

KEY WORKERS UNITED

KWU No 23 May/June 2024, Norwich

GAZA: THE HUMAN PROSPECT THAT WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE.

NO PASARAN! 1936-2024

‘Please understand, mother. You need to know that I did not come to Spain out of selfish interest. I just had no right NOT to come- on seeing that in Spain lay the powder keg that was about to set fire to the entire world, that would perpetuate oppression, scientifically institute mass murder, and trample and animalize the whole of humanity.’

Belgian-Jewish volunteer Piet Ackerman in Spain 1937



Gaza: International Protests in 2024

ASDA Lowestoft Strike

ASDA WORKERS at the Lowestoft store are set to strike on May 10th and 11th. Around 175 workers, members of the GMB Union, are due to take part. Asda have seen other stores recently take strike action at Gosport and Wisbech. There have been cuts to workers hours and senior management have resorted to a bullying culture to try to hit impossible targets with limited resources. Management will not engage in collective bargaining with the Union to try and resolve grievances. The other issues that should be addressed are equal pay, poor training, health and safety and fire safety. It's a big step up to take strike action but shop workers are beginning to stand up for themselves. The low paid are quite used to being browbeaten by the different layers of management that sit like a pyramid on the backs of workers. Supporters are welcome to visit the picket line.

John Sillett

Food couriers hit back in Britain and Brazil

MASSIVE FOOD courier strikes kicked off earlier this year, first in London and then across the whole of Britain. These strikes were organised spontaneously and autonomously, primarily by Brazilian couriers in London. Food couriers in Britain, however, aren't the only ones to have gone on strike in recent years. In July 2020, a national strike of food couriers in Brazil, self-organised from the bottom up, disrupted the delivery platforms and their profits. Paulo "Galo", a food delivery rider from São Paulo involved in organising the strikes, formed the *Entregadores Antifascistas* [Anti-Fascist Delivery Riders] linking the riders' strike to the wider political movement resisting Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government in Brazil.

Galo is currently visiting the UK to meet with striking couriers in London. Join us on **Wednesday 15 May at Pelican House in London (E1 5QJ)** from **7pm** for a discussion with him and leaders from the strike movement in the UK, as well as members of the IWGB Couriers Branch and **Notes From Below**.

New tricks for old dogs

I WASN'T always a shop-worker but the banking crisis 2008-9 depressed construction, I was out of work and needed something. I was in good company when I started, there was a bricklayer, house painter, gas engineer, handymen and others, all new and needing a job. First the uniform. Well I was given someone's cast off tee-shirt, another cast off jacket, the steel toe-capped shoes were new but there were no trousers. These were placed on order and I was told to buy some cheap black ones until they arrived. I didn't. I had some old grey one's and wore them until the company issued one's arrived. Got some funny looks from management but no hassle. Eventually I got new issue tee-shirts and jacket.

I was told tea breaks started from the moment you stopped work on shop floor and ended 15mins later with you back working on shop floor. Yeah right? No, it started when you arrived in the canteen and ended when you left the canteen, which was what everybody did. You could qualify for "overtime" if you worked hard. Most people were after "overtime". This was because contracted hours were so little. I soon found out there was a pecking order. However it wasn't a bad place to work for the first few years. The people were great, staffing levels were good, management let you get on with your job.

Just before peak period, March to June, there was a national selected staff get together over two days, usually in the midlands and at a hotel. I was asked to go soon after starting and I said, will I get paid? Sure they said. I made notes, collected all the handouts and did a presentation to staff who didn't go. When I checked my pay packet I'd been paid for 4 hours. Well they said, the time you were away only covered one of your 4 hr shifts, so that's what you've got! Welcome to the retail future I thought.

Attila the shelf stacker

ASLEF drivers keep up the pressure

ASLEF MEMBERS at 16 train companies are taking part in rolling one-day walkouts in May over pay and working conditions. ASLEF is seeking a pay rise for drivers, most of who have not had an increase since 2019. This has included Greater Anglia and East Midlands Railway.

This workforce is covered by the government's new Anti-Strike Act and the dispute could have triggered the issuance of work notices under the Minimum Service Level legislation. A work notice must be issued at least seven days in advance of a strike.

"BEHOLD YE RAMBLERS"

At Diss Corn Hall, 2nd April 2024



The choir on stage during Behold Ye Ramblers

ANOTHER HUGELY entertaining and informative play by Townsend Theatre Productions with Neil Gore's one man show telling the story of the Clarion Ramblers. Diss was the only chance in Norfolk and Suffolk to catch this tour which had been crowdfunding to get it on the road and there was a good turnout.

Robert Blatchford founded the *Clarion* newspaper "To tell the truth as we see it" in 1892 and Neil set the scene to verse about the factories belching out smoke with appalling working conditions making millionaires of the owners. The women shirt-makers even had to pay to use the machines they worked, each shirt earning them a pittance. An attempt by Blatchford to tour a chemical works failed as the workers told him that even with "protective clothing" he could be ill for weeks – or worse.

So popular did the newspaper become that it spawned cycling, walking and singing groups, as well as the Clarion Van, dispensing soup and socialism as it toured northern towns. In one comical scene Blatchford met the Countess of Warwick, a socialite who wanted to know why he derided her lavish parties. Neil, playing both characters, explained what socialism was and won her over. She was hence known as the "Red Countess".

In the second act, Neil was joined by a local choir in period dress. A time for audience participation too, with one chorus going "we'll turn things upside down, when the revolution comes". Great stuff. A change of hats and voice and Neil played G. H. B. Ward (Bert), founder of the *Sheffield Clarion Ramblers* in 1900. First ramble, Kinder Scout footpath. It was on the train that it was agreed a committee needed to be formed. Walking, cycling and socialism made healthy informed people and provided fellowship and still does, yes, the singing bit as well but I'm no good at that. They were the pioneers. They would be followed by the mass trespasses of the 1930's which famously confronted the landowners and gamekeepers and would lead to national park legislation and further open access. Never forget the pioneers though.

John Sillett

Norwich campaign for real trade union education and political education courses

ON 23 MARCH Norwich and District TUC (NDTC) launched a campaign for real trade union education when members of NEU, UCU, NUS, NUJ, RMT, UCATT and Unite as well as GFTU met at the University of East Anglia. The campaign, while recognising the importance of the traditional types of trades unions learning programmes that support working people in accessing access education and training have been the mainstay for trade unions. Unionlearn was the cornerstone of the TUC's learning, skills and training programmes. Since the fund was closed the wider activities have ground to a halt in most parts of the country.

The Union Learning Fund (ULF)

ULF WAS closed in 2021. The fund has helped hundreds of thousands of workers on their learning journey, with the support of over 40,000 dedicated Union Learning Reps (ULRs). ULRs work voluntarily to make a real difference within their workplaces. The Fund has supported more than fifty unions in over seven hundred workplaces.

The ULF enabled workers to access a wide range of learning activity in innovative ways with the support of dedicated ULRs. ULF projects have strengthened union engagement with employers through the establishment of workplace learning centres and the signing of learning agreements, including securing employer commitment to the government's Skills Pledge.

The ULF was managed and administered by Unionlearn, the TUC's Learning and Skills Organisation, under an agreement with the Department for Education (DfE), which directed the level and type of learning activity that should be supported by the Fund.

Beyond protecting workers education and training rights

NORWICH AND District TUC's learning and education day on 23 March was concerned with going beyond the basics and moving from a training model towards an education one.

Ian Duckett, NEU and N&DTUC education officer, spoke about the importance of trades unions learning and political education. Dave Welsh, RMT, outlined the significance of the loss of the Unionlearn fund, but also stressed the real opportunities for a broader programme of learning and the genuine empowerment of workers arising from this opportunity. Gawain Little, general secretary of GFTU, focused on lessons from organising and possible GFTU support for working class education. Colin Waugh, UCU gave a presentation on the Independent Working-Class Education movement as a contextual framework. Wendy Smith of Unite provided a concrete example of political education in action.

Towards an education programme with political economy at its heart

NOW THE TASK of building a union education project that goes beyond the narrow and functional, albeit important training for reps., and shop stewards and around health and safety, in historical and class contexts and rooted in political economy begins.

We plan an education project exploring a method of political economy that offers a critique of the political economy of capitalism in relation to its historical, social and mater, and how this contributes to understanding and explaining the nature and functioning of modern capitalism, as well as the root causes of social and economic inequalities.

N&DTUC's key task now is to build a campaign for a trade union education programme beyond the narrowest and most functional forms of training in Norwich and, through collaboration with the other three county trades councils, across Norfolk. The conference on 23 March and the meetings between N&DTUC and GFTU on 11 and 29 April represent the beginnings of this work.

To achieve this, we will need not only to address Unionlearn's main functions and find ways to protect and develop these in a local context and beyond. Norwich trade unionists have made a commitment to move beyond training and towards education.

N&DTUC and GFTU political education course

Ian Duckett

THE PROGRAMME will comprise of a systematic understanding of how political-socioeconomic systems interact and encourage participants to think of politics and economics as integrated systems in which governments, firms and citizens interact. The legal relations and the forms of the state are rooted in the material conditions of life and the conception of the state is therefore related to the productive base of the society through various stages of history will be explored.

We propose a four session programme, beginning in September 2024 and taking place immediately before the Trades Council meetings for September, October and November 2024 and January 2025.

GFTU will offer a video introduction to the four sessions and provide the learning materials for the sessions. Members of N&DTUC's Norwich campaign for real trade union education will facilitate the sessions. **Political education course:** Session 1: Understanding the Cost of Living crisis. Session 2: Economics: what is profit? Session 3: Labour: power at work Session 4: Organising and trade unions/ action planning



**GENERAL FEDERATION
OF TRADE UNIONS**

Labour's railway plans

Labour's proposals for rail "Getting Britain moving: Labour's plan to fix Britain's Railways" are now available. We reprint an edited version of **Jeff Slee's** response, courtesy of Labour Hub. http://www.threads.net/@labour_hub

It gives a clear policy commitment to renationalise rail. It's a commitment that separates us from the Tories, that is in line with Labour policy in our 2017 and 2019 manifestos, and that is popular. It's also a commitment to a policy that the last Labour government refused to carry out – the statement that "the last Labour government brought infrastructure into public ownership" is untrue – Network Rail went into public ownership in 2014 during the Con-Dem government.

Public ownership of rail has been campaigned for by the unions and by the left in the Labour Party. We should make sure that, when in government, the commitment is put into practice. Louise's proposals are along the same lines as the policy worked out by Andy MacDonald when he was Jeremy Corbyn's Shadow Transport Secretary and published in early 2020.

The document says Labour will bring the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) under public ownership and control within the first term of a Labour government. This can easily be done: all the contracts the Department for Transport has with TOCs expire between this autumn and autumn 2027, and when they do the Department for Transport can bring them in-house at no cost.

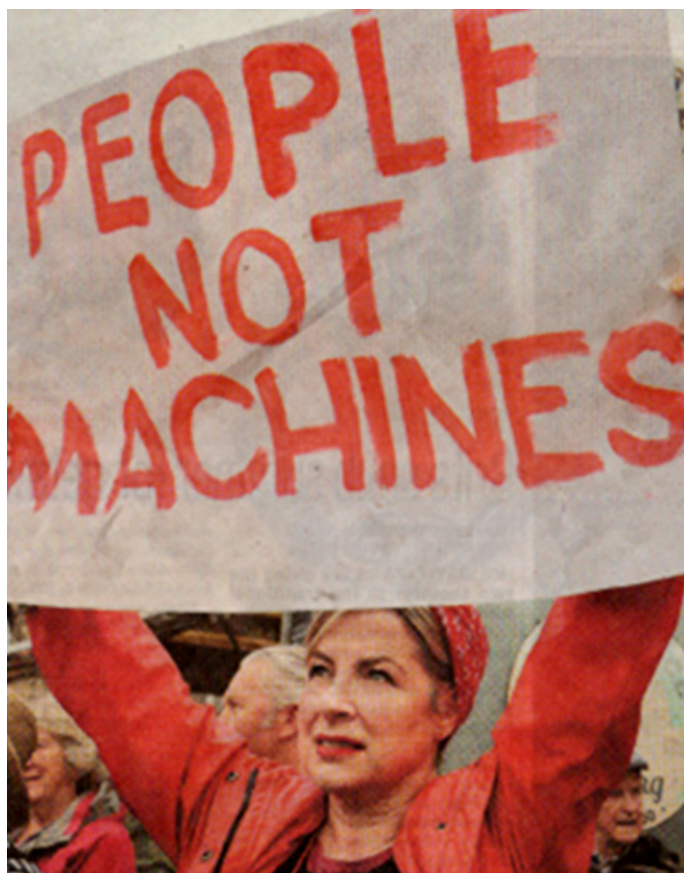
The document also says that Labour will end the TOCs' contracts early if they fail to deliver for passengers. I hope that the Labour government will encourage and pressure the train operators to hand back their contracts before they expire. Train operations will be integrated with Network Rail under a public sector body, Great British Railways, that Labour will create soon after it becomes the government.

Some reservations about labour's proposals

While the proposals commit Labour to creating a publicly owned Great British Railways, it also says that some parts of the railway industry will remain private. Many will be disappointed by this. One of these is the Rolling Stock Companies (ROSCOs). These three companies own most of the passenger trains that run on Britain's railways and lease them to the TOCs. They make big profits from doing so. In the five years to 2021, they made between them over £200m profit per year, much of which goes to their parent companies in low-tax countries such as Luxembourg and the Cayman Islands.

The document says that Labour will not nationalise these, because of the cost of doing so. Andy MacDonald's paper, while also not committing to nationalising the ROSCOs, said that a Labour government should enable a publicly owned rail body to buy new trains itself, instead of leasing from the ROSCOs. It would use regulation to curb the ROSCOs' excessive profits and would explore starting up publicly owned train manufacturing and supplying. Labour will also leave rail freight in the private sector. Here, again, Andy MacDonald's document left open the question of whether to bring the rail freight companies into the public sector.

My third reservation with Labour's proposals is on the Open Access train companies. These companies run passenger trains, but do not get contracts from the DfT and stand or fall on whether they make a profit. Anyone who uses London Kings Cross station will have seen, alongside the trains run by LNER – a publicly owned TOC – trains with the liveries of Grand Central Railways heading



Railway Ticket office protest in 2023

for Sunderland, and of Hull Trains heading (logically) for Hull.

Grand Central and Hull Trains are two of the biggest Open Access operators on Britain's railways. The document says Labour will leave them alone. But it would make for a more efficient and reliable railway if these Open Access operators were brought into the public sector and integrated with the rest of the rail industry.

The other thing to say is that it only sets out the broad outlines of a policy. There is not much detail. There are two more areas where Louise's proposals fall short. While she makes some token references to the environmental benefits of rail travel over road and air travel, there is no commitment to expanding the rail network with more lines and stations to encourage movement of freight and passengers from air and road onto rail. And there is no mention at all of extending electrification of the rail network, which is advocated by many in and around the rail industry because it would reduce rail's environmental damage by enabling the phasing out of the diesel trains which still run on many lines, and would make rail travel faster and more efficient.

Despite these reservations, in the context of a largely policy-free Labour election campaign, it is welcome that Labour has maintained its commitment to public ownership of rail, and we – the left in the party, the unions, and rail campaigners – should ensure there is no backsliding when Labour is in government. We should also put forward constructive proposals for extending public ownership of rail beyond what has been proposed and for extending and improving the rail network.

■ **Jeff Slee** is a retired rail worker and former RMT National Executive Committee member.