

People's Assembly, Leeds, 9 November 2013

Employment

- Opportunities for current workers are limited – they are to be denied what their parents had
- How do we link young people with trade unions and experienced workers?
- Is there a need to break anti-union laws?
- Where unions do things people join them – where they pull back it demoralises people
- Bosses are on the offensive everywhere – it's getting intense – conditions are worse for all workers – there is a productivity drive
- We should have a 'join a union' drive
- Organise a link between the unemployed and those in education
- What do we need to do as the People's Assembly to engage those other than the 'usual suspects'?
- We should go to where people are affected and engage with them – onto the estates – we need to organise where people are
- We need to build class awareness
- Unite Community is an important initiative
- We need to come up with slogans – a simple way to get a message across – eg; "A Million Green Jobs".
- More young people have to be involved – the under 25s have real problems
- Union bureaucrats won't fight – People's Assembly must not become a hostage to trade union leaders who pick and choose which fight to take on – we must concede nothing
- It is worth using Unite Community's resources
- Key places are work-places – not estates
- What about unpaid work?
- People's Assembly should go to the Trades council to talk about a 'Join a Union' campaign
- People's Assembly needs a better relationship with the Trades Councils
- There is a feeling that you have to do unpaid work – 'bad job better than no job' culture
- There is a trickle-down effect from over-educated in low skilled jobs – means there are no jobs for the low-skilled
- Unionisation is the way to shift the balance of power
- Unite the Community is a place people can go – it's a great idea
- New rules increasing signing on gives a captive audience for union sign up

- We need to be better at ‘rabble-rousing’ – we are bad at getting a message across (the government does it well) – we should concentrate on things that people feel strongly about
- There will be austerity as long as the economy is poor – there must be resistance – we have to be prepared to break the rules – there must be solidarity
- There are nearly 7m people in the UK who are trade union members – it’s a good starting point – it is our culture and , so far, has not been broken – there must be a ‘daring’ aspect to trade unionism
- We should have a PAAA stall at Leeds Met employer conventions – ‘No Zero hours’ etc
- We have to be consistently present at Job Centres to target the unemployed
- We should be in a position to help people on welfare disciplinarys – Unite Community?
- We need to link unions and austerity victims
- Use the ‘soap-box’ tradition
- A need for regular protest events – Nov 5 was good – was really like a *people’s* assembly
- The message has to be got across repetitiously

THREE POINTS FOR THE PAAA:

1. ‘Join a Union’ campaign
2. Link those in work and those out of work – education leavers and the unemployed
3. A monthly event to get the message across as a focus of the campaign
 - Publicity
 - Organise well ahead of time
 - Activity at 4pm to catch people at work in the cities

Welfare and Living Standards

Welfare and living standards workshop led by Rhi, legal aid solicitor, who works with a lot of people affected by cuts. And Liz Kitching from Hands off our Homes. Purpose today to exchange ideas and to work out how we raise the voice of people directly affected by cuts to overturn what is already at crisis point with people cold and going hungry. Really interesting group of people bringing wide range of expertise and experience.

Topics discussed included amongst many others: hunger & cold, bedroom tax, PIP, sanctions, WCA, ESA, mental health & waiting times for therapy, suicide rates, council tax, zero hours contracts & living wage

Leeds Law Centre closed yesterday. Legal aid still in place for housing for the moment.

Film of Dole Animators mentioned as excellent vehicle to share what's actually happening.

Even people working for local authorities call it bedroom tax not spare room subsidy.

How do we counter the predominant view that most people are in support of current changes? Lots of people not knowing who to talk to or realising just how many other people are affected - how do we join up? Shortage of routes for support. What will Council be obliged to do next to find next rounds of cuts when already so cut? Irony that so many people in support of cuts.

Endless threatening of people over tax and benefits has become a way of life with a major impact on people's mental health. Decent people (often unionised but who may have been drawn into 'scrounger debate') are being sucked into doing horrible things to keep their jobs. Are their attitudes hardening? Are there really nasty practices? Are council officers not permitted to express an opinion on for example the bedroom tax? Is this a sackable offence? Are workers consciously withholding information?

Rhi explained about how every bedroom tax challenge victories now will be challenged in upper court. Judicial review position explained. Need more appeals especially around cases where people have been told not to bother. All rulings should be challenged publicly. 250 people in Leeds affected by benefits cap, mainly in one Traveller site where rents charged are very high.

How can unions support their members to revolt? Could mass action be encouraged amongst claimants to overwhelm the system? Unemployed and low paid employed ought now to be able to work together.

View expressed that a few general strikes won't do it. Need to start telling the truth about the crisis so many people are living through. Lots of people in work not earning enough to live. Would higher union membership help? Can Trade Unions better educate their members? Could it be helpful to get hold of training manuals that are being used by staff in welfare / tax areas? Encourage whistle blowing? How are unions supporting people whose job is unbearable?

Do they have a role to protect their members from inflicting cruelty on people and undoubtedly damaging their own mental health thereby? Health and Safety Executive role reviewing workplace well being? Or do we need to start a revolutionary movement?

More pressure on Labour Councils so they're not part of the problem. Is Labour on our side or not or are they complicit?

How do we organise much much better? Groups start off with higher levels of interest but then it diminishes. Been talking about all these things before. Can PAAA be the vehicle to bring people together? Linking campaigns together to assist people to understand what's going in. Is not voting a good option? Or do we need to start a revolutionary movement? Nb. people may not take revolutionary action at their lowest point. Hands off our Housing has a set-up and momentum; should they take lead on a mass lobby?

Russell Brand video and number of views may shine some light on a way forward.

Public Services

18 people attended, mainly from Health, Education, Civil Service and Water campaigns from Leeds, Bradford and Calderdale although anti-nuclear represented as well so our campaigns were fairly disparate with privatisation as a key but not only thread. All campaigns represented said a little about what they were doing but we focused on sharing ideas about how to increase our effectiveness in the current chilly climate.

Tactics we use in our various campaigns, which seem to work.

1. Identifying a public focus (eg Keep Our NHS Public targeting Virgin who have city centre premises)
2. Accumulating information by attending Council and other meetings, interrogating websites and using Freedom of Information requests so we can launch meaningful challenges.
3. Organising lobbies and collective protests to help people feel less alone and more empowered
4. Linking up regionally with similar campaigns to support each other and plan possible joint action
5. Trying to develop good links with the press, radio and TV to raise the profile of our campaigns
6. Identifying allies locally eg. sympathetic councillors and MPs
7. Challenging the politicians locally and nationally

8. Using legal advice eg. re potential judicial reviews
9. Make organising meetings welcoming. Tea/coffee/ snacks often help
10. Stunts/ Direct Action eg occupations – not lots in Leeds but protests we have had like the event outside the Sports Shop on the Headrow, complete with one of Unite's giant inflatable rats have attracted attention.
11. Directly challenge the dominant ideology re the need for "Austerity" measures and the assumption that private is always better than public.
12. Petitions are useful, not so much because of their direct impact but because they offer a small way people can stand up for something they believe in and create an opportunity to have a conversation.
13. Strikes are very important in building collective confidence even though often small, short and disconnected. However people noted that it is important to try to get support from the public for public sector action. Teachers have found it invaluable to hold local meetings with parents.
14. In some workplaces tiny collective actions work to build confidence eg. in Newcastle PCS members agreed to wear black on Fridays to signify the death of public services services.

Some key obstacles/challenges all campaigns face

- significant effectiveness of the government's ideological battle to convince the public that their austerity measures are essential, privatisation/ competition improves quality and their "reforms" are all about increasing rather than reducing patient choice.
- the fact that most of the media is right wing/ in cahoots with the Govt.
- The relative success of the Thatcher/ capitalist project attacking any notion of society and convincing us our prime identity is as consumers combined with de- unionisation leading to a sense of individual helplessness even where people are angry about what is happening.
- real fear and insecurity re jobs, prospects and being bullied and picked on which make people frightened of sticking their head above the parapet, even signing a petition.
- the divisions amongst the left

Thoughts re ways forward

- Small confidence building actions are important. Start where people are at; avoid preaching.
- Make protests more fun and be more creative about the kind of events we put on. eg. films, gigs/socials, pop up tea rooms (a great suggestion from Calderdale), craft activities . Use people's artistic talents to make individualised placards etc. rather than just mass produced stuff.

Encourage children to be involved. The Bedroom Tax demo in Leeds had a Children's bloc.

- Support each other's struggles, maximise unity in action, build networks with other activists. Use the PA but involve TUs and Trades Council and reach out to church and community groups. All to contribute to making the PA website an info hub and develop use of social media
- Try to develop better press, radio and TV contacts and jump up a peg re our media strategy. Hands Off Our Homes are setting an example with almost weekly stories in the local press.

Environment

Facilitated by Mike McGrath and Simon Brett

The group started by identifying key campaigns. Top of the list was the rise in energy prices. It was pointed out that whilst this issue has had considerable mainstream media coverage, certain aspects surrounding the issue aren't being discussed – namely:

- Environmental issues
- Energy sector workers
- Ownership of energy resources

A contributor explained that the PCS Union are bringing in Green Energy Reps to campaign on green issues in the workplace and to challenge management to improve workplaces. A forum for the reps is being held next weekend. Could the People's Assembly call a joint meeting with these reps?

A group called Green Drinks Leeds meets on the 4th Tuesday or every month at The Lounge on Merrion Street, with monthly events including talks, panel discussions, workshops and visits. This provides another opportunity for the People's Assembly to link with environmental campaigners. Leeds Climate Alliance is another group.

The group discussed the UK's inefficient housing stock and agreed that much more needed to be done to reduce the demand – particularly with regards to insulation. Private tenants are particularly affected as landlords – not having to pay the energy bills – have no motivation to make improvements. Concern was also expressed over the recent withdrawal of the Code for Sustainable Homes which aims for zero carbon homes by 2016.

There was general agreement that a link up between unions and environmental campaigners on the energy issue would be useful. However, as opinions differ amongst unions, it was thought that this might have to be done using a debating format.

A contributor talked about examples of workers transition where skilled workers led a transition from the nuclear work to socially useful production.

The group discussed the Leeds Trolleybus project although there was some disagreement as to whether this is a good scheme or not.

As regards to campaigning in general, the group thought that pressure should be put on Labour councillors to not make cuts and have a policy of non-co-operation.

The discussion moved on to food sharing, food waste, collective growing and collective buying. Collective buying can help improve food affordability by buying in bulk. Some collective growing schemes in Leeds hadn't proved successful however.

People felt that the green movement had declined in recent years and that this was probably due to people worrying about austerity measures and their decline in living standards. It was felt that the green movement could be boosted by linking it with social issues such as energy costs.

There is a need to engage as many people as possible in the lead up to 2015 so it was agreed that we campaign on issues that affect most people. Energy being a big one.

There are many issues surrounding energy that can open up a wider debate, e.g.

- profit
- privatisation
- environment
- private rental housing
- employment
- living standards
- nuclear
- renewables
- jobs
- housing stock

It was pointed out that whilst we're discussing the re-nationalisation of utilities, it's very important to stress that jobs must be defended.

A group member talked about how difficult it was to lobby on issues - having had experience sitting on a parliamentary committee for a small NGO alongside representatives from large, powerful corporations.

Groups that could be contacted for collaboration include:

- Fuel Poverty Action
- Leeds Tidal
- Leeds Climate Alliance
- PCS Green Reps
- Green Party
- Alliance for Green Socialism

The group suggested organising a joint meeting with the People's Assembly and all of the above and felt that it is fine to have debates within the movement.

The final topic for discussion was transport. Everyone agreed that the key issues are:

- the renationalisation of rail
- free buses
- integration
- supporting the campaign to keep the East Coast main line in public hands
- affordability

And people also liked the idea of getting rid of 1st class!

It was felt that a link with Action for Rail Transport could be beneficial.

Finally, it was agreed that The People's Assembly should offer solidarity with the anti-fracking campaigners.

Anti-Racism & Anti-Fascism

Nine attendees. These points were raised in chronological order:

- The anti EDL demo on Nov 23 in Wakefield was announced (A great success – 100 EDL – drunk white males abusing all and sundry contrasted with 300 plus ‘We are Wakefield’ with excellent speeches including the Bishop of Pontefract, Leader of the Council, etc.) 150 contacts made which should form the basis of a strong anti racist and anti fascist group in Wakefield)

- need to consider refugees, No Borders, PAFRAS – build solidarity in working class communities.
- there will be a celebration vinyl evening in the Ritz Bar, Chapelton in early December
- need for a long term approach within Trade Unions and local communities
- need to be inclusive, engage multi culturally in our day to day lives.
- anti fascist demos are a spike of activity, important but reactive
- more democratic structures needed
- important differences between small and larger towns and cities.
- cuts an important aspect of our work
- are there barriers to non whites participating?
- don't forget gypsies/travellers
- don't forget new immigration

Alternatives to Austerity

- There are ideas for austerity alternatives from other organisations eg; the PCS have a page on their website
- There are many different views
- There is a need to think globally to get basic rights for all
- Get rid of capitalism
- It will take more than one single change
- A citizen's income for everyone
- People will ask the PAAA 'what are you for?' – not simply about what we are against
- There is no ready-made solution – have to analyse the system – how do we counter the narrative to which society has been conditioned?
- Communism is the only answer
- Who rules society – an elite group of politicians or the ordinary people?
- We should ask what do we want and how do we get it?
- We should demand that everyone has a basic income
- The government / Bank of England view is that the poor have to pay for the mistakes of others
- Food and housing have to be provided – some basics must be provided – an income alone will not guarantee that everyone has their basic needs met
- Ex-employees should be kept on the level of income that they lost when they became unemployed
- Austerity is capitalism's only answer to economic problems – the only way is to get rid of capitalism
- Is a capitalist system capable of reform?

- There should be a planned economy based on needs
- Do we have to look at the situation as it is? (ie; we have to find a solution within the existing political and economic systems)
- We need to have a model of what we want to provide and an idea of how we organise the economy to pay for it
- There are real risks in the way that capitalism is organised at the moment
- We need reforms – this is clear from all the current campaigns
- There should be more public voice in policy – people should be asked whether they approve of policies eg; privatisation – email allows this
- The ‘first past the post’ system is a disaster -those who do not vote for the two main parties have no voice
- There needs to be more public accountability for political parties who do things they did not mention when they came to power

How Should the PAAA Go About Getting What It Demands?

- The message needs to be digestible – and we need to bang it home
- We must defend the post-war reforms – but don’t engage in conventional politics – simplistic appeal covers the same old ground
- We have to get people to think outside conventional thinking – this is urgent, we are losing the battle
- We have to meet people where they are and get them to think about things
- We have to get people to question conventional ideas – where does information come from – was there an interest (eg; a class interest) behind it?
- Getting a message across is complicated – there are too many different views
- Record the different voices – see what there is before arriving at a message
- Myth-buster information in work places – PAAA can do this
- There needs to be a strong alternative media – radio newspaper
- We have to find a way to get past people’s defences
- Emotion does not educate the working class – emotion is common to left and right wing politics
- We need a model of what society needs and an economic model for how we provide it
- There needs to be proper freedom for individuals – that is much wider freedom than the freedom to consume
- We have to think of a post-capitalist world and how we can sustain it
- The environment is the ‘elephant in the room’
- Here is no democracy – society must be ruled by the majority
- PAAA should be part of the working class and should be there when the working class rises

- There needs to be understanding between unions/workers and the unemployed
- Oppose immigration controls

THREE POINTS FOR THE PAAA (These may not be the same as Rebecca's – who reported back to the Assembly – I thought I was going to report!)

1. A model of what we want and how we organise the economy to get it
2. Getting people to think outside conventional thinking
3. A strong alternative media.

Activism

Activism workshop led by Brian Parkin - 9th November 2013
12 people attended

Session what we want it to be

Knowing the law around direct action and how to challenge corporates, and how to organise meetings, press, produce a leaflet, contact your MP etc - PAAA grassroots support role?

Bringing unions & other activists together

Attendees bring experience of working with very wide range of campaigns

Started talking about the law on right to protest even around stalls & leafleting; need to hold firm & resist silly challenges; leafleting v littering; if stopped by police, always ask 'do I legally have to do x?'

Strength of numbers can be helpful

Static small stalls technically blocking the highway but police won't generally want to enforce

Moving demonstration needs 7 days notice

How do we stand up against corporate bullying tactics?

Lib Dem conference in York in March - easy to take over the streets when they're so narrow; do something more creative & altogether

Scrooge & Christmas theme

Hands off our homes example; door knocking, leafleting, freedom of information requests, report writing; big meetings with councillors

Big challenge is how to encourage people to get involved over time; even HOOH have had meetings with very low attendance

How to convince people that messages they get via press are often not true

Stay local & real (eg HOOH report based on facts)

How to make protest fun against climate where people scared of being arrested and even of giving their address for a petition

Films, bands, street theatre, art; Keep our NHS public thinking about Home Guard protest outside the hospital

Yorkshire Water example in Calderdale - combined mass message pre-arranged

Pop up tea room as vehicle for conversation; street cafe

Creative Cuts in Hebden - pulling in different people for fun stuff

Dens - cardboard city with kids; hot drinks

More challenging when such a wide brief for PAAA

How do we attract the stay-at-home Facebook whingers?

Can protest be normalised?

Funding can be a real challenge - getting support from unions; HOOH successful with the Edge Fund £1,500 - so not worrying about numbers of leaflets printed

75,000 marching in Manchester and no violence - but no coverage either!

Sometimes police behaviour can cause

Are we committed to non-violence?

The Anarchist Cookbook

Is there an activist handbook?

Leeds Tidal want to talk about a joint handbook

Some enthusiasm for additional joint workshop

Is leafleting an effective occupation? Offer rather than scatter

Think about locations such as GP practices

Information leaflets eg pre HOOH housing benefit changes deemed quite helpful & with a purpose

YEP reporters like well-packaged story as they are so busy

Social media (but don't be misled by numbers of followers); personal contact

Put materials on website so people can download for themselves; encourage people to scan and share themselves

Using photos of activities as social media material source; can be a distraction with VIPs

Petitions useful as a talking point

Engagement with elected representatives & potential candidates - do we believe in engaging with democratic process? Alternative party? Or Russell Brand approach

Should we be getting our messages organised and visit every MP / councillor at their surgeries? Take up their time?

Interestingly little interest in exploring this topic or in learning from what we have learnt from past activities makes the most impact

Challenge of how PAAA manages diversity of interests; risk always spends its time on catching up

Campaigning choices for everyone on offer

Sharing information could be useful in itself

Top 3:

- Christmas preparation (& cross-reference Christmas action against the cuts on Saturday 7th Dec event on programme and make this a big event)
- More formal links with Trades Council anti-cuts group
- Legal advice on action

Education

Patrick Murphy (NUT) opened the workshop by talking about what's happening in schools.

Teachers have been striking recently over longer working hours, performance-related pay and changes to their pensions. He said the union laws are too restrictive.

Education is under attack from a barrage of reforms that are bad for teachers and bad for kids. He felt that there has been less attention and less opposition to the reforms in education than to the reforms to the NHS.

Changes are being sold by claims that they will raise standards – in an attempt to divide parents and teachers. Patrick said teachers need to work together with parents and children to defend state education.

An alarming change has been allowing academies and free schools to employ teachers who are not qualified. This is a trend that is extending into mainstream schools. Teachers are being asked to teach subjects in which they are not qualified. Academies and free schools are unaccountable.

If an area needs a new school, the local authority isn't allowed to build it. The only provider of a new school can be an academy. Central services provided by local authorities – for example in the areas of special needs and teenage pregnancy – are having their funding removed.

Teaching and schools should be collaborative. Performance-related pay means it becomes about individual teachers. There is no narrow a focus on what is success. Achieving A-C grades is the key measure rather than overall improvement.

An article in the Times Educational Supplement said that stress in schools is the biggest contributor to self harm, depression and suicide in children.

50% of people leaving teacher training are no longer in the classroom five years later. Recruitment isn't a problem but retention is. Workload and stress were the primary reasons given for leaving. Between 2006 and 2011 the suicide rate amongst teachers doubled. There is a problem recruiting headteachers – particularly in primary schools.

The justification for changes is to improve standards but there is no evidence that a target culture improves standards.

The only schools in Leeds in special measures are academies. The academies that are doing better have done so because they have changed the kids (they have control over selection) or done different exams.

Education systems that do well are ones with full, comprehensive education. The problem isn't long holidays. The problem is the privatisation of schools.

The CEO of Harris – an academy sponsor – was on an inspection team at a school flagged to become an academy. A clear conflict of interest. The story was reported in Private Eye.

Teachers want smaller classes, extra provision for special needs and qualified, specialist teachers. This solution – that would work – costs money. The government is proposing another solution that won't cost money.

Another contributor spoke about Further Education (FE). Education should be for life. A college in Lancashire had one a parliamentary award for their work with people who have special needs. The funding was changed, the programme was scrapped as they couldn't prove results.

A retired teacher spoke about the class divide in education. South Leeds schools don't have sixth forms. So kids have to travel to go to sixth form. Many can't afford the travel costs. South Leeds schools have all lost their playgrounds and many are having to teach in portakabins. Two recent TV series – Educating Yorkshire and Harrow: A Very British School highlighted the divide.

The teachers' march and rally in Leeds was fantastic and probably the biggest since the miners strike. The public clapped the marchers as they went past. Representatives from many large Leeds high schools started by protesting about pay, conditions and pensions but became united with a hatred of Michael Gove.

However, unions have now backed down.

Young people don't have a voice. They're not asked about what they think about being at school from 8am-6pm. Education is something that is done to them. The kids service the schools instead of the schools servicing the kids.

Back on the subject of FE, Bradford college pioneered access to higher education. Provision for this has pretty much been eliminated now to the point where it isn't possible to do an A-Level in the evening anywhere in Bradford. Bradford College was very popular with the people who studied there.

Local authorities are an easy target. However, the system isn't so disintegrated that LEAs need rebuilding from scratch.

In sixth forms, there is a narrow focus on A-Level grades but a lack of focus on critical thinking, self learning and research. This proves problematic when students arrive at university as they don't have the skills required to get as much out of their degree as they could.

The group discussed several contradictions. It is increasingly difficult to become a teacher (PGCE) but academies can use unqualified teachers. A new national curriculum is being introduced but academies don't have to follow the national curriculum. Gove is arguing for more people with real life experience to go into education. However, people used to be able to switch to teaching because there were grants available for teacher training.

There was a general agreement that the anti-academy campaign needs to be more visible. More involvement is needed from pupils, students and parents. The idea was raised of launching a national petition to engage kids, e.g. Hands Off Our Holidays or Hands Off Our Playtimes.

Local people should have a say in the running of schools – not private companies.

School is increasingly a preparation for failure. They are trying to dampen kids expectations.

The NUT and NASUWT have organised meetings designed for parents. Unions need to get arguments out into the community. More meetings – and leafleting at the school gates – are needed. This is an area where the unions could work together with the People's Assembly.

There is a need to map out what we think an education system should look like. An

education system should be democratically controlled, publicly owned and comprehensive.