

THE FARGATE SPEAKER



Local bulletin of the Anarchist Federation in Sheffield. Issue #12, Feb/Mar 2010

FREE/DONATION

In This Issue: More rises in bus fares, discontent in the fire service, continuing look at Sheffield's radical history, film review and more ...

Sheffield Claimants Unite!

Cuts hit Sheffield Homes

The aftermath of the general election will bring cuts in public services, jobs and wages, but they've arrived early in Sheffield. Workers in Sheffield Homes, Sheffield council's housing organisation, are among the first to feel their effects. A shortfall, which will be paid for by cuts of £4.2 million, has appeared in the housing budget for 2010/11. More cuts will follow in 2011/12. Plans have been put forward to save thousands of pounds by slashing services, cutting wages and jobs. Senior management have attempted to pressure staff into accepting pay freezes or breaking their contract of employment. This is while the twelve top bosses are taking home more than £50,000 a year.

At a meeting on the 21st of January the unions were given until the 5th of February to agree to a pay freeze. The unions' response has been slow. The local leaders and regional officers of UNISON and GMB, the main unions, simply reacted by insisting that they should be consulted according to procedure. No union meetings were called, leaving management with the initiative. Recent years have seen a lot of delays from the trade unions, along with a lack of strike ballots, branch meetings and publicity. There has been no collective tradition of fighting back. Anything from the grass roots has been frustrated by class collaborationist policies and procedures designed to avoid damaging the partnership between employers and unions. We need to reinvigorate grass roots opposition to stop these austerity proposals and defend jobs, conditions and services.

Meanwhile the long-term future of Sheffield Homes is already in doubt. In recent years, Labour has provided money to modernise council housing in Sheffield through Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) like Sheffield Homes. As a result, newer council dwellings are now more attractive than those in the private sector. However, the organisation will be out on an unviable limb when the investment money has dried up. This is part of a wider move towards the dismantling of council housing across the country. There has been a dramatic decline in spending in recent decades along with a huge drop in the building of new homes. Council rents have been artificially jacked up at a time when more and more people in Sheffield and elsewhere desperately need cheap, rented housing. We need a push to transform housing provision from below to challenge the current bureaucratic and inadequate top-down provision.

- David Huckerby

article provided by **The Commune**
<http://thecommune.wordpress.com>



Members of LCAP (the London Coalition Against Poverty) stage a sit-in at the Department of Work and Pensions against the Welfare Reform Bill, a law which harms income support for single parents and those on incapacity benefit.

The new year saw the launch of a new Claimants and Unemployed Workers group for Sheffield. The aim of the group is to fight for the rights of people in the benefit system and put an end to harassment and unfair treatment. It can often be really hard just getting through the paperwork to claim the benefits that people are owed, so the new initiative is founded on the principle that we have to stick together to get what we want.

At the launch meeting members of LCAP (London Coalition Against Poverty) came to share their experiences with the new group

and advice on winning battles in the benefit system. LCAP has won a number of high-profile victories recently including gaining improved housing for their members and overturning decisions to cut off benefit payments. The Sheffield group intends to meet regularly and welcomes both claimants and workers currently in employment. It's organised on a non-hierarchical basis with all the input coming from the members themselves. If you would like to find out more info about the project or come to the next meeting email: sheffdoleys@gmail.com

Burning anger in the fire service

January almost saw another round of fire strikes only to be averted at the last moment as managers agreed to negotiate to avoid industrial action. The FBU union had called a total of ten days of strikes in response to a series of provocations by management. The root of the dispute is in attempts to impose new contracts on firefighters that would see them working longer hours, and which many firefighters fear could lead to cuts in staffing levels. There's also widespread resentment against their employer's behaviour - a local FBU survey last year found that 97 percent of firefighters reported having been bullied. After a series of strikes in autumn last year, the bosses had agreed to negotiate, and it seemed like the dispute might be over, but they went back on the offensive at the start of 2010, threatening to sack all firefighters who didn't sign up to the new contracts by the 18th of January. In addition, one member of staff was sacked over comments allegedly made about the strike on Facebook, and six others were forced to face disciplinary proceedings.



The mere threat of strike action was enough to make the bosses back down this time, and as we go to press talks are ongoing. However, given the track record of the fire service bosses, it'd be a mistake to assume that this dispute is over. South Yorkshire's Chief Fire Officer Mark Smitherman, whose salary this year is set to rise from £148,000 to £167,000, has shown that he won't compromise unless forced to, so continuing pressure is vital if the strike's going to be won.

On the buses



"We Want Our Buses Back" march against the fare hikes in early January. (Sheffield Indymedia)

First Buses started 2010 as they mean to go on: with another round of fare rises and promises of service cuts. Fares have been raised by an average of 7.5%, with regular travellers facing particularly sharp increases, as the price of a monthly pass has gone up from £68 to £74.80 - almost £20 more than the price of a month's travel in Greater Manchester. A single journey can now cost an entire £3.50. First claim that the rise is needed to cover staff costs, but this claim doesn't stand up to scrutiny, as they've been happy to raise prices while freezing pay in the past. A recent report from the Office of Fair Trading accused both First and Stagecoach for delivering poor value for money.

Worryingly, the Sheffield Bus Agreement which safeguards current routes is due to expire in April, and sharp cuts to vital routes are likely to follow. There are reports that First aims to pull out of all areas where they make less than 25% profit, which would mean cutting 20% of routes and a huge cut in driver levels. They already attempted to cut the 86 route to Fulwood last year, which would have

left many elderly people unable to reach the city centre, but were forced to back down after a fightback from local residents. With the end of the Sheffield Bus Agreement, First will be free to make cuts without consulting the council, abandoning all pretence of providing a public service. John Keenan, 75, a retiree who was involved in the campaign to save the 86 last year, pointed out the absence of low-floored buses on the 86 route, suggesting that the service would be more viable if it was accessible for elderly and disabled people.

The bus companies will inevitably try and set passengers against drivers by blaming wage costs for their decision to increase fares and cut routes, but this is misleading. They're out to make as much profit as possible, so they'll attempt to raise prices whether wages rise, fall or stay the same. The only way there's any hope of cheaper buses is if popular grassroots pressure forces the bus companies to back down. That's more likely to happen if passenger-led groups like We Want Our Buses Back are able to forge links with the drivers than if each group affected by First's greed is left to fight on their own.

FILM

The Road

Directed by John Hillcoat.

Starring: Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McPhee.

Based on the book 'The Road', by Cormac McCarthy.

The Road is a very bleak, very dark film. Often unrelentingly so. Post-Apocalyptic films are not a new phenomenon, and, with the recent release of 'Book of Eli', certainly don't look like they're about to become less common. So what is it that differentiates The Road from the Mad Max's and I Am Legend's of the world? The world represented in The Road is no fantasy playground of new possibilities and exciting adventures. Survivors, the few that there are, scavenge for what tinned food there is left hidden in dilapidated kitchens and shops. There is no room for possibility and new starts here. Survival is the only concern; anything else would likely get you killed - whether by starvation, or at the hands of the cannibalistic gangs that now roam the landscape, looking for fresh meat.



This exploration of how different people have reacted to extraordinary circumstances is the perhaps most interesting thing. The very best that humanity is capable of is represented in the man and the boy, who hold onto their compassion and resolve to "carry the fire" in their hearts. It is this relationship, particularly the boy's continuing compassion towards other people, that provides a positive undercurrent throughout the film. Despite the bleakness, the ultimate message is, indeed, one of hope for humanity.

FARGATE CALLING! SHEFFIELD'S RADICAL HISTORY

"When they come to attack our people, we will stand our ground and fight!" (pt. 2)

In 1832, Sheffield held its first Parliamentary election, which was accompanied by more riots, an understandable response to only about 3% of the population being able to vote. Election time riots seemed to be a fairly common feature of South Yorkshire life before the vote was granted, as the 1865 election prompted a mob to gather in Rotherham, smash and loot a wig shop and attack obvious conservatives until dispersed by troops. Interestingly, although 30 people were arrested, they were only charged with "riotous behaviour" and not the more serious charge of "rioting", due to a widespread feeling that their behaviour was a legitimate way for people to express their views at election time.

In 1893, attempts to cut the wages of coal miners sparked off a series of riots throughout August and September, with disturbances at collieries including attacks on police and property on at least 7 different occasions during these two months, and the red flag being flown at Bolsover. This militant tradition carried on into the 20th Century: in August 1921, there were a series of what the press referred to as "Communist riots", with fighting in Fitzalan Square and Bridge Street, with one Alphonso Wilson being charged with "charged with inciting persons to commit a riot and attempting to cause disaffection among members of the police force in a speech to a crowd of 5,000." In May and August 1922, there were more riots by unemployed workers, with the May riots even getting a mention in the New York Times! The Jessop steel company seems to have been a frequent target, with the Times reporting that "a crowd of about 3,000 people came into conflict with the police" on the 17th August at the Jessop steel works. It also described the crowd as being made up of "the unemployed, headed by the extreme section". (concluded next issue)

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Discussion: The rise of the far right and anti-fascism (hosted by The Commune and the Anarchist Federation in Sheffield) — Tue 16 Feb 2010, 7pm at The Rutland Arms, 86 Brown Street, Sheffield S1 2BS

Sheffield Social Centre 'Mash the System' Fund Raiser — Fri 19 Feb 2010, 10pm till 3am, at the Casbah, 1 Wellington Street, Sheffield for more details: sheffieldsocialcentre.org.uk

Critical Mass Sheffield — Fri 26 Feb 2010, meet 6pm outside the Town Hall

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