

STRIKES CAN FORCE TORIES OUT

- All out on Budget Day 15 March
- Build a new mass workers' party

When will it end? Every trip to the supermarket, prices rise. Every month the direct debits grow and the fear of another rent rise continues.

Every week another story of bosses' politicians, detached from the lives of working-class people, making decisions to inflict further misery.

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt has informed us that his 15 March budget will see typical energy bills rise to £3,000 a year and an end to the universal £400 discount. All very well for ministers, like billionaire prime minister Rishi Sunak and others in government, who get access to credit cards to throw parties and eat lavish meals.

Meanwhile, those in need of medication in England are going without their prescriptions - unable to afford the £9.35 charge per item.

It's hard to find those who are not sick and tired of the Tories. The historic party of the bosses' establishment is weak, unpopular, and staggering on in government through splits and scandal.

Contrast that to the 1 February day of coordinated action with half a million on strike in a tremendous show of workers' united strength.

Further days of mass coordinated strike action, punctuating the ongoing wave of strikes, would swell the numbers and be a step towards a 24-hour general strike. This strike wave could topple the Tories.

That's why Socialist Party members are fighting in the trade unions for Budget Day, 15 March, to bring all those with an existing strike mandate out on strike (see pages 6-7).

Labour is in waiting. But how is Sir Keir Starmer preparing for government? Flying to Davos, and dining with bankers in the city, to schmooze with the capitalist elite.

The need to fight for fair pay, including by taking strike action, won't end with a Labour government. Starmer has made it clear he will not support public sector worker pay rises and repeatedly reassures 'the markets' that he won't spend on the public services we need.

The strike movement needs its own political voice - a new mass workers' party. And working-class people need an alternative to a system run solely for bosses' profits. We need to fight for socialist change.



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSOON

TURKEY-SYRIA EARTHQUAKE DEVASTATION AMPLIFIED BY CAPITALISM'S FAILURES

BERKAY KARTAV

LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

A devastating earthquake – with a magnitude of 7.7, at a relatively shallow depth – struck south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria in the early hours of 6 February, killing more than 36,000 people and leaving thousands injured with the numbers still growing. The earthquake was followed by more than 648 aftershocks, including one that was almost as large as the first. The epicentre of the earthquake is Kahramanmaraş, a city close to the Turkey-Syria border.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 23 million people are affected in one of the most deprived regions of Turkey and in war-torn northern Syria.

This is the biggest and most destructive earthquake in Turkey since the Izmit earthquake of 1999 near Istanbul, which killed more than 17,000 people.

The scale of devastation shows that nothing has fundamentally changed in 24 years since. Yet again, thousands of buildings that do not comply with building codes have collapsed and the state has failed to respond to rescue people and provide the basic necessities for survivors. The government aid agency said the day after the earthquake hit, that more than 11,000 buildings were reported to have collapsed.

Even hospitals have collapsed. Severely damaged, airports and motorways could not be used in the first few days after the earthquakes.

Shockingly, locals report the collapse of newly built buildings. Belated new construction standards were brought in after 1999, but these have not been enforced; the corrupt government has turned a blind eye to violations. Profiteering property developers and construction companies have used shortcuts and cheap materials to save costs rather than constructing earthquake-resilient buildings.

Moreover, video footage of care patients waiting outside in the freezing cold, with no state or local authority assistance, have gone viral on social media on the first day.

In the cities, towns and villages ruined by the earthquakes, reports estimated more than 150,000 still trapped beneath rubble, 24 hours after disaster struck.

The failure of the government to send adequate rescue teams is criminal. Many people trapped under the rubble are dying waiting for help. Locals and volunteers are trying to help their families, in most cases using their bare hands as there are no tools or equipment provided by the authorities.

Hatay, a multicultural city that borders Syria, has been one of the worst



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PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN

affected cities, thousands waiting for days for rescue teams to arrive.

On TV, Gokhan Zan, a famous football coach in Hatay, pleaded to officials to use the unused excavators in the city. We would add that all vehicles and equipment that can be of use should be expropriated from construction companies.

There are severe shortages of fuel, food, water, toilet facilities, medicines, tents, electricity and many more necessities in the regions affected.

Most people are still sleeping in their cars, or staying outside in the freezing cold. Empty properties and rooms in hotels must be taken over to house the many people left homeless.

In his televised speech on the third day, after the earthquakes the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan admitted that the government couldn't respond effectively on the first two days. However, it was those two days when proper planning, coordination and rescue operations were most needed to save lives.

It took 60 hours for specially trained, experienced miners from Zonguldak (a coal mining city in northern Turkey) to be transported to the affected region.

Inevitably many questions about building safety and the government response to the crisis will be asked. There should be an independent inquiry by trade unions and local communities to identify the property developers and government officials responsible for the scale of the disaster.

Turkey and Syria are earthquake prone countries. But it is not necessarily the earthquakes that kills; it is the poorly constructed buildings, profiteering, and the lack of planning, coordination and resources that kills. In other words, it is capitalism that kills.

The horrible scenes we are witnessing are yet another indictment of the failings of the rotten capitalist system that puts profit first rather than the safety of people.

In war-torn Syria, infrastructure was already very weak because of the civil war and continuing economic sanctions. Authorities in both the government-held and rebel-held areas in northern Syria failed in their response.

'Where is the state?'

'Where is the state?' is repeated by people across Turkey. The abysmal response to the disaster is likely to add to the growing resentment against president Erdogan. His popularity was already historically low as a result of high inflation, which is predicted to stand at 121% as of January 2023.

Trade unions, left-wing organisations, community groups and thousands of volunteers are trying to rescue trapped people in the rubble, and provide basic necessities for people who survived. These initiatives are promising and can be a stepping stone towards the formation of democratic local neighbourhood teams, made up of workers and local communities, to coordinate rescue operations and provision of basic necessities in the immediate term.

There is an incredible mobilisation of ordinary people across Turkey, and also from other parts of the world, to send basic necessities to affected areas. Ordinary people

are making donations to non-governmental organisations that do not have links with the government. Although Erdogan's party still leads in the polls with a small margin, this is a reflection of the low levels of trust in the government.

Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, with huge resources and skills, the Turkish state has failed miserably to respond to this disaster. Rather than investing in communities and making sure all buildings are earthquake resilient, the profiteering rich pocketed the money. There was no plan or preparation to deal with such an event, as the government and big business are mainly motivated by their short-term interests.

The government not only ignored construction companies that violated building codes, but Erdogan's government issued a zoning amnesty in 2018 for illegally constructed buildings, without making sure they were safe to be inhabited. The government made \$3 billion in revenue from applicants who registered their illegal buildings.

State of emergency

President Erdogan has declared a state of emergency in affected cities. It will cover ten cities and last for three months, ending just before the presidential and parliamentary elections due to be held on 14 May.

The government wants to silence any opposition and does not want the spread of any information that exposes its incompetence. The state of emergency gives sweeping powers for the police to conduct stop and search in the area, it prohibits any protest and the production and distribution of unauthorised newspapers and leaflets.

Erdogan and the ruling party will use the earthquake as an opportunity to increase their powers and trample on democratic rights. Given the appalling response from the government, it cannot be ruled out that the May elections could be cancelled or postponed.

The earthquake graphically illustrates the failings of a decaying capitalist system. Officials in both countries have failed to provide homes, safety and basic resources for people affected by such disasters.

Without any doubt, this earthquake will deepen the crisis for Erdogan's regime and Turkish capitalism. It is too early to gauge the mood in the Turkish society, but the anger against the regime is already clearly visible.

Socialist policies, such as an emergency mass, earthquake-resilient, affordable house-building programme, and a fully funded national health service with inflation-proof pay rises for health workers, are required to begin to heal this tragedy.

Alongside these immediate measures, the nationalisation of housing, food and water supply industries under democratic working-class control is necessary, in order to stop profiteering by big business.

Only with a socialist planned economy, where production and distribution is under the democratic control of the working class, can we create a world where the needs of the whole of society are met rather than just those of the billionaires.

• This is an edited version of an article published online on 9 February at socialistparty.org.uk

Zelensky visit offers no reprieve for Tory hypocrites



Rishi Sunak greets Volodymyr Zelensky PHOTO: SIMON DAVISON/NO 10 DOWNING STREET/CC

Socialist Party WHAT WE THINK

A recent opinion poll, published in the right-wing Daily Telegraph, predicted that the Tories will win just 45 seats at the next election, leaving them in third place behind the Scottish National Party. Faced with a growing strike wave and plunging popularity ratings, Sunak must have sighed with relief last week when the visit of Ukrainian President Zelensky offered him a rare 'good news' story. Putin's barbarous invasion of Ukraine is not of course 'good news' for the millions suffering the terrible consequences of war – having their homes destroyed, being forced to flee, and losing their lives. The numbers killed are uncertain, but are clearly very high. At the end of January, General Eirik Kristoffersen, Norway's defence chief, estimated that Russia had suffered 180,000 dead and wounded, while Ukraine had 100,000 killed or wounded in action along with 30,000 civilian deaths.

From Sunak's point of view, however, it at least brought to the fore an issue around which there is still some public support for the government. Recent polling shows six in ten people 'support Britain's current role in the conflict'. This reflects the huge public sympathy that exists for the

nightmare being faced by the peoples of Ukraine.

However, Sunak and the Tories are not motivated by the suffering of the Ukrainian peoples, or the working class and poor of any country. The Tories are now posturing as 'standing up to the Russian oligarchs', but over the last decade have presided over the City of London acting as the 'laundromat', sucking in and 'cleaning' the money of the same oligarchs. The Tory party has been rewarded for this service, with at least nine Russian oligarchs known to have donated substantial sums to their coffers. Nor is Tory hypocrisy on the issue a thing of the past. While Sunak demands that the working class in Britain suffers soaring energy costs, for which he claims the war is solely responsible, his wife continues to profit from Russian investments. Last year she collected £11.5 million in dividends from her father's company which was still operating in Moscow.

For the Tories, and the capitalist system they defend, the rights of oppressed peoples, including the Ukrainians, are so much small change. They were happy to cooperate with Putin when he was conducting barbarous wars in Chechnya, for example, as was the pro-capitalist New Labour government under Blair. Had Putin remained willing to be subservient to western imperialism, above all the US, this would have remained the case regardless of the crimes his regime was committing. It is Putin's attempt to assert Russia's imperialist interests in its 'near abroad' that has pushed the West to

shift its position in order to defend its

own imperialist interests, by providing massive modern armaments to Ukraine.

The 'West', however, is not homogenous. US imperialism, having pulled out of Afghanistan without even consulting its NATO 'partners', is now using the Ukrainian war to try and unite the Western powers behind its leadership. This has only happened very superficially, however, with deep divisions remaining. Remember how, as recently as 2021, the announcement of the AUKUS military pact between the US, Australia and Britain, led to the French government withdrawing its ambassadors from the US and Australia!

As the Ukrainian war drags on, tensions between the NATO powers on the way forward are likely to come to the fore again. Within that Britain's Tory government has, at every stage so far, played the role of pushing hardest for Western military aid to Ukraine. There is a big difference between the rhetoric and the facts, however. In reality it is the US that has supplied the vast majority of the military hardware. At the end of November 2022 the US had pledged \$50 billion of total aid, including non-military spending, compared to \$7.5 billion from Britain. US imperialism really is 'calling the shots', with Britain playing a very secondary role.

And while Sunak is happy to echo Johnson and Truss, cynically trying to gain popularity by warmongering, it is a very different question when it comes to supporting those fleeing the horrors of war. For those fleeing wars in Africa or Asia, the Tories have only brutal racist anti-refugee policies and propaganda to offer.

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The rhetoric, at least, is different for Ukrainian refugees.

However, eight million people, mainly women and children, have had to flee Ukraine. The Tory government is far down the rankings for the number of Ukrainian refugees accepted, with only 160,000, compared to 1.6 million in Poland and 1.1 million in Germany. What is more, the schemes under which most Ukrainian refugees entered puts the burden of looking after refugees on individual families. The inevitable result has been widespread homelessness and destitution of Ukrainian refugees when their 'host families' can no longer cope.

We can have no trust in the capitalist elites in any country to defend the interests of the Ukrainian peoples. Instead we need to step up our own struggle against them. Sunak's attempt to cynically use Zelensky's visit to distract workers in Britain from the fights we face here – to win decent pay rises, defend public services, and to get his hated government out of office – did not work even momentarily.

However, this nightmarish war does throw into high relief the need – in Russia, Ukraine, Britain and every country – for the working class to have its own mass parties, independent of all the rotten capitalist elites. Such parties need to fight for power to be taken out of the major corporations and banks that dominate the economy, so that society can be run democratically in the interests of the majority, based on socialist planning and cooperation, instead of capitalism's ruthless pursuit of profit, which leads to poverty, environmental destruction and war.

Far-right attack Kirkby migrant hotel – build united workers’ movement against racism

For jobs, homes and services for all

THEO SHARIEFF
SOCIALIST PARTY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The scenes of violence and intimidation against migrants outside the Suites Hotel in Kirkby have shocked working-class people across the country. The far-right group Patriotic Alternative descended on the hotel on 10 February with the objective of inciting violence against refugees, met by local residents in a peaceful counter-demonstration.

The attacks have been hypocritically condemned by politicians from all of the capitalist establishment parties. This includes Tory home secretary Suella Braverman. But she has used her position in office to demoralise migrants, describing refugees fleeing war and repression as “the invasion on our southern coast”.

The Tories are attempting to stir racist division in communities, at a time when workers are uniting in a fightback against the cost-of-living crisis. The Tories blame migrants for the lack of housing and the strain on public services that their policies have actually caused – whatever the consequences.

It’s clear that far-right racist extremists feel emboldened under the Tories to carry out anti-migrant attacks. The attempted attack in Kirkby is only the most recent in a string of racist attacks and attempts at intimidation against migrants, including the attempted petrol bombing of an asylum centre in Dover last year.

Tories and Labour

But it isn’t only the Tory government which is responsible. The Labour Party has called on the Tories to step up deportations! That’s because Starmer’s Labour also defends the idea that working-class people should pay for the crisis, while the rich get richer.

Kirkby has some of the highest levels of poverty in the country. Labour has controlled Knowsley Council since 1973 – and for years has voted in favour of passing on brutal Tory cuts to council funding. This is in stark contrast to the Militant-led Labour Liverpool City Council of the 1980s, which led a united mass movement of workers and working-class communities to take on and push back the attacks of Margaret Thatcher’s Tory government.

In Knowsley, £485 per resident has been cut from its budget, compared to the national average of £188. It’s no wonder local people are angry.

Meanwhile, the richest 250 individuals in Britain now own £710



A protest in support of refugees in London in 2015 PAUL MATSSON

billion, up from £658 billion in 2021. No working-class people should face any cuts – make the billionaires pay!

What programme needed

The tiny far-right ‘Patriotic Alternative’ was able to persuade around 450 people to attend the protest outside the Suites Hotel on 10 February. Less than 100 were its own supporters, mobilised from across the north of England.

The fact that the brave, anti-racist, counter-demo – organised at short notice at the Suites Hotel on 10 February – was outnumbered, underscores the vital need for the trade union movement to take the lead. The fight against racism and the far right has to include the fight against the conditions that allow racism to flourish.

Leaflets distributed to houses in Kirkby by Patriotic Alternative in the days leading up to the protest referred to the cost-of-living crisis leaving people freezing over winter. But it’s workers of all different backgrounds in the trade union movement who are currently leading the way in the strike wave – the most powerful struggle against the capitalist-driven cost-of-living and energy crisis.

The potential for a united trade union campaign for jobs, homes and services for all couldn’t be clearer.

That would be the most effective way of building a movement to cut across support for the far right growing. Such a campaign should also demand the resources our local councils need in order to meet the needs of refugees and the existing population.

Workers need a political voice

Tory rule continues to be threatened by the growing strike wave. So, there is no question that the Tories will once again blame migration to try to distract working-class people from the real causes of falling living standards. But what political alternative exists to the pro-austerity parties, who all agree with attacking the conditions of workers and refugees?

The Socialist Party says that the trade unions should take steps now to establish a new political voice for workers and young people. That could stand firmly against racist scapegoating, and against all attacks from the bosses and capitalist politicians.

A starting point would be standing workers’ candidates in the local elections and the next general election. A general election is due by the end of 2024, but could be much sooner.

If only a fraction of those workers currently on strike were to stand as workers’ candidates, this would help lay the groundwork for building the

political party workers will need on their side in the important battles to come.

This would be a big step forward in the fight against racism right across society. But racist division is inherent within capitalism – a system where wealth is hoarded at the top of society by the super-rich who tell the rest of us to fight amongst ourselves for the remaining crumbs. As Malcolm X explained: “You can’t have capitalism without racism”.

That’s why the Socialist Party fights for a fundamental, socialist transformation of society. We fight for the nationalisation of the banks and major industries, under democratic workers’ control and management, so we can begin to run society in the interests of the majority – to provide decent jobs, services and housing for all.

THE SOCIALIST PARTY SAYS:

- Build a united working-class struggle for jobs, homes, and services for all
- For councils to set no-cuts budgets based on what our community needs – not what the Tories want to give us
- Defend the right to asylum – with democratic community control of emergency funding and resources. No to racist immigration laws
- Support the strikes! For fully

funded above-inflation pay rises for all

- Fully fund our NHS – no to cuts and privatisation
- No more austerity – reject council cuts and tax rises on workers
- Tories out! Starmer’s Labour doesn’t speak for us, so fight for a new working-class party
- Nationalise rail, mail, energy, utilities and the banks under democratic working-class control and management, with compensation only on the basis of proven need – nothing for the fat cats
- Take the wealth off the super-rich. For a socialist alternative to capitalism’s poverty and crisis

Come to a Socialist Party meeting near you

The Socialist Party has regular meetings in towns and cities across the country. If you would like to participate:

- Go to socialistparty.org.uk
- Or text 07761 818206 with your name and postcode.

Surrey community condemns brutal racist attack on pupil

PAUL COUCHMAN
STAINES SOCIALIST PARTY

No one who has seen the videos on social media, of the attack on a black schoolgirl outside Thomas Knyvett school in Ashford, in Surrey, could fail to be outraged. The racist attack was brutal and involved both adults and children.

There have been community protests at the school. Some arrests have been made, and an investigation has been promised, but tensions are running high.

Although Surrey is often considered a well-off county, there are many areas of poverty and deprivation. Thomas Knyvett school is in one of those places – left behind by the Tory council and Labour councillors.

Unions get organised

Some students and local residents have expressed anger at a perceived lack of action of some school staff. However, the demands for proper safeguarding and safety can only be guaranteed if there is strong trade union organisation, and a willingness to stand up against racism and be counted.

I raised, first through my Surrey County Unison union branch – which represents a number of support staff at the school – and then at a meeting of the Surrey County Council trade union group, the need for a robust trade union response to this horrific incident.

The education trade unions are in the best place to call for unity and to fight racism – in workplaces, schools and in the community. The Surrey council trade union group voted unanimously to write to the school



Black Lives Matter protest in London in 2020 JUDY BEISHON

asking for a joint union meeting with all the school staff – to hear their concerns, and to develop a united front against racism and discrimination.

Unfortunately, the school is part of an academy chain, the Howard Partnership, which does not recognise trade unions. It has proven to be reluctant to allow unions to organise within its schools.

If they refuse, then the trade unions should publicly shame them, and demand to be recognised. The Socialist Party demands the ending of academies and free schools. All schools should be brought back under direct local authority control.

The Socialist Party demands fully

funded professional play and youth services, backed up with support services to provide for mental health, and wellbeing services for young people. And this area desperately needs well-built council housing to meet the demands of hundreds living in poor accommodation or on the waiting lists.

But most local politicians don’t support these policies, including the local Labour mayor of Spelthorne.

To fight for the demands that these school students need to keep them safe, to get rid of the conditions that allow racism to fester, we need ‘no-cuts’ councillors determined to fight for the resources we need.

Kirkby resident – far right blame refugees for failures of capitalist politicians

Socialist Party member Neil Dunne lives in Kirkby, and helped organise the 10 February anti-racist protest. This is what he had to say.

“Towns like Kirkby have experienced poverty, ‘managed decline’ and deindustrialisation. This is a breeding ground for the far right.

“Disenfranchised, local people have become politically homeless due to the failure of the Labour Party – and the Tories – to address cost-of-living issues. When people are forced to fight for scraps under capitalism, far-right ideas can grow.

“Cynically, another far-right group has renamed itself ‘National Housing

Part’. It has been leafleting Liverpool areas, leaning on the plight of working people during a cost-of-living crisis, and blaming refugees for this problem.

Media

“It seems a lifetime ago that kids were photographed lying dead on a beach after failing to escape their terrifying situation by boat. Now the capitalist media is putting front pages out to create hysteria about migration.

“The cost of living, energy prices, and wage stagnation are just a few reasons why working-class people are rightly fed up and angry. Cuts to jobs and services and council tax

rises in these forgotten working-class towns will bite hard like frostbite.

“Every workplace has had discussions on how they simply struggle to put food on the table and heat their homes. But, a vacuum has been created by Labour councils passing on Tory cuts with zero fightback.

“We need real wage rises. We don’t need Labour politicians holding ribbon-cutting ceremonies for food banks.

“When workers are free from the pressure and insecurity of bills and rent that they can’t afford, then it’s easier to make the case that people staying in a hotel, trying to make a better life for their families, are not the cause of their problems.”



They get tax havens, we get mouldy homes

ALI COOK
DORSET SOCIALIST PARTY

You won’t find many people disagreeing with the idea that the state of housing is appalling.

Ten million people in England live in homes that don’t meet basic standards. A majority of these homes pose a serious threat to the inhabitants’ health and safety. According to a study by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, thanks to funding cuts and a failure to act, Britain’s homes are crumbling.

The decreasing quality of homes is also reflected in the increasing amount of mould that is being reported.

Doubled

The number of social housing tenants in England who are reporting damp and leaks has more than doubled in the last two years. In this time, less than half of the landlords have fixed the problem.

Two-year-old Awaab Ishak tragically died from a respiratory illness caused by his family’s rented flat in Rochdale. This prompted Michael Gove – the Tory cabinet minister responsible for housing – to pledge to

introduce a new law that would give more rights and protections to tenants in mouldy homes. But little progress has been made regardless.

What about the other side of the equation? Following the Register of Overseas Entities, launched in August, the offshore companies that own 138,000 properties in the UK are supposed to reveal their identities. But despite the new transparency laws, the owners of around 50,000 UK properties still remain hidden from the public.

Royals

The identities of those that have been revealed include the royal families of Gulf states – like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar – that own £1 billion in UK property through tax havens.

Inequality is growing. We need mass building of genuinely affordable, good-quality, carbon-neutral, and publicly owned housing. And let’s take over these empty homes that are used by the wealthy only for their own benefit.

Do you agree?
JOIN THE SOCIALISTS
socialistparty.org.uk/join

All strike together on Budget Day!

RMT: Time to escalate and generalise the fightback



RMT MEMBER, LONDON UNDERGROUND

The RMT transport union's twin disputes on the national rail network (Network Rail and train operating companies - TOCs) and London Underground (LU) are seen as having heralded the growing industrial fightback against austerity and the cost-of-living crisis. Both disputes are now entering a new, potentially decisive, stage.

Those who take their briefings from government spokespeople believed that RMT members had been worn down and would now accept the same offer of a real-terms pay cut, together with a bonfire of terms and working conditions.

They have been put right by RMT branches and reps. Following two weeks of consulting members, they have overwhelmingly rejected the terms demanded by Network Rail and the TOCs.

Now, the discussion for reps, branches and members must be to identify what is needed to win the dispute and safeguard jobs and conditions, not to mention the service they provide.

The London Underground dispute is not about pay, though it is likely

to become a factor, with no deal in place for April 2023. RMT members on the tube are resisting £2 billion of cuts, demanded by the Tory government and implemented by the Labour mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. Hundreds of millions have already been saved through a combination of delays to upgrades and renewals, savings from outsourced expenditure, and operational staff cuts, including the loss of 600 station staff in the first tranche of cutbacks. A further £600 million is still to be identified.

For members on the tube, the next crunch point will be 28 February, by which date Transport for London (TfL), owner of LU, is committed to agreeing proposals to cut the employer's contributions to the pension scheme. This could lead to an increase of 5% in employees' contributions and significant loss of benefits.

Both disputes are being fought against employers who are doing the bidding of the government. This is also the case in disputes across the public sector.

To win these disputes, RMT must seek to involve every member in discussing tactics to seriously escalate action.

But spreading the fightback

against austerity and the cost-of-living crisis is also critical to winning the battle.

The government assault on the working class is generalised. Having driven real wages down since the banks crashed the economy in 2008, the ruling elite and the political parties that represent them demand that businesses be able to raise prices in order to increase profits while wages fall behind. This is to happen alongside further cuts in public services, and reduced benefits paid to the most disadvantaged working-class households.

This generalised attack demands a generalised response. The TUC should be organising a 24-hour general strike - but we can't wait.

The National Education Union and civil service union PCS have called strike action on Budget Day, 15 March, and more must follow. RMT is threatening action on 15 March on London Underground, unless the pension threat is removed by 28 February.

Reps and activists in every union need to campaign for their own leaders to put out the call for all unions with live ballot mandates to take action in furtherance of their own disputes on Budget Day.

PCS joins 15 March action

NEC must lead a serious campaign

We carry here an edited extract from a statement by the PCS Broad Left Network (BLN), the rank-and-file campaign group in the union, in which Socialist Party members participate.

On 7 February, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the PCS civil service union met to discuss the impact of the national strike taken by 100,000 PCS members on 1 February. Rightly, the attitude of the NEC was positive, given the big turnout on pickets and demonstrations across the UK, and union members' clear support for a fightback on pay, on pensions, on redundancy rights and for many other improvements.

Fiona Brittle, BLN supporter elected to the union's NEC, voted for further action to be called on 28 February, 15 and 16 March, all of which are dates where coordination with other unions is possible, including teachers' and lecturers' unions in England, Wales and Scotland. Coordinated action would seriously raise the pressure exerted on the government, and has been underdeveloped by the current leadership of PCS.

However, it is not enough to simply call further dates. There must be a clear plan demonstrating the impact of well-supported strike action, explained to members across the union - in both those departments with strike mandates, and those which missed the Tory turnout threshold in the last vote and are now rebalancing.

Fiona laid this out very clearly at

the NEC, and voted with other NEC members who had named specific dates in April as well.

In addition to calling for proper exploratory work to be done to extend coordinated action, and for a serious campaign of national strike action to be announced no later than 16 February, Fiona also renewed her demand that branches must be given access to members' contact details. Home emails and phone numbers are essential, to reinforce attempts at mass engagement by our key activists in the branches.

This is certainly necessary as we approach the expiry of the union's mandate on 7 May, six months after our ballot victory. The nearer this gets the more thoughts should be turning to rebalancing, to including action short of strike action, and to making a serious case to members as to why they need to vote 'yes' to help us win our demands.

The NEC majority, led by the 'Left Unity' group, voted against all of the proposals made by Fiona to strengthen the national campaign, and opposed all dates for action except 15 March.

Broad Left Network supporters will throw themselves into building for the 15 March strike action.

- Socialist Party members and Broad Left Network supporters are standing in the upcoming national leadership elections in PCS because we need a leadership that is capable of mounting a serious and escalating fight against the Tory government.

Birmingham UCU passes motion to strike on 15 March

LLUIS BERTOLIN UCU MEMBER

On 8 February, the University of Birmingham branch of the University and College Union (UCU) overwhelmingly passed a motion calling upon the UCU leadership to schedule a day of industrial action on 15 March. The resolution had been published in the Socialist.

That day is Budget Day, and the NEU and PCS unions have already notified that they plan on striking then, with demonstrations in London and Cardiff already announced.

It is important that UCU takes active steps towards co-ordinating with other unions and building solidarity. As well as escalating national action, striking together on 15 March would put the Tories and the employers under enormous pressure.

- 'UCU model motion to join others on 15 March' at socialistparty.org.uk - adapt for your own use



SOUTHAMPTONS SP

'The way to stand up is to collectively strike'

UCU members continue to take strike action around the country as part of the ongoing 18-day strike campaign.

"I'm striking for fair pay and pensions. I'm striking for academics. I'm striking to ensure the best education for students. And that their money actually goes towards their education." This is what Eleanor Mason, a communication and marketing manager in the UCU union, told Socialist Party member Ian Pattison.

On why we all need to strike together, Eleanor said: "Workers' rights are being slowly chipped away, so this would be a turning point nationally. The only way to stand up is to collectively strike."

NEU: Build 15 March as a day of fightback!

SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS ON THE NEU NEC

The excitement and enthusiasm seen on the giant 1 February strike was fantastic, and a real display of what national unions can mobilise when they take a lead.

National Education Union (NEU) members had picket lines, rallies and demos in places where they'd never mobilised before. Many hadn't been on strike before, and so based their understanding of strike days on what they'd seen the rail unions and the postal workers do, which included active picket lines and loudly sharing the political message of the action.

Bristol had over 100 attend training to become a picket supervisor and ran 57 picket lines. Newham had over 35 picket lines. For a union that has never taken a stand like this before, it shows the mood of members: 'If you fight, you can win!'

As well as Socialist Party members being part of the strike, many other members visited picket lines and were warmly welcomed, with our bulletins and papers snapped up. Members could see the benefits of uniting the strikes, and working with other unions to fight for pay and conditions for all.

The Labour-led Welsh government has already made a move (see box). It is good that something new has been put on the table, but this pittance must be rejected outright! 1.5% still offers teachers 5% below the inflation-proof pay rise we demanded. There is nothing for support staff. This means that workers who are often part-time and paid only for term-time, many forced into second or third jobs and to use food banks, are still being offered a pay cut. The lack of funding for the first 5% means that Welsh schools could still be looking at cuts and redundancies. And we want no suggestion that the action across England could be called off for crumbs!

Executive must plan what next

So, the National Executive meeting on 25 February needs to plan: where next?

1 February was extremely well supported by NEU members, as well as many other education workers who weren't on strike refusing to cross picket lines. This ensured that many schools were either closed or just relied on head teachers and school managers to keep schools open for a small handful of 'at-risk' children. We need to push this and get even more out next time!

In England, only teachers passed the strike threshold, so support staff weren't part of the action. However, in areas where a strong lead was given support staff refused to cross the picket lines in droves.

This needs to be replicated across the country with a strong lead from the national union, declaring all members will be robustly defended against any action taken if they refuse to cross picket lines. Many fewer schools would take this tack; and indeed, many school managements are



NEU executive member Sheila Caffrey speaking at the Bristol rally BRISTOL SOCIALIST PARTY



in support of the action as they need the increased funding and face the staff retention issues that come with poor pay and funding.

We also need to escalate the action. The two national days of strike action in March, with a national demonstration on the first day, 15 March, is certainly a step in the right direction.

15 March a day to up the pressure

However, there has been a recent move to de-politicise 15 March by calling it a 'carnival' and a 'family fun day'. This underestimates the mood of education workers, hungry to fight for the pay and funding they know schools desperately need. It also gives the bosses' media a green light to attack us for having a day off with paid-for funfairs, while children and young people are not getting taught.

Education workers will want to show again the strength that was

seen on 1 February. A national demo, with clear demands on pay and funding, will have coachloads of members from all areas flooding to London.

This will be strengthened with the 100,000 civil servants in the PCS joining with a national strike, and could be built further by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) coordinating the action and a demonstration that day with as many unions as possible from across the public and private sector joining. The University and College Union already has national strike action that week; health and rail unions have live ballots; and the Royal Mail workers in the CWU are shortly announcing their ballot result. This could bring three-quarters of a million workers or more to the picket lines and the streets, fighting together for pay and conditions.

Coordinate

The 1 February rallies were

coordinated in many areas by local trades councils, showing the role that they can play in bringing unions together.

Unfortunately, the leadership in many local trades councils is not reflected in the TUC leadership. The new general secretary, Paul Nowak, has made it clear that he won't do anything that could embarrass or compromise Keir Starmer's Labour. The suspension of action in Labour-run Wales is a warning of the pressures that will come on trade union leaders under a Starmer government.

This makes it even more important for union members to push union leaders to be bold and to call action, unified with other unions where possible.

- Socialist Party members are standing in the elections for the national executive of the NEU, campaigning for a bold, fighting leadership



Reject the Welsh Labour-led government offer to teachers

CATHERINE PEACE NEU MEMBER IN CARDIFF

After a well-supported, successful strike on 1 February, with a good turnout by teachers and support staff at the strike rallies that were organised in Wales, the second National Education Union (NEU) strike that was due on 14 February has been postponed until 2 March because of an offer by the Welsh Labour-led government.

The offer is extremely low. It is 1.5% to be added to the paltry 5% we had already been offered, with an extra 1.5% for this year only. The extra money is at least funded by the Welsh government, unlike the initial 5% which appears to remain unfunded. It only includes teachers and head teachers and not support staff, who have separately been offered a review by Welsh government into their pay by Welsh local authorities, with no extra money attached yet.

So far, every teacher I have spoken to thinks the offer is not enough and well below the rate of inflation. They are also concerned at letting down their support staff colleagues and fellow NEU members in England as well, if they settle for so little.

We have a Zoom meeting on the day the strike should have taken place, for workplace reps and district officers to feed back members' views. Hopefully this offer will be rejected, and we can continue our action, as well as leading on coordinating with other unions on 15 March. We should be working towards a 24-hour general strike.

Get all the latest union news nationalshop stewardsnetwork with the NSSN bulletin shopstewards.net

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS GROWS AND SERVICES CRUMBLE

FIGHT FOR A SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE

BEN GOLDSTONE

MENTAL HEALTH WORKER, WEST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

More and more adults and children in the UK continue to experience difficulties with their mental health. NHS services are in a state of crisis. NHS data shows over a million adults, and rising, use mental health services every month. Among children and young people, numbers are rising alarmingly quickly. In April 2016, 96,789 children and young people came into contact with mental health services. Fast forward to April 2022, this number had risen to 355,807.

Funding

In 2019, with services already under strain, the Tories promised an extra £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24. A report from the British Medical Association (BMA) makes the case that, as a result of inflation, this would now need to rise to £2.6 billion. The money was intended to fund an extra 2 million appointments a year. However, with the growing demand for services, the BMA estimates £5.2 billion is needed to ensure that everyone who needs help can get it, and that this needs to be matched with an increase in funding for primary care, public mental health, mental health research, and mental health facilities.

Socialist Party Says

- Immediately boost funding to that which is required - as determined democratically by workers in the industry, their trade unions and patients

Waiting lists

If you need help with your mental health, there is a good chance you will be waiting a significant amount of time to get it. In 2022, the number of people waiting for community mental health care rose to 1.2 million. The NHS also had a target that 1.6 million patients would be able to access 'talking therapy' through the 'Improving Access to Psychological Therapy' service, but only 1.2 million did. Targets for providing services to psychosis patients were also not met in 2021-22.

Research by the Royal College of Psychiatrists has highlighted that nearly a quarter of mental health patients wait more than 12 weeks to start treatment, 12% experience waits longer than six months and 6% wait longer than a year. Of the patients involved in the research, more than three quarters of those on a hidden waiting list reported that they were

forced to resort to emergency services or a crisis line in the absence of mental health support (both underfunded and stretched services themselves already).

Socialist Party Says

- Expand talking therapy provision to all those who need it
- Free prescriptions for all
- Increase carer's allowance, and expand eligibility criteria. Living benefits, that rise with the cost of living, for all who need them

Mental health beds

For those who are in need of inpatient treatment, there are increasingly few beds available. Last year, there were found to have been 18,247 mental health beds - a reduction of 23% since 2010-11. The Tories will say this has been part of a policy shift towards care in the community - services which have been increasingly difficult to access.

People in need of inpatient treatment go untreated, those who do get access can be sent miles away from their families, friends, and social networks at a time when they need them most.

The lack of capacity also means that patients ready to move on to different wards are kept in place - often in a restrictive environment. Shortages are such that last year there was an increase of 30% in children being admitted to adult psychiatric wards.

Socialist Party Says

- No patient to be transferred out of area, all children who need care to be admitted to child-specific services
- Restore and extend provision of mental health inpatient beds

Privatisation

Mental health services are increasingly outsourced to private companies. Out of £2.1 billion in mental health contracts between 2013-2018, 58% of these were won by the private sector, with the total award coming to £1.2 billion.

An estimated 30% of NHS mental health hospital capacity is supplied by the private sector. Over half of NHS inpatient beds for children and teenagers with mental health problems, and almost all of the secure beds for adults, are supplied by private companies. 99% of 'out-of-area' placements for patients with personality disorders are provided by the private sector.

Socialist Party Says

- Bring all private mental health provision in-house, with no compensation to the fat-cat profiteers



PHOTO: SECRETLONDON123/CC

Staff shortages

Like the rest of the NHS, staff shortages blight mental health services. There are thousands of vacancies for nurses, therapists and psychiatrists. Between 2009 and 2020, there was a 12% reduction in the number of mental health nursing positions occupied. In 2021, 10% of psychiatrist positions were not filled.

Alongside this, NHS workforce data showed there to be one consultant per 12,567 people in the UK. It's unsurprising there is such a long wait for people to be seen for mental health support.

A survey of workers in 2020 showed that 52% were "too busy to provide the care they would like" and 65% said that on their most recent day of work they were short by one or more nursing staff members.

For workers in post this means extra pressure. In 2022, over one in five sick days taken by nurses were due to mental health reasons and this was the most frequent reason for sickness. This is no doubt exacerbated by the stress of working in an underfunded and under resourced system.

Socialist Party Says

- A mass recruitment and training programme for mental health workers
- Immediate inflation-proof pay rises for all NHS workers, and all outsourced workers to be brought in house on NHS pay terms and conditions. £15-an-hour minimum wage now
- Scrap tuition fees, establish living student maintenance grants

Quality of care

Government ministers have established an inquiry into safety in mental health inpatient settings. The quality of care and safety in mental health services has been brought into stark focus following a series of revelations, including a BBC Panorama programme revealing abuses at the Edenfield hospital near Manchester.

A review of 2,000 deaths at the Essex Partnership University Trust over a 21-year period was triggered by a 100,000-strong petition created by an Essex mum whose son died while an inpatient at the Linden Centre in Chelmsford in 2012.

If services remain chronically understaffed and run for profit, failings will continue.

Socialist Party Says

- Bring all services into public ownership, fully funded and run under workers' and patients' democratic control to ensure safety and quality of service

Economic security

Looking at the current political and economic climate, is there any wonder more and more people are experiencing difficulties with their mental health?

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the government's mishandling of it, has had an impact on individuals' mental health.

This is made worse for those isolated in poor-quality housing, forced to work in unsafe workplaces or working from home with the additional pressures of caring for relatives and so on.

But the numbers suffering from poor mental health were increasing prior to the pandemic. Since 2009, government-imposed austerity has



PHOTO: BIRMINGHAM SP

Students' mental health suffers in cost-of-living crisis

NOAH EDEN

SHEFFIELD SOCIALIST STUDENTS

A shocking 45% of students said their mental health had declined since the start of the 2022-23 academic year, according to a recent survey by the Office for National Statistics.

The numbers of students suffering from mental health problems has been steadily increasing, but due to the cost-of-living crisis that number has shot up rapidly. The survey found 91% of respondents were concerned about making ends meet.

Students face precarious employment with low pay and a maintenance loan that doesn't begin to cover the cost of what is needed to get by - the maximum maintenance loan hasn't gone up in line with inflation for five years, and next year students are set to be £1,500 worse off.

Already, 50% of respondents stated they are experiencing 'financial struggles', with a further 15% facing 'major difficulties'.

Students who face issues with money are more likely to have poorer mental health, greater anxiety, and have higher rates of alcohol dependence. 37% of first-year students suffer from symptoms of depression and anxiety - higher than the general population of the ages 16-29 at 22%. Alongside this, 21% stated that they have used mental health services since September 2020.

Socialist Students fights for an immediate rise in the minimum wage

to at least £15 an hour rising with the cost of living, an end to zero-hours contracts, and living grants for students. We fight for better mental health services too - publicly owned and as part of a fully funded NHS.

The Covid-19 pandemic restrictions hit the mental health of many students hard. Many students were forced to sit in their rooms all day and study online. In Manchester, university managers even erected fences around student halls to pin them in; protests eventually tore the fences down. All the while students were paying £9,250 a year and getting deeper into debt.

While students suffer, and university staff are forced to go on strike for fair pay and pensions, university bosses continue to rake in huge salaries and bonuses. The ex-president of Imperial College London, who stood down in July, earned £714,000 a year. How many university-based mental health support workers or counsellors could that money be used to employ? Students unions must do more to demand university bosses fund proper mental health services for students.

Socialist Students fights for the funding our universities need from central government, to provide free, high-quality education and support for students - paid for by the bosses and the wealthy elite.

• See Socialist Students conference page 11

made it harder for people to access necessary public services.

People's ability to meet their basic needs has been hit by benefit cuts, low pay and insecure work. General life prospects have worsened. All the while, profits for big business, and bonuses for bosses, have soared.

Safe, secure, and affordable housing is increasingly hard to come by. Funding for schools and education has been cut in real terms. Young people accessing higher education have been saddled with larger and larger amounts of debt. Poverty continues to climb. It's a perfect storm!

NHS data showed that, in July 2022, double the number of people in the areas with the highest levels of deprivation came into contact with mental health services compared to those from the areas with the lowest levels. Economic security is clearly a factor when it comes to mental health.

Socialist Party Says

- Inflation-proof pay rises for all workers
- Immediate rise in pensions and benefits, rising in line with the cost of living
- Establish democratic rent controls

and a massive council house building programme to provide high-quality affordable housing for all

Socialism

It is clear that the capitalist system, where profit is prioritised above all else, cannot provide for those experiencing mental ill health, or for those who care for them. A socialist society, based on public ownership and democratic control of society's wealth and resources, would not only be able to provide mental health care for those who need it but would address the economic and societal issues that cause and exacerbate many mental health difficulties in the first place.

Socialist Party Says

- Take the wealth off the super-rich - nationalise the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy and run them under democratic working-class control and management
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority
- For a socialist world free from oppression, inequality and want



NHS strike 7 Feb PHOTO: ALISTAIR TICE

Capitalist policies make disabled people poorer

DAVID MAPLES

DISABLED MEMBERS' CANDIDATE IN THE UNISON NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL ELECTIONS (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

After the experience of the pandemic, 565,000 people, predominately aged 50 to 64, have left the workforce. All over the economy, there is a shortage of workers.

Ignoring their rundown of health services and social care, and the backlog of urgent procedures, the Tory government is now desperately scratching around for solutions. Ending low pay with a minimum wage of at least £15 an hour, and providing affordable childcare, with costs fully met through benefits, would be a good start.

The government is even looking to disabled workers, so time for some home truths.

Six in ten of all deaths from Covid were disabled people. If you were disabled and male, you were 6.5 times more likely to die from Covid than a non-disabled man. Disabled women were 11.3 times more likely to die than non-disabled women.

In the 2008-09 recession, disabled workers were more likely than non-disabled workers to experience negative changes to terms and conditions and working practices – such as wage freezes, reduced overtime and the reorganisation of work. During economic upturns, disabled workers are the last to gain employment, and during downturns we are first to lose our jobs.

Pandemic

Until the pandemic, most employers were reluctant to allow homeworking. But a survey by the Unison trade union found that 73% of disabled workers were more productive or just as productive working from home.

Reasons included a reduced impact on pain and fatigue due to less commuting and the ability to work more flexibly, with additional breaks or a later starting time. The same survey found that a reduced number of disabled workers took sickness absence as they were able to manage their condition better when working from home. Redundancy rates are 62% higher for disabled than non-disabled workers.

Disabled workers face double discrimination. Not only are we less likely to be in work, but when we are, we are paid less than non-disabled workers. Research by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) shows that disabled workers face 20% lower pay – the equivalent to earning £2.10 less an hour.

Changes to the welfare system over the past 12 years have left disabled adults four times worse off financially than non-disabled adults. Nearly half of those in poverty – 6.9 million people – are from families which include a disabled person. TUC research found that disabled people are more than three times as likely to have used food banks as non-disabled people.

Benefit sanctions do not move disabled people closer to paid work. Instead, they often worsen many disabled workers' existing illnesses and conditions, particularly their mental health.

The pandemic worsened existing accessibility, isolation and disability rights barriers. Disabled women were already twice as likely as other women to experience domestic abuse.

The Tory-LibDem coalition government from 2010 saw disabled people as a soft target. A strategy of whipping up prejudice against disabled people was designed to divide the working class.

The Tories used this to help push through tens of billions of pounds



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSOON



The past 12 years have left disabled adults four times worse off financially than non-disabled adults

worth of austerity cuts, to attack the benefits disabled people need for a reasonable standard of living.

But during the austerity years, two million public sector workers took strike action for their pensions. And protests by disabled activists helped to counter the Tories' rhetoric too.

George Osborne, the then Tory chancellor, was famously booed by 80,000 people when presenting medals at the Paralympics in 2012.

Disabled people will return to the methods of protest. And we need strong workplace union organisation too.

The trade unions are the most powerful organisations that exist. Together we can fight for the rights and livelihoods of all workers.

The Socialist Party demands:

- Trade union control over health and safety, and the 'Access to Work' service
- 'Reasonable adjustments' – changes that workplaces are supposed to make so disabled people are not disadvantaged – must be something the whole union movement fights for
- Benefits must be based on the real cost of living and the real cost of disability
- Democratic working-class control over the benefit system to make it supportive rather than punitive
- Full pensions with no reductions because of lower pay or a shorter working lifetime

European workers walkout over pay and pensions

Germany

Postal and public sector workers have taken strike action in Germany over pay. On 6 February, around 8,000 Deutsche Post workers walked out across the country with major strike rallies held in ten cities. The following day, thousands again downed tools and protested. This action was followed on 9 February by public sector strikes in the states of Berlin, Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia, and in Baden-Württemberg on 10 February. Like in Britain, these workers are striking for better pay, amid the rising cost-of-living and inflation crisis.

Tom Hoffmann, a member of Sozialistische Organisation Solidarität (Sol - CWI Germany) in Berlin reports: "The union ver.di demands a 10.5% wage increase or at least €500 for a period of 12 months. In view of the real wage losses due to high inflation and the lack of staff in many areas, this is sorely needed. Sol members were there from 6:30am and visited the picket at the Urban-Klinikum hospital in

Kreuzberg. The workers we spoke to thought that the pay demands could have been higher. At 8.30am a rally began near the Berlin House of Representatives. Here too, Sol members expressed their solidarity, distributed leaflets and sold our newspaper Solidarity. We argued that the money to fund the demands should be sourced from the super-rich and big business."

Christian Walter, a Sol member in Aachen, reports: "Sol members were at the ver.di demonstration, which was attended by hundreds of people. Delegations of employees from the municipal theatre, the fire brigade and other municipal companies were represented. Many workers from Sparkassen-Finanzgruppe public banks had travelled from all the surrounding area. The demands were written on posters and banners, and noise was made with rattles and whistles. For the final rally, the central square at the Elisenbrunnen was full of workers."



Workers strike in Germany PHOTO: SOL (CWI)

France

The huge pension strikes which started on 19 and 21 January have continued with days of action on 31 January, 7 February and 11 February. The movement is against the pension reforms of the Borne-Macron government, which plans to increase the retirement age from 62 to 64 years old.

On 11 February, according to the CGT union, over 2,500,000 protestors took part in demonstrations, a rise of 500,000 compared to 7 February.

Gauche Révolutionnaire (CWI France) reported: "Another show of force! Millions of workers, young people, retirees and self-employed people were on the streets - in big cities, but also in plenty of small towns all over the country. There was an obvious joy, coupled with a palpable determination to push back Macron. After the next strike on 16 February, we must bring the country to a standstill on 7 March."

Gauche Révolutionnaire is calling for immediate pay rises to match inflation and full pension at the age of 60 maximum, or 55 when necessary.

Committee for a Workers' International
FIGHTING FOR A SOCIALIST WORLD
 socialistworld.net

NHS strikes

The week of 6-10 February saw the biggest NHS strike so far on the Monday, and NHS workers striking in different unions all week: the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), ambulance workers in Unite, GMB and Unison, and the CSP physiotherapists.

ALISTAIR TICE REPORTS FROM SHEFFIELD

Like with the teachers on 1 February, the NHS strikers are overwhelmingly young, women and on strike for the first time ever. And they are turning out on picket lines in big numbers, their placards and songs reflecting their energy and enthusiasm for making a stand. Not just for more pay but more for the future of the NHS and their patients.

A feature of the strikes has been the homemade placards and made-up songs on the picket lines. At Sheffield hospitals, RCN nurses displayed

signs like: "Rishi Sunak - tighter than a TED stocking", "Nurses not hearses" and "Put your money where your claps were".

And physiotherapists held up boards saying: "Our NHS needs rehab", "My patients cough up more than the Tories" and "Together we can fix a fractured NHS".

There's a growing realisation that NHS staff professionals are not going to be treated as a special case by this Tory government, so they need to strike together with other public sector workers to force the government to cough up or get out.

BIRMINGHAM SP



NHS in Wales – reject the ‘offer’!

BETH WEBSTER
CARDIFF RCN MEMBER

Most NHS unions in Wales suspended the 6 and 7 February strike action following a paltry pay offer from the Labour-led Senedd (Welsh government). The decision of the leaders of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), Royal College of Midwives (RCM), physios' union CSP, and GMB ambulance workers to call off strike action on 6 and 7 February was met with anger by rank-and-file members once the details of the deal were made public. Only Unite ambulance workers continued to strike.

The offer is a consolidated increase of 1.5%, and a 1.5% unconsolidated one-off payment. This means that for a staff nurse on the highest-possible pay point, they will receive, together with last year's deal, a total of a 6% pay rise and a £494 one-off payment. This is far below the RCN's demand of inflation plus 5%. It is not enough to retain or recruit staff to a collapsing health service.

The non-pay elements of the deal do not include any concrete commitments. Vague promises to consider improving pay progression, a 36-hour working week without loss of pay, and to reduce agency nurse spending, are not good enough. The NHS needs urgent, concrete solutions to the worsening staffing crisis.

Such was members' anger at the strikes being called off, that RCN Cardiff members held a meeting with the Associate Director of RCN Wales within hours of the deal being made public. We were told that it will put more pressure on the Tories, now that the Scotland and Wales governments have made offers, as Westminster is where funding really needs to come from for a proper pay deal.

Members pointed out that going ahead with the coordinated strike action would have put far more pressure on than a meagre pay deal, and that union leaders being willing to settle for crumbs from devolved governments will actually take pressure off the Tories to offer a decent deal.

This deal is further evidence of the Labour-led Senedd refusing to take responsibility for the NHS crisis in Wales, aided by union leaders under the guise of 'social partnership'. Ordinary NHS workers are not willing to let the Senedd off the hook. They could fund the pay rise the unions demand in the immediate term, and stand up to the Tories to fight for the funding necessary from the government in Westminster.

NHS workers are voting on the deal and, judging by their anger so far, it will likely be rejected. Our next strike action should be coordinated, not just with other health unions, but all workers fighting on pay. We need a 24-hour general strike.

Abellio bus drivers win victory

UNITE MEMBER IN LONDON

Unite the Union members working as bus drivers at Abellio in London have won a major victory following strike action that began last November. This follows a big rise in the number of disputes involving Unite members in the passenger transport sector. In 2019, the figure was eleven. In 2022, the figure had risen to 102.

The win at Abellio is significant. It includes a headline increase of 18% on the basic hourly rate. But that's not all. All additional payments - overtime, weekend working, rest-day working - have also seen increases. Negotiations will continue to secure an improved scheduling agreement, with early concessions already won. New starters will also see an increased rate.

The employer had sought to divide workers by proposing a lower increase for 'TUPE' staff (workers who transferred from a previous employer and whose conditions at point of transfer are protected). Unfortunately it is common for staff on TUPE conditions to be denied pay increases - a tactic to try to persuade them to transfer onto what may be inferior conditions at the new employer. But in this dispute, the union demanded and won the same cost-of-living increase for both sets of workers.

Crucially, the strike action fought off the bosses' attack on the trade union that took place when one of the reps on the negotiating committee was dismissed. The correct approach is to say that there will be no resolution until the reinstatement of the sacked worker. This is what was demanded - and this is what was won.

The union began a series of



LONDON SP

consultations with members to discuss the detail from the negotiations, and crucially many had indicated that a combination of the concessions already won, along with financial hardship, could lead to a drift back to work on strike dates. It became clear that only significant escalation would move the employer further, and this is what was put to members. The members made the decision to accept what was already a very significant win.

The campaign will continue. Negotiations will now take place on issues not immediately resolved, while building for future pay battles to come, which workers will face strengthened as a result of this win.

Firefighters get improved offer, but should fight on



Firefighters on strike in 2013 PAUL MATTSSON

The Executive Council of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is recommending that its members accept an improved pay offer from the employers.

88% of FBU members voted 'yes' to strike action on a 73% turnout, with 94% voting 'yes' in Northern Ireland. Undoubtedly, this massive vote for strike action, following the mobilisation of over 2,000 members to lobby MPs in December, which marched to parliament, has shown the preparedness of firefighters to take action and forced this improvement.

However, while recommending the pay offer, the union's leadership accept that the 7% for

the current year is below inflation. It is actually considerably lower than RPI inflation, which has been higher than 14%. The offer would be better if for next year it was 5% or RPI inflation, whichever is the greater.

The improved offer has shown that a determined response from workers and their unions, backed by the willingness to take action, can win major concessions.

However, Socialist Party members in the FBU believe that this offer should be rejected, and that the union should agree a schedule of action, including coordinating with other unions.

West Midlands conference confident in fighting for socialism

DAN FORD
WORCESTER SOCIALIST PARTY

Over fifty members of the Socialist Party from across the West Midlands met on 11 February for a terrific regional conference. Over the day, contributions were made with hopeful but realistic experiences of branch building and tales from the picket line.

nothing left to give and the need for a new workers' party and a socialist alternative.

Lenny Shail, national campaigns organiser, introduced a discussion in which he raised the many ways, big or small, we can all help build a strong socialist force in the West Midlands over the next few critical months.

Delegates reported on the development of the great work done in their areas, with some branches growing and others expanding into new areas! And discussed how we can win more students and young people to socialist ideas.



West Midlands Socialist Party conference
PHOTO: BRUM SP

Mansfield Socialist Party campaigns for jobs, services and homes for all at anti-racist demo

PHOEBE COX
MANSFIELD SOCIALIST PARTY

On Saturday 11 February, Socialist Party members ran a campaign stall in Mansfield town centre, alongside the Nottinghamshire Trades Council demonstration in response to recent protests outside a Mansfield hotel housing asylum seekers.

having conversations about the need for better services, and offering their thoughts on the improvements needed for the district and its residents.

The trades council protest included a presence from Unite and PCS union members, many of whom have been on picket lines in recent months.

Socialist Party members from across the East Midlands, with leaflets and posters, advocated the need to 'unite and fight for jobs, homes, and services for all' - along with calls for an end to racism, and to get the Tories out. We had a good response to this message.

It was a great show of solidarity, with many passers-by taking leaflets,

'What choice do we have?' Why I'm standing in my local by-election, and won't stop after this one

RACHEL COX
OXFORD SOCIALIST PARTY

The challenge is not just seeing what's wrong with the world, everyone can do that. There's plenty to see, from the woeful response to the pandemic and the government's use and subsequent disregard of NHS workers, to increasing hatred and violence towards ethnic and trans minorities - trans hate crimes have risen by 56% in the last year with an estimated 88% of further incidents believed to go unreported in the first place. It's easy to see these problems, the challenge is apathy. Exactly because there's so much wrong, our hearts can harden and turn away in case they might shatter.

quantity of woe to the point where it was easier to ignore it and try to live my life. But over the last year, seeing people freezing and starving on the streets and in their homes due to the failures of local and national government was the tipping point.

When I realised that all these problems were linked to a systemic failure, of the Tory government and the profit-driven system of capitalism, my apathy gave way to compassionate anger. I realised we have no choice but to fight for things to get better, and that passively waiting won't do anything.

Littlemore ward in Oxford is an area that's felt the sharp end of council decisions and a decade of cuts. This includes unpopular Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN) schemes, and lacklustre bus provision. There's

a strong want and need for deeper involvement of local people in how their area is run. And with all of these failures happening under a Labour council, people are looking for an alternative.

So I am standing in the upcoming Littlemore by-election for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), taking place on 2 March. I stand with its policy platform of people's governance and real accountability, for needs budgets which use council reserves and borrowing powers to fund the services we need, linked to a campaign to demand the resources taken by the Tory government.

And I won't be stopping campaigning after this by-election. Because, if the choice is between apathy and action, what choice do we really have?



Rachel and Oxford TUSC campaigning in Littlemore
PHOTO: OXFORD SP



Mansfield Socialist Party
PHOTO: HEATHER RAWLING

Sheffield TUSC prepares anti-cuts stand

YORKSHIRE SOCIALIST PARTY

48 people attended the Sheffield Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) public meeting held on 9 February, including nine at their first such meeting.

Steve McGowan, (Fire Brigades Union rep) and Paul Suter (regional organiser for the PCS civil service union), both speaking in a personal capacity, explained their unions' current disputes and the need for co-ordinated strike action.

Sue Statter (former Labour councillor, now TUSC candidate) reported back from the discussions at the TUSC national conference endorsing policy platforms for the upcoming elections. And Alistair Tice (Sheffield TUSC agent and Socialist Party organiser) argued that Starmer's Labour does not represent us and that we need a new workers' party.

Sheffield TUSC, with the support of the local RMT branch, is gearing up to stand over 20 candidates in May's council elections. TUSC candidates will put forward an anti-cuts, socialist alternative to Sheffield's 'collaborative council' of Labour, Lib-Dems and Greens.

Visit www.tusc.org.uk for details on how to apply to be a local election candidate before the next TUSC steering committee on 22 February.

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AREA	£ RECEIVED	£ TARGET	%
South West	1,420	1,800	79%
Wales	1,814	2,300	79%
Northern	359	750	48%
West Midlands	1,190	2,600	46%
North West	414	1,150	36%
London	1,366	4,600	30%
Yorkshire	744	2,550	29%
Southern & SE	666	2,350	28%
East Midlands	398	1,850	22%
Eastern	147	1,200	12%
Other	1,926	3,850	50%
TOTAL	10,444	25,000	42%

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Socialist Students conference - a key event for the fight back on campuses

ADAM POWELL-DAVIES
SOCIALIST STUDENTS NATIONAL ORGANISER

This year's Socialist Students conference in Birmingham on 18 March takes place amidst a historic collapse in students' living standards.

Double-digit inflation has slashed the value of student maintenance loans by 7% this year, pushing students to drastic measures to continue their studies. Over half of university students are now cutting back on essentials to make ends meet. One in four have taken on new debts and nine in ten students say they are worried about the cost of living.

This crisis is set to deepen, as the government prepares to increase maintenance loans in England by just 2.8% next year, while inflation is sky high. What is posed is a sharp increase in university dropouts, as the Tories attack working-class students' ability to continue their education beyond the age of 18.

However, the objective crisis facing students is in stark contrast to the current low level of student-led struggle on the campuses. At this stage, students are generally enduring attacks from the Tories and university management, as opposed to fighting them. A central task of this year's Socialist Students conference will be to lay out what programme is necessary and how to organise to begin transforming this mood - from one of resignation, to fighting back.

That task will be the main theme of the morning session, 'Organising, fighting and striking back against the cost-of-living crisis'.

A spark could ignite explosions on campus. It is possible that struggle could rapidly break out in the universities in the next period, similar to what happened with the rent strikes two years ago. We will be discussing perspectives for UK higher education, to raise some of the issues that students may find ourselves campaigning on, in addition to the cost-of-living crisis.

This discussion will be further developed during the motions discussion in the afternoon, in which conference will hear motions from groups around the country on a number of key issues affecting the lives of students and young people. These motions will propose policies to be included in the national programme of Socialist Students for the coming year, which conference delegates will vote on as well as a steering committee for 2023-24.

As a campaigning organisation, Socialist Students puts forward concrete demands that students can fight for to improve our lives - for example, living maintenance grants, or rent controls in university accommodation. But we also link those demands to the need for a socialist society where those improvements would be possible on a permanent basis. Deciding what demands to put forward, and at what stage, requires an understanding of the world

around us - where it's come from, where it is currently, and where it's heading - and the outlook and ideas that exist among the different forces in society. The theoretical workshops at the start of the afternoon session will apply this method of analysis - Marxism - across a number of topics:

- How do Marxist economics explain the cost-of-living crisis?
- Ending violence against women - the fight today and the origin of women's oppression
- How could a 24-hour general strike be achieved?
- How can students fight for a new political party?

Finally, the conference will close with a rally under the heading, 'The struggle for socialism across the globe'. This will feature socialist fighters from around the world, from Sri Lanka to Nigeria. In a new era of overlapping crises - social, economic, political, ecological - young people everywhere are looking for an alternative to the current system. The closing rally will place the struggle of workers and young people in Britain in the context of a global capitalist system facing its deepest crisis for generations, which can give us confidence in our fight for a socialist world.

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May Day greetings - help fund the paper that fights for the working class

CALLUM JOYCE
OXFORD SOCIALIST PARTY

1 May marks International Workers' Day, an event where socialists and workers' movement activists of all backgrounds celebrate the rich history of working-class struggle and commemorate the original fight for an eight-hour working day, which began over one hundred years ago.

The celebration this year takes place against the backdrop of workers moving into struggle to defend their pay and conditions.

The Socialist newspaper has been a familiar sight on many picket lines, carrying messages of support, reporting on developments in industrial struggles, and providing a clear political programme to take the fight forwards. As such, it is more important than ever that the Socialist continues to be produced and sold - to

provide a working-class alternative to the bosses' media.

Every year, the Socialist runs a campaign of May Day greetings where trade union branches, community campaign groups, student societies and more help fund the work that we do. By making a donation for a 'greeting' in the pages of our paper this shows a message of support from an organisation and carries out a practical act of financial solidarity.

Last year we received over 75 greetings from many different trade union bodies and campaign groups, reflecting the widespread impact the Socialist has across different workplaces and campaigns.

If you have been on strike this year, fought back against closures to public services or campaigned against the cost-of-living crisis on campus, then consider taking part in this May

Day tradition by making a contribution from your trade union branch or organisation to support the paper which has supported you.

This year, for an extra £40 on top of a greeting you can get the Socialist delivered to your union office or workplace for a year.

If you know any other individuals or groups that have received support from the Socialist then consider asking them about taking out a greeting as well.

2023 will be a year of fighting back against the bosses and their corrupt politicians and continuing the struggle for socialism. The Socialist will be there every step of the way, providing a fighting voice for all workers.

- Visit socialistparty.org.uk/mayday for information on prices and how to make payments



The Socialist on an NEU picket line
PHOTO: PAULA MITCHELL



WHAT WE STAND FOR

Capitalism is an ailing, crisis-ridden system based on the exploitation of the majority of the world's population by a small, super-rich elite who own most of the wealth and the means of producing it. This way of organising society, in which the pursuit of profit comes before everything else, causes poverty, inequality, environmental destruction, wars and oppression across the globe.

The Socialist Party organises working-class people to fight against the attacks from this rotten system on our lives and livelihoods, and for a socialist alternative: a society which takes the wealth out of the hands of the super-rich and is democratically run by working-class people to meet the needs of all not the profits of a few.

Building fighting democratic trade unions in the workplaces and a new mass workers' party is a vital part of the struggle to change society along socialist lines.

Because capitalism is a world system, the struggle for socialism must also be international. The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International which organises across the world. Our demands include:

WORK, PENSIONS AND BENEFITS

- A £15 an hour minimum wage for all, without exemptions. For the minimum wage to automatically increase linked to average earnings or inflation, whichever is higher.

- Share out the work. A maximum 32-hour working week with no loss of pay or worsening of conditions. The right to flexible working, under the control of workers not employers. An end to insecure working, for the right to full-time work for all who want it; ban zero-hour contracts.

- All workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness, parental and holiday rights from day one of employment. End bosses using bogus 'self-employment' as a means to avoid giving workers rights.

- No to austerity through inflation. For all wage rates to be automatically increased at least in line with price rises.

- Open the books of all companies cutting jobs or claiming they can't afford to pay a real living wage. State subsidies, where genuinely needed, for socially-useful small businesses.

- For trade unions independent of the capitalist state, with members having democratic control over their own policies, constitutions and democratic procedures. For all trade union officials to be regularly elected, subject to recall by their members and paid a worker's wage.

- Reduce the state retirement and pension age to 55. For decent living pensions.

- Replace universal credit and the punitive benefit system with living benefits for all who need them.

PUBLIC SERVICES

- A massive expansion of public services including the NHS and council services. Reverse all the cuts, kick out the privateers. Bring private social care and childcare facilities into public

ownership under democratic control, in order to provide free, high-quality services for all who need them. Expand services for all women suffering violence.

- For local councillors who are committed to opposing austerity and all cuts to local services, jobs, pay and conditions.
- For a socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs, including dental and eye care – free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out the private companies! Nationalise the pharmaceutical industry under democratic workers' control and management.

- Renationalise privatised utilities – including rail, mail, water, telecoms and power – under democratic workers' control and management.

- Free, publicly funded and democratically run, good-quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees and write off student debt, end marketisation, and introduce a living grant. No to academisation. For all schools to be under the genuine democratic control of local education authorities, school staff, parents and student organisations.

- The right to a safe secure home for all. For the mass building of genuinely affordable, high-quality, carbon-neutral council housing. For rent controls that cap the level of rent. Fair rent decisions should be made by elected bodies of tenants, housing workers and representatives of trade unions. For cheap low-interest mortgages for home buyers. Nationalise the privately owned large building companies, land banks and estates.

- Oppose the dictatorship of the billionaire owners of the media. For the nationalisation of newspaper printing facilities, radio, TV and social media platforms. Access to these facilities should be under democratic control, with political parties' coverage being allocated in proportion to the popular vote at elections.
- For a new mass workers' party, based on the trade unions, and drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplaces, and community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, socialist political alternative to the pro-big business parties.

ENVIRONMENT

- Prioritising major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels and nuclear power with renewable energy and ending the problems of early obsolescence – where products are designed to 'wear out' and be replaced – and unrecycled waste.

- Nationalisation of the energy companies, under democratic workers' control and management, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need, in order to carry out a major switch to clean, green energy, without any loss of jobs, pay or conditions.

- A democratically planned, massively expanded, free to use, publicly owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.

- For a major, publicly funded, insulation and energy transition plan for existing housing stock.

- Agribusiness to be taken into democratic public ownership. For a food processing and retail industry under workers' control to ensure that standards are set by consumers, small farmers; and

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all workers involved in the production, processing, distribution and retail of food.

DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

- For united working-class struggle to end discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice and oppression.

- Repeal the anti-trade union laws and all others that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest and to strike! End police harassment. For the police to be accountable to local committees, made up of democratically elected representatives of trade unions, local community organisations and local authorities.

- For the right to choose when and whether to have children – for the right to access abortion, contraception and fertility treatment for all who need it.

- For the right to asylum – with democratic community control and oversight of emergency funding resources. No to racist immigration laws.

- Expand democracy. For the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords. For all MPs to be subject to the right of recall by their constituents at any time, and to only receive a worker's wage.

- For proportional representation and the right to vote at 16.

- For the right of nations to self-determination. For an independent socialist Scotland and for a socialist Wales, both part of a voluntary socialist confederation of Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland.

- Oppose the dictatorship of the billionaire owners of the media. For the nationalisation of newspaper printing facilities, radio, TV and social media platforms. Access to these facilities should be under democratic control, with political parties' coverage being allocated in proportion to the popular vote at elections.

- For a new mass workers' party, based on the trade unions, and drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplaces, and community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, socialist political alternative to the pro-big business parties.

- Take the wealth off the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need, not to the fat cats.

- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.

- No the EU bosses' club. Organise a campaign with European socialists and workers' organisations to use the talks on post-Brexit relations to tear up the EU pro-capitalist rules. For a real collaboration of the peoples of Europe on a socialist basis as a step towards a socialist world.

- No to imperialist wars and occupations!

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Protester's 'contempt of court' jailing for speaking about climate issues

IAIN DALTON
YORKSHIRE SOCIALIST PARTY

One thing most people know about courts is that all witnesses are asked to swear to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." But in a recent case of an Insulate Britain protester, David Nixon was forbidden by the judge, Silas Reid, to mention either climate change or the cost-of-living crisis when summing up his defence of the case.

How on earth are you supposed to tell the truth about your motivations if the judge instructs you not to talk about them?

Bravely, David did speak about those issues, reported as saying: "That's before moving on to climate change. Posters around the court building are saying that we are on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator."

"You've not been able to hear these truths because this court has not allowed me to say them. Our safety is at risk, our society is at risk."

After refusing to apologise, he was

found in contempt of court by the same judge, and sentenced to eight weeks in prison.

This judgement, along with restrictions on the right to protest that the Tories plan to bring in, will be used against the workers' movement.

We have already seen during the Covid-19 pandemic how temporary powers the government gave themselves were used to shut down pickets in a number of industrial disputes, and to impose a huge fine on a nurse for organising a protest over low pay and poor working conditions (later reversed). We've also seen attempts to bring in new legislation to restrict the right to strike in response to the cost-of-living strike wave.

Ultimately, for the capitalist class, its law and order isn't about the truth or justice, but about protecting profits - such as the mouth-watering profits of Shell and other energy companies. The workers' movement has to fight: to defend the right to tell the truth, the right to protest and the right to strike.



PHOTO: AZZAJ/CC

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Why I joined the Socialist Party Fighting for our rights means fighting against capitalism



Georgia signed her membership forms at a striking postal workers' protest outside Buckingham Palace! PHOTO: PAUL MATSSON

GEORGIA GERMANI
UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON
SOCIALIST STUDENTS

I have been a member of the Socialist Party for about two months now, having signed my membership form in front of Buckingham Palace at the end of a postal workers' rally in December. I became involved with the party after joining my university's Socialist Students society at the beginning of the academic term.

I had been engaged with politics since my teens but have become far more active in the last two years, particularly after Sarah Everard's murder in 2021. As a young woman and feminist living very near to where Sarah went missing in Brixton, I was rocked by the event. It filled me with a rage and sadness I hadn't felt before.

I tried to channel this anger by becoming active in the protests that followed her murder, particularly after it was revealed that she was murdered by a serving Metropolitan Police officer. This led to me being in attendance at the vigil that was held for Sarah at Clapham Common, when the police eventually turned violent towards us. I witnessed an aggression towards the mourning women around me that I knew the police used on the public regularly, but had never witnessed so closely. I would never have expected such violence and callousness from

them considering who Sarah's murderer was.

The anger that I felt as a result led me to reading more about the real role of the police, as well as the real reasons for why misogyny and violence against women is so prevalent in our society. It quickly became clearer and clearer to me that this violence was not inevitable or natural, and that capitalism was at the centre of women's oppression.

In taking part in many of the 'Kill the Bill' protests that came about just after Sarah's murder, I understood how the fight for women's emancipation was interwoven with every other fight against oppression - whether the fight against racism, the fight for LGBTQ+ rights or the fight for climate action.

The way in which the Kill the Bill protests brought together all of these different struggles illustrated to me so clearly how the fight for liberation has to mean fighting against capitalism.

After many months of feeling disillusioned and angry, I decided that I did not want to feel angry and helpless anymore. I wanted to find a community of people who I could feel energised and emboldened by, who I could learn from and actively work with to build an alternative. I now know that I have found this community with the Socialist Party.

TV: Consent An excellent one-off drama about misogyny and sexual harassment in schools

ALEX GILLHAM
LEICESTER SOCIALIST PARTY

Channel 4's one-off drama 'Consent' is something of an extended public service announcement about 'rape culture' and sexual harassment in UK schools and colleges. While lacking subtlety, it is an important reminder of how power can play a crucial role in silencing victims.

Set in a fictional private sixth form, Consent follows privileged student Archie (Tom Victor), who is harbouring a crush on his twin sister's best friend Natalie (Lashay Anderson).

Natalie, a scholarship student at the school, opens the drama addressing a school assembly with the reminder that only 7% of the UK is privately educated. She catches Archie filming her speech, who stops with a smirk after a pointed look.

During Archie's 18th birthday party, Archie and Natalie catch each other's eyes in between downing shots and snorting lines - a night that ends with a grave non-consensual assault

on the passed-out Natalie.

Much of the show is concerned with the content of the 'Sluts & Stuff' group chat between Archie and his fellow male students, where they discuss the growing crush between Archie and Natalie and the fallout after the party. Instead of text on screen, the boys' WhatsApp chat is acted out by the boys themselves (complete with spoken emojis).

While stoney, it is a powerful device used to depict the issues of objectification of women, peer pressure and, of course, blasé attitudes towards consent.

The 'banter' of the group chat brings to mind the Warwick University 'rape chat' scandal in 2019, when leaked screenshots revealed how 'locker room talk' is elevated to shocking levels within the confines of a digital space.

The show also depicts the power-play between middle-class Archie, a promising student bound for Oxbridge, and working-class Natalie, to silence her story. Archie's family immediately hires a lawyer to put together a statement and threatens to sue the school, whereas Natalie remains voiceless and powerless with no evidence of the assault.

The depiction of the school's negligent response to the incident - the

headmaster promises discretion to Archie's family and hands the boy a leaflet for Alcoholics Anonymous - is also a depressing reminder of how educational institutions, particularly private schools, contribute to the power structures that discourage victims of sexual assault to even bother speaking out.

While the show touches on a range of topics (Emma Davis-Edwards' script squeezes in revenge porn, easy access to pornography and homophobia in a breathless 50-minute run), some of the characters can feel like caricatures, especially Archie's friend Raffa, whose attitude towards women borders on demonic.

However, despite this lack of nuance, the show ends with shocking statistics from an Ofsted report on an endemic rape culture in UK schools which sounds the alarm for the creeping increase in misogyny in an era of Andrew Tate, obsessive hatred of figures like Meghan Markle (who gets a name-drop on the show) and online 'incel' groups.

Consent is an essential watch for today's teenagers. The young cast is excellent, it speaks to its subjects on their level and avoids melodrama.

- *Consent is available to watch on demand on All4*



Consent PHOTO: CHANNEL 4

Young people side with strikers

WALK OUT ON BUDGET DAY 15 MARCH



PHOTO: YORK.SP

CHARLIE SCHOOL STUDENT

On Budget Day 15 March, teachers across England and Wales in the National Education Union (NEU) are set to strike nationally for the second time. The last time they took national strike action on 1 February alongside others, over 500,000 workers showed their opposition to the cost-of-living crisis.

There are set to be national demonstrations in London and Cardiff, with striking teachers and civil servants confirmed to be out so far.

Our schooling system has seen cuts over the last decade, with schools in deprived areas suffering the most. In real terms, teachers have seen a 15% decrease in their pay since 2010. The Tories have attacked starting salaries for teachers, lowering what they earn. And at a time of increased inflation, combined with higher workloads, fewer resources and fewer staff, it's clear why teachers are taking action.

Students should join the fight and back teachers on strike; we are also suffering after over a decade of

Tory rule. We are expected to pay huge amounts of money for university and end up in debt worth up to £45,000. We are expected to work for low wages, on zero-hour contracts, earning sometimes as little as £4.81 per hour as an apprentice.

On offer for us is expensive education cut to the bone, poverty wages and cramped rip-off housing. And they can't even guarantee we will have a planet that is safe to live on. The Tory government has made no progress towards its already insufficient plan to tackle environmental destruction.

Joining teachers on 15 March will not only be a show of support for striking teachers. Young people are often overlooked and under-represented in politics, so Budget Day gives us an opportunity to take a stand. Walking out of classes and lectures, we will be fighting alongside workers on strike to demand better wages, a better education system and a world in which workers and young people can live comfortably.

● See Socialist Students conference page 13