the agitator

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Issue 7 Nov–Dec 2002
Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists - Produced by Workers Power supporters

Victory to the fire fighters!



The strikes by the Fire Brigades Union have become political with a capital P. If a single fire fighter still thought this was just a pay dispute the interventions by John Prescott, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown will have now persuaded them to think again.

Prescott tore up his RMT union card a few months ago to show the world that he has gone from union darling to union buster.

At 6.30 on the morning the second strike was due to start the FBU executive and the bosses reached a deal. Prescott refused to consider this new deal till after 9.00 – the strike deadline. This was a provocation and an insult to the FBU. Labour wants a fight. Why?

The government wants to inflict a political defeat on the FBU. They know that a determined strike by a strong union could inspire other low paid public sector workers to rise in revolt. That is why they want to smash the FBU's strike. They want to hold the line across the whole public sector so that they can carry on with their plans to cut and privatise it.

It is now clear that the government are lying through their teeth in order to justify their stance. They claimed the Bain review was independent when it was appointed by the government. Twice now they have blocked a 16% offer. Prescott threatened the strikers with police and soldiers crossing their picket lines – only to be told bluntly by Michael Boyce, chief of staff, and the head of the Met that their men would do no such thing. Boyce even let slip that his soldiers were experiencing "morale and motivational problems" scabbing on such a popular and just dispute.

This shows that the government can be beaten. Public support for the strike rose after the first 48 hour stoppage despite filthy lies from the likes of the Sun.

Solidarity has been fantastic. Fire fighter support committees have sprung up around the country. Money has poured in. In a fantastic display of solidarity the New York fire fighters - the heroes of 9/11- have announced their support for the strike and have sent people over to help on picket lines.

The RMT managed to close down most of the London Underground network. And when RMT members were threatened with disciplinary action for protecting themselves and the public from fire hazards underground, they responded by calling a strike ballot. Unison members in Peckham Library, not to be outdone, walked out for almost the whole 48 hours demanding a new fire and safety assessment be carried out.

The basis for massive solidarity to help the fire fighters win is there. Every activist now needs to build on that so that we can keep up the momentum, build the resolve of the strike, push for other public sector workers to bring forward their claims and strike alongside the fire fighters, demonstrating to the government once and for all - we will not tolerate low pay for one second longer. Victory to the fire fighters - all the way for 30K!

Our pay, our strike

Andy Gilchrist is widely respected in the FBU for the way he has handled the dispute. He has come under enormous pressure, so much that he suspended the original strikes.

That pressure can come from other union leaders too, keen to keep the peace so they can carry on with their comfortable lives free from the intrusion of strikes, pickets, solidarity action and the threat of a rank and file taking the unions under their own control. The TUC's role in particular has been despicable, calling for "moderation" from the FBU while providing left cover for the Bain review.

Unless Andy is put under equally enormous pressure by the rank and file of the union there is a real danger that he will buckle.

The suspension of the strikes was a tactical mistake. It enabled the bosses to regroup and come up with the Bain insult. Valuable time was lost to the FBU and other unionists building for solidarity action. It was rank and file activists who - through lobbies and unofficial action - got the strike's momentum going again.

Then he openly declared he would call off strikes for an offer well short of the FBU's full claim, as well as opening the door to the Bain reforms being the basis for negotiations. This prevarication went right up to the wire before the first eight-day strike so that fire fighters did not know whether they would be called out or not till the last minute.

Every time Gilchrist softens the union's line, every time he says the strike may be called off, every time he accepts another part of the bosses' agenda... what happens? The government hardens its line and we risk losing momentum.

FBU activists have too much to win and lose in this dispute to leave the leaders to take all the decisions. They must be made to feel the pressure of the rank and file constantly through:

- regular mass meetings to discuss and decide on the action and on negotiations
- elected strike committees at every station to organise the action and monitor the talks
- a recall special conference, preceded by mass meetings in every area, to decide on any offer that the executive propose be accepted by the union.

No blood for oil

The United Nations weapons inspectors are about to re-start their work in Iraq.

Not only does the Iraqi regime insist it has nothing to hide, neither the US nor Britain has been able to produce a shred of evidence that Saddam Hussein is sitting on an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Even Tony Blair's dossier on Saddam revealed that Iraq has between two and twelve medium-range missiles, has no nuclear capability and any biological or chemical weapons it has are likely to be redundant, past their use-by date.

US Secretary of State and arch hawk Condoleezza Rice has added that even if Iraq does have weapons of mass destruction, it cannot possibly use them for fear of reprisal.

Yet these facts will not avert a war. Why? Because the war on Iraq is not about stopping the evil dictator Saddam. It is about re-colonising Iraq and its valuable oil fields for US and British oil companies. It is about cementing the rule of global capitalism for decades to come. Why else should Bush and Blair threaten Saddam and continue to sell arms to Israel's Sharon, a war criminal who has broken more UN resolutions than Saddam has had hot dinners.

When Bush's daddy went to war with Saddam, he ordered the military to plant tank tracks near the Kuwaiti-Saudi border to convince Arab leaders to back the war, thinking the Iraqis were on the verge of invading Saudi lands. No doubt similar tricks will be used by Junior this time round. Already the Americans have tried to claim Iraqis firing back at US and British planes bombing their territory is a violation of UN resolutions - by Iraq!

Huge anti-war movements have emerged around the world to stop Bush and Blair. In London 400,000 people marched at the end of September and an incredible one million people took to the streets of Florence in Italy in November. The past month has even seen the anti-war movement in the USA mushroom. Organisers plan to get another million to march on Washington on Martin Luther King Day in January.

There is a direct link between New Labour's war on "terrorism" and its war on the working class. John Prescott deployed 19,000 soldiers to scab on the FBU strike. The government is expected to spend at least £3bn setting off fires in Iraq but can't find £425m to settle the fire dispute in Britain. Schools, hospitals, social housing, workers' pay and conditions all desperately need money but we are told there is none. Meanwhile an old-fashioned imperialist war in the Middle East has money thrown at it.

Tony Blair's war on Iraq and his war on the "enemy within" are both aimed at boosting the profits and control of the billionaire oil magnates, bankers and fat cats at the expense of working people, whether they live in the Middle East or West Midlands. That's why every workers' organisation should stand firm against this war and defend the Iraqi people.

But many in the movement are beginning to demand more than demonstrations. The Hallowe'en day of direct action was a huge success with city centre streets blockaded and colleges occupied. We can build on this by actions like the recent picket of Fylingdales air base. Direct action – and in particular *workers' action* – can stop the warmongers in their tracks.

CoBas, the Italian rank and file union which organised a general strike in April, has called for political strike action to stop the war. This is an excellent initiative and has already received a warm response from other, bigger Italian unions. British unions can enter the fray by organising mass meetings and pledging to down tools when/if the war starts. The RMT and Aslef in particular could stop the tubes when the B-52s take off. They say missile strikes - we say workers' strikes!

Of course, not every trade union is in a position to break the anti-union laws just like that. But we can all agitate for the maximum disruption of the capitalist system – workplace meetings, posters and bulletins, refusing to perform work related to the war effort, bringing union banners onto demonstrations. So long as we remember that the main enemy is at home... together we can stop this war.

Defend Phil Billows

Phil Billows is Unison branch secretary of the Barts and London Hospital NHS Trust. He has been sacked, escorted from the premises by security guards and told he may only re-enter the building if he is seriously ill and in need of treatment!

His crimes? According to the bosses he is guilty of "insubordination" and "unauthorised absences" from work. His insubordination consisted of leading a legitimate union campaign to prevent management opting for a new hospital built under a PFI scheme. His absence was a legitimate use of agreed facility time for him to be able to carry out union business.

In other word Phil has been victimised because he opposes government privatisation policies and is prepared to do something against them. Phil was also a Socialist Alliance candidate in last May's local elections, something that didn't interfere with his work at all, but did upset his bosses.

A campaign to reinstate Phil is now underway with backing from Unison locally, regionally and nationally. We call on all readers to back this campaign.

Contact Phil on 07957 562037, or via the union office on 020 7601 8125, or email philipbillows@yahoo.co.uk.

Send messages of support to Phil via this address and bombard his boss with messages of protest by faxing them to:

Paul White
Chief Executive
Barts and London Hospital NHS Trust
020 7377 7413

FBU STRIKE... FBU STRIKE... FBU STRIKE... FBU STRIKE... FBU STRIKE... FBU STRIKE...

Pay demand "excessive"

Blair, Two Jags Prescott and penny pinching Brown all get paid in excess of £100,000 a year. That is well over £70,000 more than the fire fighters are asking for.

Every television commentator, every rat-cum-journalist on the Sun, every "independent" academic - indeed all of those denouncing the FBU's claim for a take home pay of £8.50 an hour - get more money than a fire fighter. Much more. And none of them risk their lives to save people on a daily basis.

The fire fighters are worth every penny of their full claim. And they are right to strike to get it. If 42% last year was a good enough rise for MPs, then why are fire fighters not worth a similar rise (which would still leave their wages £25,000 short of the lowest paid MP)?

"I do not think we impress the public if we set too low a value on our own worth ... If we believe our work here is important we should not shrink from putting a proper value on it." - Robin Cook, Labour Minister, justifying a 42% pay rise in July 2001. Who is worth more, Cook and his crew, or the life savers in the FBU?

"Bain, Bain, you're insane..."

So go the words of the popular picket-line song. He is so arrogant that he thinks he has found all the answers to the fire service in a couple of weeks without consulting a single FBU member!

But there's method in his madness. Fresh from his work training future fat cats at the London Business School, Bain's reforms of the fire service are designed to break the FBU and impose the unchallenged rule of the bosses in every station.

The Bain review is aimed at destroying the comradeship of the fire station and making fire fighters work harder and longer. The result is easy to see: tight-knit crews will be torn asunder as leading fire fighters are forced to discipline their fellow crew members; exhausted fire fighters at the tail-end of their shifts will be liable to make fatal mistakes; union activists will be picked off for defending conditions that every fire fighter knows are crucial to running an effective outfit.

If any member of the public believes "modernisation" must mean a better service, they should think of this. Bain wants to reduce the number of fire fighters working night shift, even though the majority of domestic fire fatalities occurs between midnight and 4am.

As in every other part of the public sector, modernisation is a euphemism for lower wage bills and a worse service. And for Tony Blair, who recently supported the Queen's immunity from prosecution despite apparently attempting to pervert the course of justice, the Agitator says, modernise the feudal monarchy, the archaic justice system and the pompous Houses of Parliament - but leave our fire service alone!

Una sola soluzione e la rivoluzione!

The first European Social Forum took place in Florence, Italy between 6 and 10 November. 426 associations – trade unions, campaigns, movements – participated. In addition a host of political organisations had stalls and organised seminars and workshops. 60,000 activists from 105 countries registered, 10,000 coming from outside Italy, 1,500 from Britain.

The event culminated in a million-strong demonstration against the war and capitalist globalisation with union and social forum banners from every town and village in Italy. And this was followed by a meeting of up to 15,000 activists from the social movements which agreed on a common declaration against the war, including a European day of action on 15th February, and a series of actions to continue the battle against the multinational corporations and privatisation.

These facts alone mark out the ESF as an historic gathering. Not since the 1920s has such a huge international forum taken place for political discussion and the linking and co-ordination of struggles.

What made the ESF even more important was that it showed – in Italy, especially, but in other European countries as well – that the anti-capitalist movement and the workers' movement have come together. No longer do the unions and the socialist and communist parties separate themselves off from the militant and youthful anti-capitalists, marching the day before or the day after the big battles with the police. They're on the same demos, chanting the same slogans, talking about the same issues.

And as we did so, the proposals for co-ordinated action got more and more concrete, and the forums got more and more left wing. The RMT – which sent an official delegation of around 30 members – signed a pact with other transport unions to link up anti-privatisation struggles. The 5,000-strong meeting on "Which way forward for the anti-capitalist movement?" cheered every mention of workers' revolution, anti-imperialism and socialism.

In this sense the ESF marks a turning point in the struggle against neo-liberalism (the IMF/WTO model of welfare cuts, flexible working and privatisation) and imperialist war. The 1990s were years when workers were told, "There is no alternative to the market." In the new decade, our response is, "Yes there is – and we're gonna make it happen!"

And what better country to mark this turning point than Italy? Everyone who went was impressed by the breadth and depth of the Italian movement. The million-strong demo saw home-made banners from every town and village, not just the big cities, representing the local social forum. Just as important – all the major unions were there in huge numbers. At the final meeting, the most militant speeches came from the Italians too, with the rank and file CoBas federation calling for political strike action against the war.

The Agitator urges everyone in our network to invite speakers to report back to branch and workplace meetings about this new movement. But more than that, let's learn Italian! Let's build social forums here in Britain where anti-war campaigners, trade unionists and anti-racists (to name but three strands of the struggle) can come together as equals in a movement that can put the skids under New Labour.

The mass character of the movement and its real internationalism also gives us the best opportunity for many years to build a new international party of socialist revolution. Yes, there remain serious debates to be had out, but at last there is the political will among thousands of workers and youth to engage in this debate and struggle for revolutionary unity.

Build social forums in every city!

All out across Europe on 15 Feb!

For a new international party of global revolution!

Zanon success

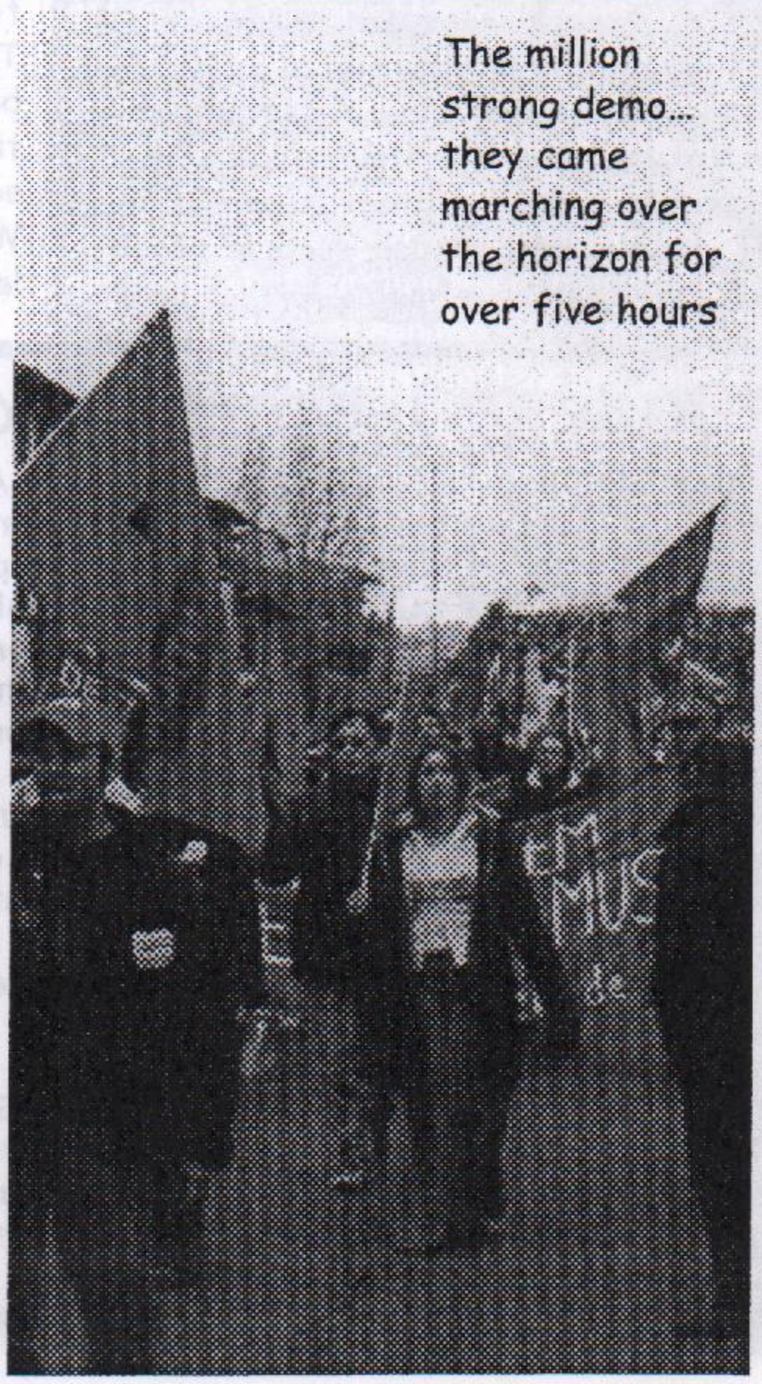
Zanon success

All year the Agitator has been running a solidarity campaign with the ceramic workers who are occupying the Zanon factory in Argentina. Their heroic response to the bosses' refusal to pay their wages was to kick them out and run the factory under workers' control. Now over 100 other factories in Argentina have followed their example.

With tremendous help from the Italian union CoBas, we brought over a Zanon worker, Chicho, to address the ESF. Over 100 workers attended the outdoor meeting and were clearly inspired by Chicho's recounting of their struggle.

In fact, so taken were the Italian section of the audience that Chicho has since embarked on a tour of Italian workplaces. At meetings of a thousand or more, workers have cheered every detail of the occupation, the battles with the police and the road blockades they have mounted with the unemployed.

The true worth of internationalism can be seen by the response of the Fiat workers. Facing over 8,000 job cuts and devastating plant closures, it is essential that they "do a Zanon" and start negotiations with the bosses on the basis of having seized millions of pounds' worth of equipment. And, knowing the Italians, they just might...



The million strong demo... they came marching over the horizon for over five hours

No Sweat steps up a gear

No Sweat – another campaign that the Agitator has been promoting – held a truly international seminar on the fight against sweatshop conditions. With speakers from the American textile union Unite, the US student campaign USAS, War on Want and the Thai Labour Campaign, the meeting revealed a huge enthusiasm for working class solidarity. In fact, dozens of the 250 who attended stayed behind to swap addresses and firm up plans.

There was general agreement on the causes of sweatshops lying in the capitalist system's search for ever-cheaper labour, on the need for independent unions and protective legislation which can be enforced from below, and on imaginative forms of direct action to pile on the pressure on the mega-corporations like Nike and Gap.

The meeting agreed to build for an international day of action against sweatshop labour, to be held on International Women's Day, 8th March 2003. The meeting of the social movements later endorsed this call. Now let's build for it!

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London public sector...

Unite these pay fights

The 26 November strike has finally united London's education workers in our fight for decent pay. Last March NUT members struck for a day to demand a significant increase in the London Allowance. Many other union members from teaching and non-teaching unions refused to cross picket lines. On the strike days later called by Unison, the question posed again and again was: "Why are we not all striking together?" School cleaners, office workers, learning support assistants and teachers are all finding it harder and harder to cope with prices in the capital - soaring rents and house prices, on top of travel and food costs. We all knew it made sense to fight together, not separately.

Our union leaderships have, however, opposed such unity. Doug McAvoy doesn't even want Unison members on the demonstration. The unity that has finally emerged reflects pressure from rank and file union members, who have demanded co-ordinated strike action and built unity in staffrooms and on the picket lines.

Where to now?

The strike in schools looks set to be very effective across London. But will it win our claims for significant increases in the London Allowance? Quite simply, no, and what is sadly lacking at the moment in the NUT, NASUWT or Unison is a clear strategy to win. In the NUT, despite the massive success of the March strike, we have had no further action for more than eight months - no working to contract, no refusal to cover, and no targeted strike action. The national union mounted a sorry excuse for a rally in Central Hall, where TUC head, John Monks, lectured us on why strike action was not a good idea.

Supporters of "The Agitator Network" have argued with those who lead the NUT in London that London teachers, not Doug McAvoy, should run the campaign. We proposed and supported an initiative from Hackney NUT to call a reps' meeting last July to discuss the campaign and develop a strategy. Unfortunately, the largest left organisation in the union, the Socialist Teachers' Alliance, has so far refused to fight to wrest control of this dispute from McAvoy and co.

In Unison there were signs of a serious campaign to win. A programme of escalating strikes started in June, but the momentum has since flagged. The national pay deal undoubtedly took steam out of the London campaign. Currently, key sections are being called out on selective action, but many Unison members feel that they have been out for several days with little to show for it. There is a danger that Unison members will become disillusioned with the campaign at a time when the potential for more generalised action is growing.

We have had enough stalling from the union leaders, enough of stop/start campaigns. It is time for rank and file union members to take over the running of this pay campaign. We need united action co-ordinated by an elected and accountable joint union committee, representing members from all three unions and beyond, including the GMB and T&G. We need leaflets, lobbies, local demonstrations and, crucially, a campaign of industrial action - combining action short of strikes with more prolonged walkouts.

Where's the money coming from?

Day in and day out we hear the likes of Bank of England boss Eddie George and media commentators on six-figure salaries tell us that the government must not grant a decent pay deal for firefighters and other public sector workers. Meanwhile, MPs have awarded themselves a 40% rise. Local councillors in Leeds have followed their example and in crisis-ridden Hackney the new mayor could be raking in £65,000 a year, while another 10 councillors would have salaries of £36,400, if an "independent" review gets implemented. In total, the new allowances would cost £1 million, at a time when the council is tearing up the national terms and conditions of library workers.

But these whopping rises are peanuts against the "earnings" of Arcadia retail boss Philip Green, whose income weighed in at nearly £158 million in 2001. His business interests include high street clothing outlets that subcontract to East End sweatshops. Across the private sector, top corporate bosses saw their salaries soar by 107% between 1994 and 2001 to an average of £416,000, while their typical employee saw pay rise by only 31%.

So where's the money coming from for our increases? The answer is obvious: TAX THE RICH AND PUT PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT.

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

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College lecturers told: no such thing as a free lunch...

Further Education college bosses attending the Association of College's (AoC) annual bash at Birmingham's International Convention Centre on November 19th had to get past a determined lobby by a hundred or so Natfhe and Unison members.

The lobby - which was backed up by strike action at several colleges - was aimed at both the employers and the new Education Secretary Charles Clarke who was in town to announce plans for the seriously underfunded FE sector.

College workers are conducting a joint campaign over pay: lecturers are demanding parity with school teachers (FE college staff have now fallen 12% behind) and support workers want at least parity with those in local government doing comparable work. A joint national strike earlier in the month won unprecedented levels of support - the first time the unions had acted together and the first ever strike for many of the Unison members.

At the short rally, addressed by Natfhe General Secretary Paul Mackney and by Unison representatives, there were loud cheers for the messages of support from the FBU and other unions. In many colleges, branches have teamed up with the FBU at their local fire station, and visited each other's picket lines.

The lobby undoubtedly helped keep up the pressure on the employers who met union officers later. At this meeting they offered to restart talks in the wake of Clarke's funding announcement (although they had cancelled the dinner invitations to Natfhe's officers in protest at our strike!).

Now we must keep up the pressure with further action - telling the employers that unless they meet our claim and guarantee parity by 2004 in ALL colleges, we will move to indefinite action in the New Year.

Natfhe is holding a Special FE Sector Conference on December 7th. This must tell the negotiators not to settle for a "jam tomorrow" deal dependent on the good will of the employers. It is essential we put the arguments to the members and explain that there is no other way we will get a return to decent national pay rates.

Like all of New Labour's funding announcements, Clarke's extra money for the colleges is full of strings and is aimed at setting up a two tier system. Colleges who meet "targets" will get extra funds, others will get thrown to the wolves.

Natfhe and Unison members need to be clear: we have already given and given. Our conditions have been eroded by endless rounds of "modernisation" and we are so "flexible" we can bend no more. We want real money now and a return to nationally agreed pay scales paid in all colleges.