

Kent Socialist

working-class news and views for Kent and Medway

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COALITION GIVES FIGHTING ELECTION ALTERNATIVE

Vital new electoral platform for workers

This month the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition was launched to contest a number of seats in this year's local and general elections.

Workers can look forward to an alternative to the uniform policies of the three main parties – attacks on public services, trade unions, jobs, pay and living standards – and the racism of the BNP in the new electoral formation.

Although the RMT union executive have not agreed to formally support the coalition, RMT branches and regional councils will be able to apply to the union's national executive to support, politically and financially, individual candidates in their area. RMT general secretary, Bob Crow, is supporting TUSC in a personal capacity, and will serve on its steering committee. Other leading trade unionists involved include Brian Caton (general secretary of the Prison Officers' Association) and several prominent members from the PCS union.

Many RMT branches, and other trade unionists have already declared they intend to stand candidates in the general election but have not registered



a party name. Now, if they wish, such candidates will be able to appear on the ballot paper as TUSC rather than as 'Independent'. Candidates from community campaigns, and other socialist organisations that have not been involved in the discussions to date, are also welcome to stand under the TUSC banner.

The coalition has agreed a core policy statement which prospective candidates will be asked to endorse. As a federal, 'umbrella' organisation, however, coalition candidates and participating organisations will also be able to produce their own supporting material. This will allow different individuals and organisations to collaborate with a common purpose under a common banner.

Given the persistent attacks workers have already experienced under the

New Labour government in the recent 'boom years', the offensive on working-class conditions is set to intensify over the next period. It is clear that the 2010 election will mark a turning point in British politics. It will usher in a new 'age of austerity', whoever wins, and socialists and trade unionists together will have to build a working class fightback in the new decade. The TUSC represents a modest but significant step in developing a future alternative to New Labour and the pro-big business policies of the British political establishment.

GET INVOLVED!

To get involved or find out more about the campaign, please email electioncoalition@btinternet.com or jacqui_berry@hotmail.co.uk. Alternatively write to TUSC, 17 Colebert House, Colebert Avenue, London E1 4JP.

WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE DO AND HOW TO GET INVOLVED



The Socialist Party fights for socialist change: a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profits of a few. We also fight, in our day-to-day campaigning, for every possible improvement for working-class people.

As capitalism dominates the globe, the struggle for genuine socialism must be international. The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), a democratic, socialist international that organises in over 40 countries.

Our branch is active in a number of areas in Kent. Initially you should email us at socialistpartykent@mail.org and we will be happy to introduce the nature of the branch and the party, the things that we do and organise, and how we operate, to you. Anyone is also welcome to drop into one of our weekly branch meetings in Gillingham.

Alternatively, you can find out more about the party, become a member, subscribe to our newspaper or support the party in other ways through the national website (socialistparty.org.uk).

A FEW DAYS' SNOW: IS THERE ANYTHING CAPITALISM IS FIT TO DEAL WITH?

In the early weeks of 2010 the UK was met with 'treacherous' weather conditions. Schools, colleges and workplaces the country over were closed, and drivers everywhere faced dreadful road conditions. As the snow brought the country to a halt, Kent was heavily affected.

For days on end, students couldn't get to campuses, children were unable to get to school and many workers cut off from work, and had no choice but to take days off – in many cases unpaid. This cold spell lasted for at least ten

days, and while main roads were gritted, many residential areas were left unattended to.

Medway Council boasted a 650 tonne stockpile of grit through their contractor Volker, but many areas of Medway were left exposed. Dangerous road conditions were endemic in residential areas and housing estates throughout Medway had, with many students and workers were still home-bound weeks into the bad weather.

This mismanagement of road safety procedures and severe weather

precautions caused many problems throughout the Medway Towns. Rush hour congestion turned into gridlock in Medway, and one worker described a five hour delay during her journey from Greenhithe to Chatham – a journey that would otherwise take forty-five minutes.

As many pavements began to thaw with no grit, it became clear that the local council, and indeed councils throughout the UK, did not take proper precautions. Some councils in Scotland prepared efficiently thanks to support

from the government, but places like Medway had to rely on the co-operation if the private sector – as in the case of Volker – which failed to prepare adequately for the extreme weather.

It is clear that the government must take proper action in times of extreme weather. More public spending is required, and staple needs such as grit should not be left in the hands of private companies. As we now know, profiteering grit-hoarders are no substitute for a planned, democratic, and nationalised gritting service.

COMMENT: CADBURY'S TAKEOVER LEAVES BITTER TASTE

The £11.5 billion buy-out of Cadbury's by American food giant Kraft has been finally wrapped up this week. 'It's sad that Cadbury is gone, but business is business,' said a Cadbury's shareholder.

Sure, it's sad. For those who like to think that 'British' shareholders are somehow nicer or those dreading the end of the Curly-Wurly, it's 'sad'. For the 45,000 Cadbury's employees whose jobs are now on the line, though, sad doesn't quite say it.

Shareholders won't be too despondent: they've pocketed a healthy profit on their investments, knowing that accepting the bid would mean job cuts. If we take the now former chairman's word for it, '[Kraft understand that] people are the key to successful businesses, they need to be cared for.'

Back in reality, Kraft have borrowed the £11.5 billion to finance the deal, debts that will be paid for by 'drastic restructuring' – in other words, thousands of job cuts and the erosion of working terms and conditions. To rub salt in the wound, one of Kraft's major financial backers turns out to be none other than RBS.

So after spending hundreds of billions to bailout the banks, the UK government now sits idly while one of those 'tax-payer owned' banks assists in the takeover and inevitable job losses at one of Britain's oldest employers. After months of empty phrases about job protection and creation, the government hides behind 'impartiality' whilst more jobs are put at risk.

Ultimately, and unfortunately, the takeover is yet another reminder of the need for all trade unions to mount a serious struggle to secure jobs now and for future generations.

WHAT WE STAND FOR

- ★ To increase the minimum wage to £8 an hour without exemptions as an immediate step towards £10 an hour. For an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings.
- ★ All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one.
- ★ An immediate 50% increase in the state retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension. Reinstate the link with average earnings now.
- ★ Reject 'Welfare to Work'. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.
- ★ A 35-hour week with no loss of pay.
- ★ No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.
- ★ Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees now and introduce a living grant. No to academies!
- ★ A socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs - free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out private contractors!
- ★ Keep council housing publicly-owned. For a massive building programme of publicly-owned housing, on an environmentally sustainable basis, to

provide good quality homes with low rents.

- ★ Major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy and into ending problems of early obsolescence and unrecycled waste.

- ★ A democratically planned, low fare, publicly-owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against pollution.

- ★ Oppose discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice.

- ★ Repeal all laws that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest! End police harassment.

- ★ For a mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental and anti-war campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.

- ★ Trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party now and aid the building of a new workers' party!

- ★ No to imperialist wars and occupations. Withdraw the troops immediately from Afghanistan!

- ★ Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and banks that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and management. Compensation to be paid on the basis of proven need.

KENT FIREFIGHTERS STEP INTO RELIEF VACUUM



Kent firefighters rescue a Haitian quake victim, while governments refuse to cancel Haitian debt

Workers in Kent have nationally and internationally responded with donations and other help to the victims of the earthquake which hit Haiti last month.

Fire-fighters from Kent have joined the UK International Search who left Britain on the 13 January to help with the international response. The Kent fire-fighters are based in the Haitian capital, Port-Au-Prince.

The earthquake, which hit the country on 13 January and registered 7.0 on the Richter scale, has devastated Haiti. We have all seen and heard the desperate and harrowing accounts from both rescuers and survivors. We have heard less, however, of the decades of corrupt and often brutal rule, and imperialist, especially American, interfering that left the majority of Haitians so vulnerable.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, with some estimates putting poverty levels in the country at 80

per cent. Adult literacy stands at just over 50 per cent and 70 per cent of the population is unemployed.

The majority of the three million people of Port-Au-Prince live in slums which were flattened by the quake.

The Socialist Party (Kent) applauds the brave individuals who have gone to Haiti from all over the UK while Western governments have wrangled over Haitian debt and given pittances in aid compared to their massive bank bailouts.

We call for the cancellation of all foreign debt, and democratic control over all aid and emergency rescue relief as a means to rebuild and redevelop Haiti, along with a massive reconstruction programme to include new good quality housing, hospitals, schools, roads and infrastructure – all to be controlled through elected committees of workers, land labourers and poor people in every area of Haiti.

HOSPITAL STAFF UNDER RENEWED BOSS ATTACKS

Management at Medway Hospital have stepped up the attacks on ancillary staff (porters, cleaners, gardeners) to a non-stop barrage of attacks on their conditions and salaries.

Ancillary staff, who are already poorly paid, have faced reductions in overtime whilst working in filthy and unsafe conditions. Local Unison and Unite branches, meanwhile, have shown no fighting leadership, with more interest in 'partnership' with management than defending their own membership.

At the same time the hospital uses its 'flexibank' to employ new staff who receive no sick pay.

Talks of possible sackings are ongoing.

NEWS IN BRIEF

- On 13 March Kent comrades will be joining the national march through Barking to protest against the BNP, whose leader, Nick Griffin, is contesting the seat. The demonstration, which is being organised under the Youth Fight for Jobs banner, will demand jobs, housing and free education, not racism.

- The scheduled political discussions for our upcoming meetings are as follows: 'Trotsky's Struggle Against Stalinism' (11 Feb), 'The Thatcher Years' (18 Feb), 'Obama: A Year On' (25 Feb) and 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific' (4 Mar). Meetings, where we will also plan our activities and campaigning for the weeks and months ahead, are held every Thursday from 6.30 to 8.30pm at the Sunlight Centre, Richmond Road, Gillingham. Feel free to come along and get involved!