the agitator

THE AGITATOR NETWORK

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Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists - Produced by Workers Power supporters

The 'war on terrorism'

Union leaders suspend resistance, but Blair and the capitalists carry on attacking working class people.

Tony Blair has used the attacks on New York in September as a pretext to get what he wants at home.

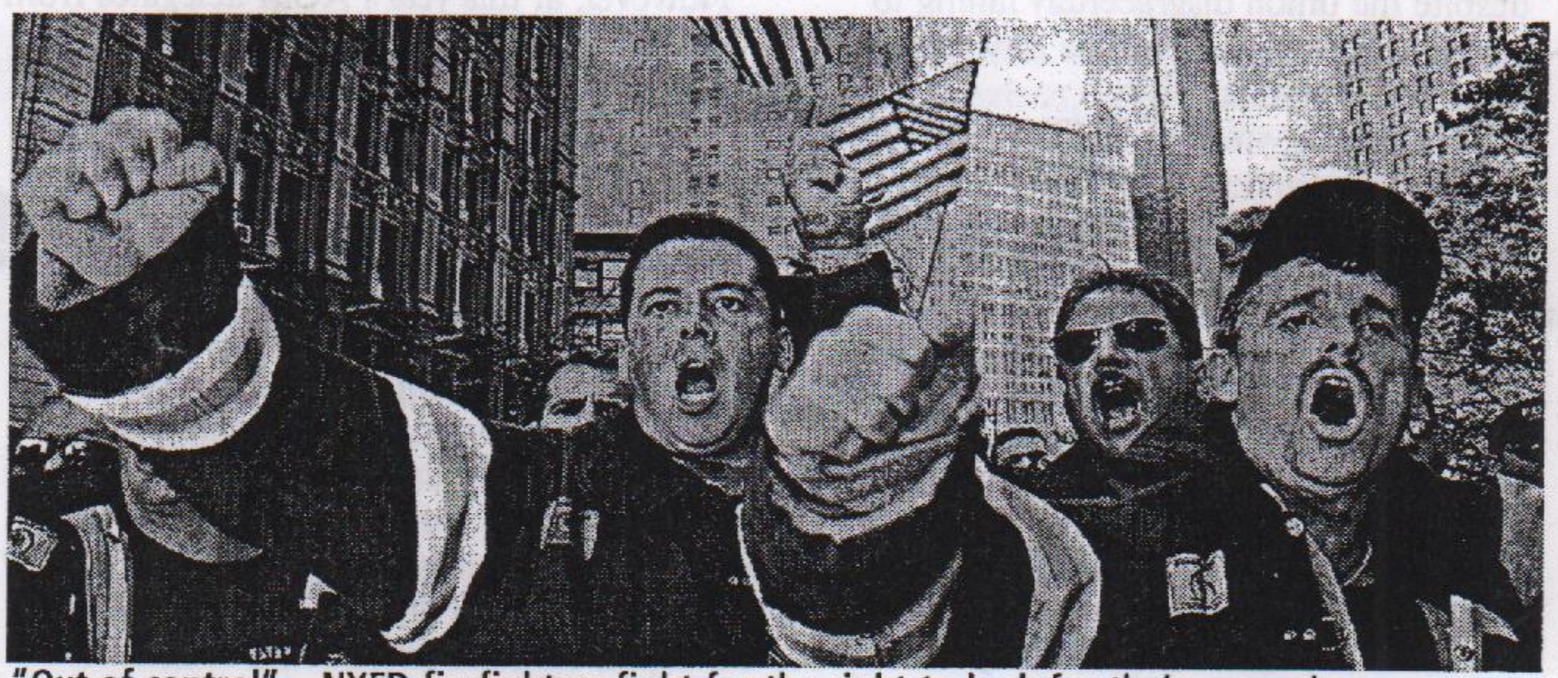
He was just about to make a speech defending privatisation and PFI at the TUC conference. He was widely expected to be booed. Then the planes struck the twin towers. Blair called off his speech, the TUC called off its congress, and John Edmonds of the GMB called off his planned campaign against privatisation.

This was "for patriotic reasons", you see – because "we all need to pull together in times of crisis or war".

But did Blair call off his policy of selling our services to fat cats? Did he hell. PPP on London underground, Alan Milburn's privatisation drive in the NHS – they are going full steam ahead with their plans to hand public services over to the private corporations for mega-profits.

It doesn't stop there. In a blatant bit of Thatcher-style union-busting, New Labour is paying strikebreakers an extra £49 a day to break the strike of the Benefits Agency workers. And that's nothing compared to the billions they can find to bomb Afghanistan back into the stone age. At the same time there's no money to save the jobs of workers in the travel and airline industries. Blair stands by while British Airways axes over 7,000 jobs, Virgin chucks over a thousand onto the dole and hundreds of sackings are taking place at British Midland.

Blair's 'patriotism' is a fraud on the working class. It's the same approach that New York mayor Giuliani has shown to the heroic workers of the New York Fire Department. One day he was praising them for their self-sacrifice on 11th September. The next he ordered them to stop trying to dig out their fallen brothers and get back to work. When they refused, went on strike and occupied cranes to hold a rally, he condemned them as 'out of control' and 'emotional'. Then he locked up their leaders. The massive real estate deals waiting to be signed as soon as the rubble is removed are apparently more important than human lives.



"Out of control" – NYFD firefighters fight for the right to look for their comrades.

Similarly, when the New York stock exchange re-opened for business on 17th September, George Bush called on traders to be 'patriotic' and not let the market crash. The speculators' patriotism lasted 20 minutes – after which they sold as fast as they could. In the real world, thousands of workers were sacked.

When employers and their politicians call for national unity or appeal to patriotism, it only means one thing – stop resisting our exploitation at home. There's not a nation on earth that isn't divided into capitalists and workers, rich and poor – so patriotism just means workers accepting everything the bosses want.

When union leaders support Blair and Bush's war, it won't help the working class one bit. The war has got nothing to do with stopping atrocities like 11th September, and everything to do with extending the power of US and British corporations all over the world. The 10-year War on terrorism is about giving the great powers the right to intervene wherever they want, whenever they want. Meanwhile, the same thing happens in the economic sphere, as the World Trade Organisation forces poor countries to drop trade barriers and privatise their already desperately underfunded services.

Indeed, if the Bush and Blair want to be tough on terrorism, they should be tough on the causes of terrorism. Globalisation has led to a world where three billion people survive on less than $2 a day while the 350 richest families in the world own 40 per cent of the world's wealth. The world's poorest countries are strangled by 'debts' of $2,200bn, of which just $34bn of this has been cancelled in the past four years. Within four days of 11th September the US Congress handed over $50bn to the military for an immediate revenge attack.

The Agitator is a new bulletin produced by trade unionists who want to fight back, not just against Blair and individual employers, but against the whole system of global capitalism. It has been started by trade unionists and workers who have taken part in protests around the world against global capitalism and the rule of the big corporations, from Prague and Melbourne in 2000 through to the gigantic protests in Gothenburg and Genoa this year. The last of these saw 300,000 people, including masses of trade unionists, protest against the G8 group of major capitalist countries. We are mobilising for the next big protest – in Brussels on 13-14th December.

We want to build a rank and file movement in the trade unions, so we can take action even where our full-time officials and bureaucrats oppose it. We want to build an international alliance of workers, to meet the challenge of global corporations and institutions. And we want to link up with mass anti-war and anti-capitalist protests, so we can help build a movement that get rid of capitalism.

Rail union tops attack militants not bosses... an RMT activist speaks out

Rail privatisation has, by anyone's standards, been an unmitigated disaster for the industry. The decision to wind up the despised Railtrack will be welcomed throughout the industry and by the general public. However, the chance to bring it back into public ownership will be missed by the government. Stephen Byers' talk of a non-profit making commercial organisation beggars belief.

Nevertheless out of this chaos workers are finding a new confidence and will to fight.

This year the RMT has seen massive 'yes' votes for strike action against privatisation on London Underground and against attacks on the operational role of the guards. Strikes have been solidly supported and quickly won. Only at C2C, the Essex to London commuter line, has management dug in. Even so, the strikers have shown tremendous resolve, taking up to 14 days action so far despite the union disgracefully failing to spread their action or raise a levy to help them cope with hardship.

This fighting spirit of RMT members has, however, been undermined by the anti-democratic machinations of a nasty right wing clique dominating the Council of Executive.

In the past year the C of E has

- ignored a national AGM decision to re-run the election of the C of E rep for area 2 and 3 (NW England) and imposed the clique's preferred candidate, John Tilley, despite his failure to win an absolute majority in the first round.
- closed down a Special General Meeting of the national union—by switching off the microphones!
- attempted to witch-hunt Alex Gordon, Pat Sikorski, Tony Donaghy and Phil Boston for their attempt to get these matters addressed.

Alex and Tony faced a suspended 3 year ban from holding a union position, Pat a 5 year ban and Phil being removed from his elected post as President of the union. However, at this year's AGM delegates from branches throughout Britain threw out the C of E motion to discipline them.

We must consolidate this victory by re-electing Phil and electing Bob Crow as General Secretary and John MacDonald as Assistant General Secretary. We need the right people at Unity House to support the current militancy.

We can't afford to have back-stabbers in control of the union while the rail bosses are conducting their own victimisation campaign against militants.

- Mick Skiggs, a guard at Portsmouth, was demoted, while Pat Spackman, a Bristol driver, and Chrissy Davidson, Health & Safety rep and a shunter at First Great Western, both faced the sack. All three were reinstated only after massive votes to strike in their defence.
- Waterloo drivers Greg Tucker (branch secretary) and Sarah Friday (Health & Saftey rep) have also been victimised, as have others.

We must cut out the cancer of bureaucratism if we are to stop the victimisation of militants and go on the attack – to renationalise all the rail companies under railworkers' and passengers' control.

Victory is sweeter second time round!

Medical secretaries at the North Glasgow Hospitals Trust have finally secured the regrading deal they deserve after two campaigns of industrial action. The Unison members thought they had reached an agreement that all the secretaries, who are among the lowest paid workers in the NHS, would be put on Grade 4. They suspended their all-out action on 25th October only to find, hidden in the small print, a clause meaning that many of them would not reach Grade 4 immediately.

Frances Lyall, a medical secretary, said, "I'm absolutely sickened by the attitude of the Trust. We thought they had finally acknowledged that we were an important part of the team. But it is clear that they consider us to be of less worth than their new squiggle on their headed notepaper."

All-out indefinite strike action recommenced on 1st November—and after eight days NGH management caved in. The new deal will mean increases that are 50 per cent higher than the recently negotiated 'National Framework' agreement.

Branch Secretary Carolyn Leckie warned other penny-pinching NHS Trust managers, "This has been a monumental uphill struggle all the way but we've overcome every obstacle and won through. Low paid, public sector workers are on the march. This is just the beginning."

Pay up – or the factory gets it!

"Du fric ou boum" Workers at the ill-fated Moulinex factory in Caen, Northern France, have been threatening their own war against the bosses and the government this week – class war! The banner unfurled on the factory walls threatened "Cash or up she goes" as the sacked workers installed gas cylinders and barrels of chemical products on the roof of the factory.

While Moulinex bosses have been granted millions of francs over the years by successive governments, supposedly to save jobs, Moulinex workers thrown out of work are being forced to take drastic action in order to win measly compensation.

The action of the Moulinex workers certainly forced the government to negotiate – before the threat to blow the factory up, the government refused to meet with the unions. However, reports are that their demands are far from being met. Only longstanding workers will receive the full pay out. 321... BOUM!

FBU leaders try to put out fire over political fund...

Tony Blair's Labour Party relies on millions of pounds donated by the unions. What do union members get for their money? Privatisation, cuts and sackings!

The Firefighters union, the FBU, wised up to this at its last conference. Socialist Alliance supporters moved a resolution arguing that the union should be allowed to donate money to political parties other than just Labour.

The resolution explicitly said money and support from the FBU could be considered for "organisations who stand in opposition to New Labour so long as they uphold policies and principles in line with those of the Fire Brigades Union."

The FBU leadership argued against this resolution and defended the age-old line – and lie – that Labour was the only choice for the working class. They got a shock when conference delegates decided to support the resolution. Even Labour Party members supported it, because they recognised the important principle of allowing the union itself to democratically decide who to give support to rather than giving Labour a permanent monopoly over support and funds.

The resolution was a great victory. But now the FBU leaders are working to get it overturned next year. The Agitator will be supporting all campaigns to democratise the block vote and political funds in the trade union movement and, in particular we will support the campaign by FBU members to defend the decision they took last year and keep it as union policy for good.

THE AGITATOR NETWORK

The Agitator wants to advertise and build solidarity for all workplace and trade union struggles – please send your stories in.

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NO SWEAT CAMPAIGN

Branded with shame: Make 'em sweat!



Nike – brand name first and foremost, sports shoe and leisurewear manufacturer secondly – thrives on its image. It stands for excellence, for freedom of the individual and, most of all, for the importance of play and study in the development of children to their fullest potential. Its own Code of Conduct states, "in the area of human rights… in the communities in which we do business, we seek to do not only what is required, but what is expected of a leader."

Yet, its world empire is built on the very opposite of these values:

- Nike pays the 500,000 workers in its subcontracted factories around the world, on average $32 a month. The World Bank says the minimum wage required anywhere in the world to keep a single person alive is a dollar a day. So Nike is denying its workers the right to raise families.
- Nike has been caught employing workers as young as 10 years old in its factories.
- Nike admitted this summer that managers in its Indonesian factories have been sexually abusing young women workers. Physical abuse is also rife.
- Nike's factories often force its workers to work compulsory overtime: 12 hour shifts and just one rest day a month.
- Nike systematically relocates its factories whenever workers organise in trade unions. 40 per cent of its production has recently moved to China where membership of an independent union is an imprisonable offence. China has also agreed to waive its minimum wage legislation for Nike.
- Nike can afford to double its sweatshop wages around the world by simply reducing its advertising budget by 3.4 per cent. Golfer Tiger Woods gets $55,555 a day for wearing a pair of shoes, the producer just $1. CEO and Nike founder Phil Knight is worth a disgusting $5.8bn.

And if you were wondering – yep, Adidas, Gap and the other brand name high street manufacturers are equally guilty of the most sickening hypocrisy. His dad may wear Adidas boots, but if Brooklyn Beckham was Bengali he'd soon be stitching them. And as for those Gap kids… Get to work!

No Sweat is campaigning to highlight these abuses and force the companies to improve their conditions and– crucially – to recognise the workers' unions.

Initially set up by socialist youth group Revolution, No Sweat has regularly picketed High Street stores and received tremendous support from customers, young and old, when presenting the facts.

In March No Sweat forced Nike to close its London flagship store when it invaded Niketown after months of being fobbed off outside. In the summer it ran a solidarity campaign in support of 800 sacked sweatshop workers in Mexico who eventually won their fight for reinstatement and union recognition.

In October, along with London region GMB and the McLibel campaign, it turned its attention to McDonalds who have been found guilty of forcing schoolkids to work till 2:00a.m. on weekdays and double shifts during exam periods. McDonalds has also begun to exploit the lower minimum wage for under-22s by paying just £3.75 an hour. Sweatshops are not just a Third Worlds phenomenon – they're a capitalist one.

No Sweat has grown in the past year. It is now supported by several socialist organisations and union branches. KFAT, GMB, Natfhe, T&G and Aslef have all supported No Sweat campaigns and actions. Teachers have invited No Sweat into classrooms to explain how the mega-corporations seek out the lowest labour costs and how workers fight back.

New campaigns are in the pipeline. No Sweat will, with supporters' associations and fanzines, target football clubs to get their replica kits ethically sourced. It will help the GMB run a recruitment drive in the garment trade in the East End of London. It will work with unions in the Third World to get independent monitoring of factory sites and develop a union-approved Kite mark for clothes that have been made in conditions the workers are happy with.

What you can do:

- Come to the No Sweat national conference in London on 24th November
- Invite a No Sweat speaker to address your union branch
- Affiliate to No Sweat
- Contact workmates, trade unionists and friends and picket your local Gap store on World anti-Gap Day, 1st December.

Dita Sari – on bail and on tour

Indonesian Trade Unionist Dita Sari was arrested on 8th November. Thankfully she was released the following day, but this sort of state harassment is a regular feature of the class struggle in Indonesia.

1,000 strikers from 15 branches of the Matahari Putra Prima department store gathered inside the company's headquarters compound to demand a meeting between their union – the Indonesian National Front for Labour Struggles (FNPBI) – and management. The workers were seeking payment of various allowances. They are currently being paid between $40 and $50 a month.

At 3.10pm, workers heard the police commander issue orders to disperse the workers and beat them. Scores of police then attacked the workers. According to a statement issued by the FNPBI on November 9, 31 workers suffered injuries, mainly wounds to the head. Others suffered severe bruising from being kicked while on the ground. Eight FNPBI leaders were arrested.

Protest faxes can be sent to:
National Police Headquarters:
62-21-7261771
Jakarta Metropolitan Police Headquarters: 62-21-5225646

NO SWEAT CONFERENCE

Saturday November 24 University of London Union, Malet St WC1. 11am-6pm Speakers include Dita Sari. There will be a discussion on anti-capitalism after Genoa and a debate between Colin Hines and Pete Green on the meaning of Globalisation. There will also be film showings and practical sessions aimed at informing and launching campaigning activity. Registration: £5

Dita will also be doing a brief speaker tour, visiting Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham and Sheffield.

www.nosweat.org.uk – for details.

Global justice – Global peace

For a workers' Europe, demonstrate in Brussels D13/D14



For many British workers the European Union remains—after nearly 30 years—a mysterious and distant entity. Yet 60 per cent of new laws in Britain are introduced by the EU, and 70 per cent of these are economic laws regulating workers' rights, benefits and social welfare.

That's why the European Confederation of Trade Unions, including the TUC, has called for a mass international demonstration at the Laeken summit of the EU leaders in Brussels in December. That's why school and college students in Germany, Belgium and Holland have called strikes during the summit. That's why anti-capitalist organisations across Europe, like Attac and Globalise Resistance, have called for a blockade.

Here are some of the reasons why British trade unionists, students and anti-capitalists should join their European sisters and brothers on the demo:

- The EU demands that all member countries raise high taxes on medium and low paid workers while giant corporations and the rich get tax cuts and offshore havens. The Agitator says: Tax the rich!
- The EU wants public services to be privatised and subsidies removed from education and healthcare. A specific proposal at the summit says all public transport systems in major cities should be privatised and run for profit. The Agitator says: No to privatisation, PFI and PPP. Renationalise all services and utilities (rail, water, gas, telecommunications, etc.) under workers' control and with no compensation!
- The EU allows free access for capital across its borders and demands the right for its bosses and bankers to operate freely anywhere in the world. But should any worker or refugee try to come and live here, they face razor wire, imprisonment and discrimination. Only if they have the right skin colour or skills that can boost profits are they welcome. The Agitator says: Open the borders! For the right to work and vote for all who want to come to Europe!
- The EU is creating an autonomous army ready to intervene to defend its global profits anywhere in the world and has co-ordinated police tactics via Europol against strikers and anti-capitalist protesters. The Agitator says: Not a penny nor a person for the defence of the bosses' system! Disarm the police!
- The EU is run by unelected bodies like the European Commission, European Council, Council of Ministers and Committee of Permanent Representatives while its parliament has no real powers. It is lobbied by bosses' unions like the European Employers' Association and the Round Table of European business leaders while the trade unions are left in the cold. No wonder no one bothers to vote... The Agitator says: For a European constituent assembly to decide what kind of Europe we want, elected by all over 16 years old! For the socialist united states of Europe!

The EU is a bosses' club. It is, along with the USA, the major force on the planet for globalisation, that is the tearing down of all health and safety, labour and environmental legislation that stands in the way of profit. Nationalised industries, welfare provision, jobs and standards of living must be attacked in the name of 'free trade'. Yet those who want to use freedoms of speech, assembly and direct action—on the streets or the picket lines—have to be silenced, repressed and imprisoned.

In the context of a deepening global recession, the EU seeks to ensure that it is workers and poor people who will pay the price for the crisis in the bosses' system. Tens of thousands across Europe have already been chucked onto the scrapheap since 11th September. Sabena workers from the collapsed Belgian airline will be in the front ranks of the demo.

The EU is every bit as legitimate a target for protesters as the G8 or the World Trade Organisation. D13/D14 must stand in the tradition of the international anti-capitalist protests begun in Seattle against the WTO in 1999, Prague against the IMF and World Bank last year and Genoa against the G8 in the summer.

These protests have rocked the capitalists. Their response has been to try and split the movement by a series of reforms and repressive measures.

But the 'reforms' are cosmetic. The EU says it has launched an in-depth "Future of Europe" reform process, yet its Charter of Fundamental Rights excludes the rights to work, to social housing and to welfare benefits while the rights of capitalist property are enshrined. And if even this proves too much for our masters, any country can suspend articles of the European Convention of Human Rights on the grounds of a national "emergency"—thus Britain suspended the right to liberty on 10th November so that it could lock up asylum seekers even though it has not been attacked.

Meanwhile, unarmed protesters at the EU summit in Gothenburg in June were subjected to a shoot-to-kill policy by the police, while Carlo Giuliani, a young trade unionist and anti-capitalist, was killed in Genoa and hundreds hospitalised and tortured in a night of terror. No one has been charged for these murderous offences.

In these circumstances it is criminal for the leaders in the ETUC to try and keep the trade union march on D13 separate from the anti-capitalist demo on D14. Far from playing into the bosses' hands, the anti-capitalist movement, with its tactics of direct action and confrontation, has forced the globalisers to address the issues of global injustice. Trade unionists must defy their leaders and stay in Brussels for both protests.

The Agitator believes that the dynamic combination of the disciplined mass ranks of the labour movement and the creative courage of the anti-capitalist movement can stop the bosses in their tracks and consign their system to the dustbin of history. Brussels D13/14 must be another step along that road. We'll be there. Join us!

Coach tickets are £45 and leave London 11pm Wed 12th of December and return Friday evening.

Contact the Agitator for details.