

The Redbridge Newsletter

produced by retired members in Redbridge to
share with colleagues across London

Winter 2021



Liz Floyd captured the nuances of a beautiful autumn day

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Stepney Words 50 Years On

Probably any retired English teachers reading this will have heard of Chris Searle. He was the teacher back in 1971 who got the sack from his East End school for publishing a book of his pupils' poetry, titled *Stepney Words*.

Fifty years on, Chris and several of the ex-students of the class of '71, together with a number of academics, activists and writers, assembled recently on a Sunday afternoon in November to discuss the book and its legacy.

One of the topics addressed by the panels that took to the stage at the People's Palace, a building adjacent to London's Queen Mary College, was working-class writing and community publishing – the Basement Writers were established by Chris when he was reinstated by the school two years after his dismissal due to a determined NUT campaign.

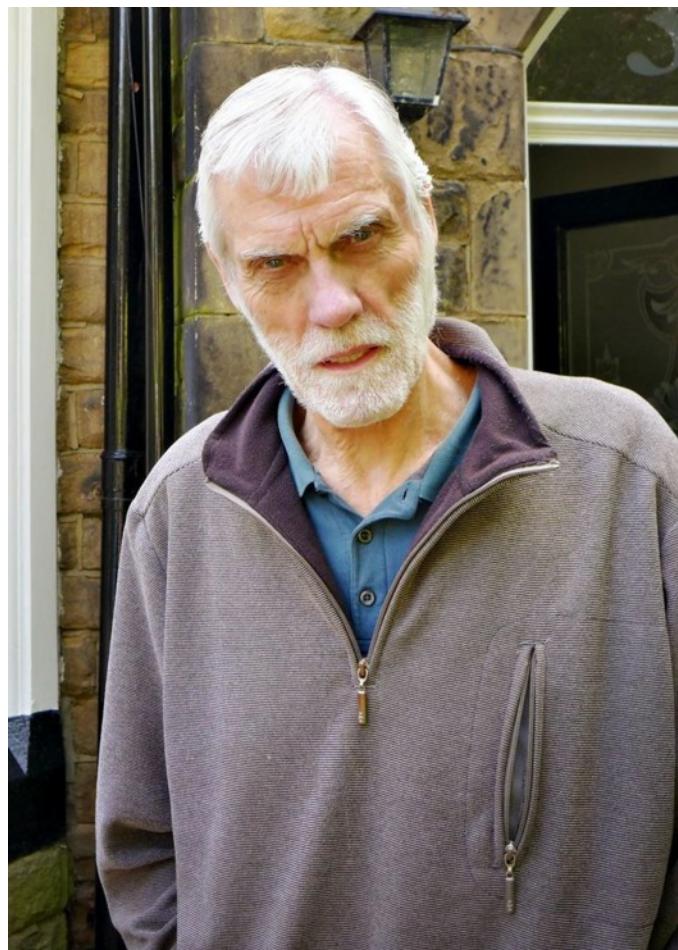
Presentations were also given on the social context of Stepney in the late 60s and early 70s and on the significance of Chris's work as a progressive teacher – Judith Suissa, from UCL, for example, argued that his major achievement was to break down the barriers between what happens in the classroom and what happens politically outside.

Steve Harley from Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel, who was a local reporter at the time, recalled on video his memories of attending the strike – he had obviously been impressed by the solidarity of the students demonstrating outside the School.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Julia Begum from the Swadhinata Trust drew out the links between the history of radical protest in the East End and more recent ant-racist activism. We also watched a new film about Chris and a group of the class of '71 students

returning to their old school - now renamed Stepney All Saints - to work with current Year 9 students. At the end of the afternoon, these students took the stage to perform their own poetry – Chris Searle's legacy then is alive and well in the East End.

Mike Peters



Chris Searle

HAVE YOUR SAY!

Redbridge Retired educators are keen to provide a voice and a space in the Newsletter for other retired colleagues in London. If you would like to submit an article, poem, report, photograph, letter, brief comment or almost anything else, please get in touch with us by emailing Mike Peters at mike321peters@gmail.com

Colombia: Another trade unionist murdered

Bob Archer shares a report from <https://justiceforcolombia.org>
12 Aug 2021

On Wednesday 11th August, teacher trade unionist, Carlos Fredy Londoño Bautista, was killed in Fuente de Oro in the departmental region of Meta.

The Murder of a Trade Unionist

A member of the Association of Meta Educators (ADEM) trade union, Carlos worked at the education centre, El Progreso, and was well-known for promoting and supporting regional culture. He was shot dead by assailants on a motorbike while on his way to the school. A number of students reportedly witnessed the attack.

In response to the latest killing of a teacher trade unionist, the main teachers federation, FECODE, said 'these killings are taking place amid a systematic campaign of signalling and persecution against trade unionists and social leaders, and teachers affiliated to FECODE, via different media and social media channels which is accentuating the campaign of intimidation, lies, harassment [and] disqualification that aims to sow terror and silence the indignation and discontent of teachers and the education community.'

A number of right-wing senators in President Iván Duque's party, the Democratic Centre, have sought to stigmatise teachers over their trade union activity.

Union Warnings

Carlos' murder came days after FECODE issued a warning over ongoing threats against its members. Close to 35 teachers have been killed since the start of 2018 and many others have been threatened or forced from their homes and workplaces. British and Irish education unions have repeatedly condemned the aggression towards teachers and called for improved security and an end to stigmatisation.

A Dangerous Place

Recently, the International Trade Union Confederation published its latest annual report on anti-union violence and abuses of labour rights, which yet again found Colombia to be the most dangerous country in the world for labour organising. Twenty-two trade



Colombian teachers on a demonstration

unionists were murdered between March 2020 and April 2021, at least six of whom were teachers. The figure represented a sharp rise on the previous report's tally of fourteen documented killings.

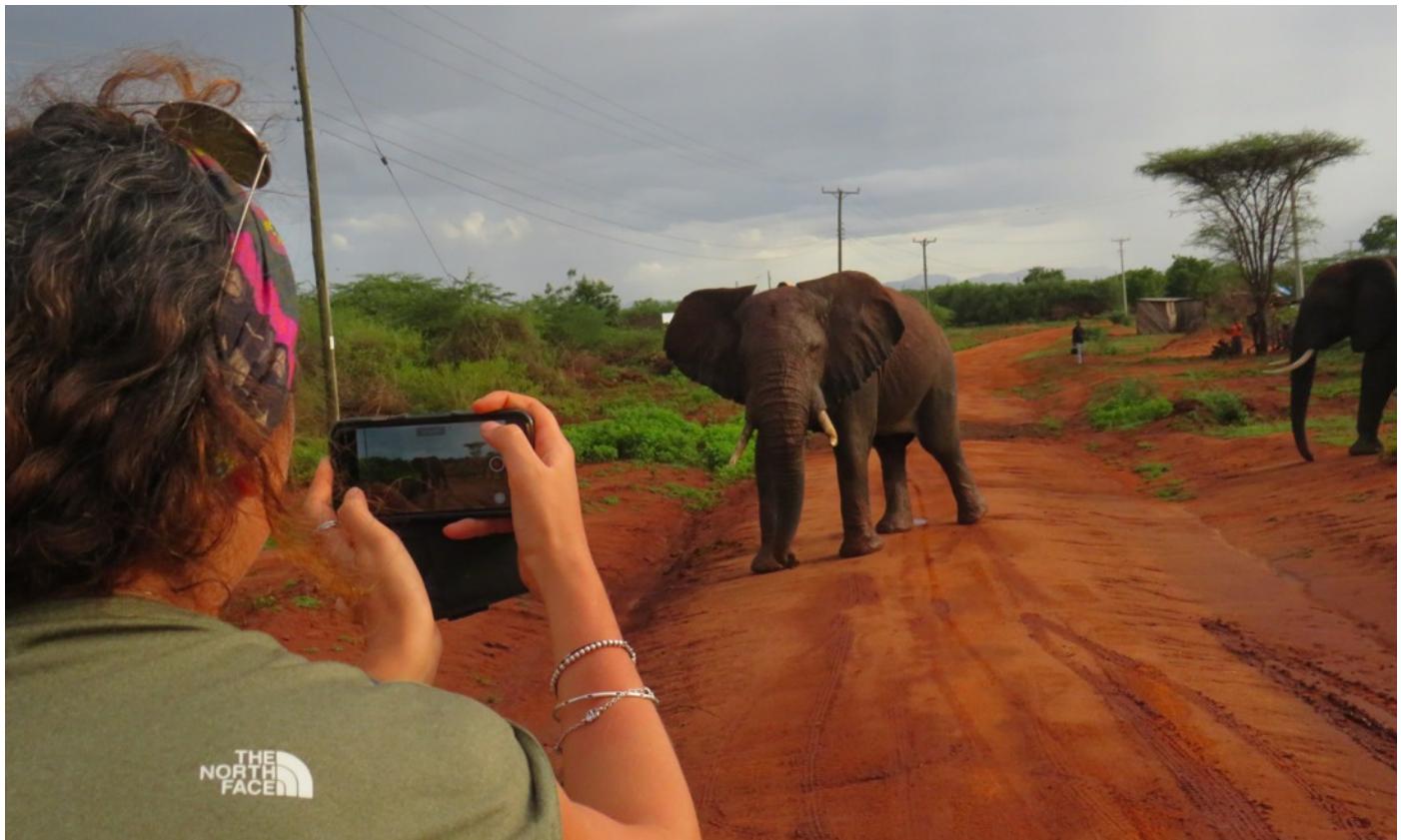
Historically, trade unionists have faced horrific violence in Colombia. The National Trade Union School (ENS), a Colombian labour rights organisation, has documented the murders of 3,280 trade unionists in the country between 1971 and 2018. With killings continuing today, there is little indication that authorities are taking necessary measures to stem attacks.

A Shocking Situation

Attacks on trade unionists are taking place amid broader escalating violence against social activists and human rights defenders in Colombia. According to the INDEPAZ, human rights NGO, Carlos is the 107th social activist killed in 2021 and the 1,223rd since the signing of Colombia's historic peace agreement in November 2016.

Despite the dire situation in many regions, the Duque government still has not properly implemented security programmes created in the peace agreement which, according to the United Nations, represent the most effective means of addressing the human rights crisis.

Working with elephants



Schooldays

Although being some years short of eligibility for membership of the Redbridge Retired Teachers' Association, and having never actually been a teacher myself, I am a thoroughbred of the Redbridge school system: attendance at Churchfields infants and primary schools was followed by secondary education at Ilford Ursuline Girls' High School (although not of the Catholic faith!).

A very pleasing set of results at GCSE preceded a not so pleasing, disengaged-teenager set of results at 'A' level. However, with a renewed sense of commitment and 'A' level retakes, I was finally able to study my true love from childhood, namely animals.

Although, I had not always been as fully focused on my school studies as I could have been, I had done a lot of my own animal-related reading outside of school. Subsequently, a first degree in Zoology eventually led to a PhD in Human-Elephant Conflict in the Masai Mara, and to my current position as Research and Science Manager with an organisation called Save the Elephants (STE) based in Kenya.

Save the Elephants and its Work

STE is a research and conservation organization working to secure a future for elephants in a rapidly

changing world. It provides cutting-edge scientific insights into elephant behaviour, intelligence and long-distance movement, and applies these insights to the long-term challenges of elephant conservation.

I work on the Human-Elephant Co-Existence programme, based in Tsavo in the southwestern part of Kenya. I coordinate the field research and data collection and supervise student projects, interns and staff in the field.

Improving Relations Between Elephants and Humans

Part of our project is to explore different ways in which we can reduce human-elephant conflict and promote co-existence. Elephants need large amounts of land, which means that they are significantly affected by human encroachment.

Human-elephant conflict is triggered when elephants leave their natural habitat and are attracted by cultivated food crops. In no time at all, elephants can destroy people's fields of crops, cause damage to property and, more seriously, inflict human injury or even loss of life.

Often the people who are most affected are the very poor, and their livelihoods can be completely destroyed by these crop raiding elephants. The subsequent



In the Wildlife works gyrocopter (for tracking collared elephants)

intense anger directed at elephants can then lead to retributive killings, with adverse effects on local elephant populations.

Solutions

As part of our project to reduce human-elephant conflict, we are testing different methods to protect farmers' fields of crops. These methods include using watchtowers and a very smelly elephant repellent, growing unpalatable crops and constructing beehive fences. Such fences act as a natural elephant deterrent as elephants don't like bees! Not only do the fences reduce elephant crop raiding but they also provide an economic boost through pollination services and the sustainable harvesting of 'Elephant-Friendly Honey'.

Gathering Data with Technology

Another aspect of my job involves the monitoring of twenty collared elephants across the Tsavo ecosystem. Tracking elephants, using GPS collars that report via satellite, has been shown to be effective in defining how elephants use ecosystems, and this method also provides data that is invaluable in helping to understand their movements and behaviour and to preserve connectivity. This, in turn, helps to guide planning and decision-making.

If you're interested in learning more about our work, please visit the following website:

<https://www.savetheelephants.org/>

Lydia Tiller



A staff strategy meeting in 2019!

© janewynyard

The arms trade: Profits from war

The arms trade profits from war. The weapons we trade are manufactured to kill, torture and maim, and are often bought by corrupt, brutal regimes, sometimes with scant regard to the arms export regulations. In parts of the world, they are used to perpetuate proxy wars.

The UK Welcomes Arms Traders

Arms corporations often have close involvement with members of the government, and the UK supports the global arms trade by hosting arms fairs. The largest and most prestigious arms fair is the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) which takes place every two years at ExCel in London.

Representatives from regimes which oppress, torture, murder and carry out human rights abuses are made welcome. This year, there were delegations from 67 different countries, invited by the UK government.

Wars are Closely Linked to the Heart-breaking Predicament of Refugees

Our weapons are used in wars which result in death, starvation, disease, injury and displacement. The refugees created in these wars flee in search of a new life and sanctuary. They often have long, hazardous journeys and demonstrate amazing courage, initiative and ingenuity en route, only to face our hostile borders, where they often find little help, understanding or compassion, certainly not from the political establishment.

Selling Weapons Generates Massive Profits

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute published data that shows the largest importer of arms from the UK between 2016 and 2020 was Saudi Arabia. These sales were valued at £1,489,000,000.

There has been an ongoing war in Yemen since March 2015 when the Saudi led coalition intervened. In addition to country-wide destruction of vital infrastructure, thousands have been killed; Aljazeera published an estimate of 130,000. Yemen was already the most impoverished country in the Arab world, and there is now untold suffering, often overlooked by our biased media.

The UK sells, or has sold, weapons to many other countries, often those with a poor record of human



Old and young joined together to protest at the London arms fair in Newham in 2019

rights. These include Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Turkey. We also profit handsomely from arms sales to Israel, despite their illegal occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, unlawful killing and the abuse of human rights.

Campaign Against Arms Trade

The arms industry is complex and growing fast. The figures and complexities of this vile global trade are well-documented by CAAT (Campaign Against Arms Trade, caat.org.uk). CAAT is a reliable source of background information, up-to-date statistics and case studies.

Fearless Opposition

Opposition to the arms trade is well-established in the UK and in many parts of the world. In addition to CAAT, some of the organisations involved include



Members of many faiths (and none) have joined in the massive protests against the regular UK arms fairs

Amnesty International, War Resisters International, the Society of Friends, Palestine Action, Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Pax Christi.

Over the years, groups and individuals have undertaken direct action and have risked lengthy prison sentences. In 1996, 10 women disarmed a Hawk aircraft which was due to take action against civilians in East Timor. They spent 6 months in prison on remand but were acquitted of all charges. "The jury's verdict showed that ordinary people, when presented with the facts, can see that extraordinary action is justified when one's government is engaged in criminal behaviour." <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2015/10/seeds-of-hope-east-timor-ploughshares-book/>

The tradition of direct action has continued over the decades and, in many cases, opposition has proved successful, with manufacturing disrupted, pressure exerted on MPs, local councils and retailers and courageous court appearances. In May this year, Palestine Action protestors shut down a subsidiary of Elbit Systems in Leicestershire. CAAT and other protestors were involved in demonstrations against the London and Liverpool arms fairs this autumn. In London, the east gate to Excel was successfully blocked by a group of protestors. Sadiq Khan spoke out against the hosting of the arms fair in London and, in Liverpool, many local people acted in solidarity with the protestors.

CAAT activists are not strangers to legal action, which has involved successful proceedings against both BAE Systems (Britain's largest arms manufac-

turer) in 2007 and the British Government in 2020/2021.

The Complicity of Financial Institutions and Businesses

Global financial institutions are often heavily involved in the arms trade. Many banks, often those popular on the high street, pension funds, investment schemes and companies which manufacture household products are linked to the arms trade.

Many people buy washing machines, for example, which may be made by companies with links to this trade and the military. Bosch, Samsung and Siemens are three examples. A number of banks have for years also had a role in the arms industry and have financed a range of projects from the manufacture of nuclear weapons to the supply of arms to countries involved in the war in Yemen.

Ethical Consumer (Ethicalconsumer.org) has researched many of these links and reveals which companies are involved in the manufacture and supply of arms.

Brecht and Clinton

Many words have been spoken about weapons. Bertold Brecht stated it simply: "Hungry man, reach for the book: it is a weapon." I doubt this German Marxist has much in common with a late 20th century American president but when the Bill Clinton said, "We must teach our children to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons" they seem to be on the same page.

Jo Buchanan

Reflections on the closure of Hackney Downs: the past and hopes for the future

Our Summer Newsletter included an article describing the events which led to the closure of Hackney Downs School in December 1995 (*The Murder of Hackney Downs School*). Here are some thoughts to put those events into perspective regarding changes within education and wider society prior to the closure and during the last 26 years.

Towards a co-operative ethos

The feelings of injustice about the closure itself and the ruthlessness of how it was carried out are still raw but the camaraderie amongst the staff, united by a common cause during that terrible time was a privilege to experience and many of us carried the memory with us to enrich our working relationships ever since. The teaching staff, including all Senior Managers, became almost 100% NUT members and we opened our union meetings to all, including support staff. The Union Rep was invited to all Senior Management meetings. If only all schools and workplaces could be run in a similar way, as co-operatives, what a difference that could make to education and society.

The new comprehensives

Staff at Hackney Downs had voted to become a comprehensive school in 1969, as had the majority of ILEA schools. Overwhelmingly staff, pupils and parents felt it was a much fairer system, where wider life opportunities were going to be available to all young people, including a growing number of migrant children, with varied or no previous education and many were first or second stage English language learners. Comprehensive education was a new and exciting innovation in many secondary schools throughout the 70s and mixed ability teaching was usual.

There was an optimism that the quality of education delivered in most grammar schools would be opened out to everyone who could benefit from it, alongside practical and vocational education equally available to all. Unfortunately, the change-over was not always properly thought through or funded sufficiently to ensure success. However, the seventies and eighties were generally a good time to be teaching and there was genuine optimism that we were moving in the right direction.

Curriculum changes

At Hackney Downs during the 70s and 80s a close bond was formed with the London Institute of Education, and the School's innovative curriculum developments such as 'Skills for Living' and 'Integrated Humanities' were highly regarded. 'Skills for Living' was a ground-breaking development, particularly in a boys' school, in which all the pupils were taught to cook and care for a home, basic first aid and to understand practical money management. These remain vital life-skills for all pupils – skills that have virtually been squeezed out of the current curriculum.

Integrated Humanities lessons were planned and taught in teams of teachers, including SEN and language support, and combined the teaching of English, Drama, History and Geography, allowing these subjects to be taught in greater depth and with more relevance to all the pupils regardless of their intellectual abilities, backgrounds and origins.

Black history and literature were becoming particularly relevant to building self-esteem in an increasingly multi-cultural school. Hackney Downs was ahead of its time in raising awareness of the 'Black Lives Matter' agenda but this did not figure at all in early Ofsted inspection criteria. Tragically, continued meddling and micro-management of the curriculum content and how it is taught and assessed, by non-educationalists and politicians, has resulted in a regression in such innovations over the last 15 years to the less than satisfactory situation faced in most schools today, where the curriculum is top heavy with factual content and assessment tests of the rote learning of knowledge rather than skills and understanding.

The mid-1970s – a better time for education

When I first started teaching in 1976 professional educators made all important decisions about the curriculum and assessment without government interference. Needing to keep detailed records of lesson plans for others to inspect would have been seen as an affront to our professionalism. The highly respected HMI were there to inspect and advise schools when it was deemed necessary. These inspectors were all extremely experienced and successful teachers whose

advice was impartial and held in high regard, which is not necessarily the case with Ofsted Inspectors. In addition, each LEA had a team of advisory teachers, based in a local vibrant Teachers' Centre who ran high quality courses and worked within schools to help with curriculum development. This service was funded by the local education authority and was free at the point of delivery. There was collaboration, not competition, between schools.

As a science teacher the content of my lessons was guided by the exam syllabus but there was time for me to use my discretion and include topics in which I and my pupils had a particular interest. I taught about climate change and energy-saving long before it became topical. I undertook cross-curricular projects with the maths and technology departments and often involved drama to illustrate scientific concepts.

A story of deterioration

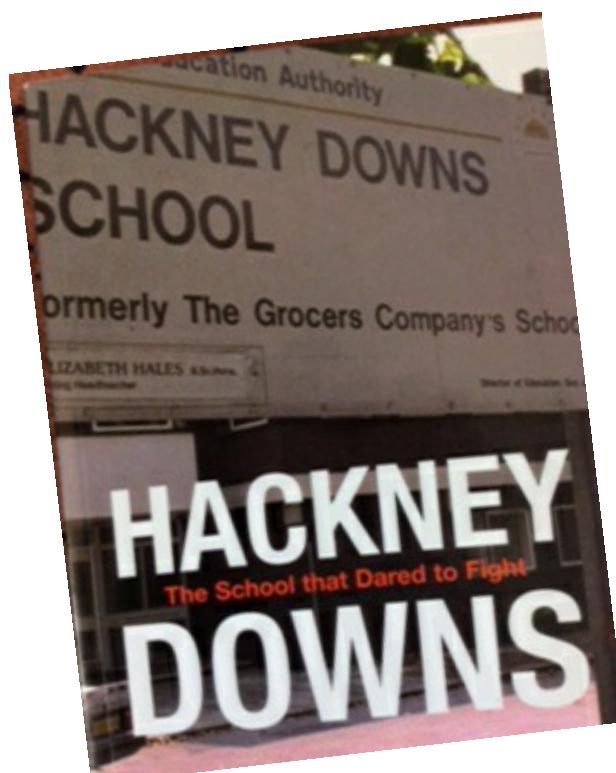
Comprehensive education, as originally envisaged, has not been given a chance to be fully achieved due to chronic under-funding and frequent changes in direction imposed from outside the school. This began with the introduction of the National Curriculum and Local Management of Schools in the late 80s. Then came the Ofsted Inspections and the obsessive need to set targets for everything to produce tick boxes that can be easily inspected.

On paper, these developments have supposedly brought about improvement in academic attainment

but education has lost its way. Assessment should be a tool to help the education process but in English schools nowadays its main purpose is to police it. Child and adolescent mental health services have never been so busy and adolescent suicide is at 'all time high' proportions. Teachers are often demoralised, over-burdened and beleaguered by the bureaucratic process of continued target-setting and record keeping demanded of them. Professional accountability should always be paired with professional respect. The move to academisation, where schools are not answerable to elected representatives and can set their own pay scales has enabled and accelerated this deterioration.

The complete mayhem that has ensued recently, regarding exam results due to the pandemic, highlights the mess our system is in. Instead of learning from best practice elsewhere in the world, where teacher assessment is the norm, our leaders have arrogantly imposed their ill-informed views on us with disastrous effects. Our schools today are predominantly exam factories, instead of places with wide and rich extracurricular activities, where staff and pupils can thrive. They should be focused on drawing out the best from the child rather than cramming in the dubious.

Betty Hales
Headteacher,
Hackney Downs School, 1993-1995



'Hackney Downs: The School that Dared to Fight' by Maureen O'Connor, Elizabeth Hales, Jeffrey Davies and Sally Tomlinson.

Turning the clock back

... and keeping it back

When I was a young economics student at university in the early 1970s, certain things were given: the utilities such as electricity, gas and water were regarded as 'natural monopolies'; i.e. there was only room in each industry for substantial economies of scale to be reaped by one provider and, because of their obvious importance to society, it was accepted that the provider should be the state; education and health care were regarded as 'merit goods' which should be provided by the state, with a private sector in each for those choosing to pay and with a clear separation being drawn between the two sectors; local authorities would be responsible for the large scale provision of council housing for low income families; and trade union membership would continue to rise, along with improvements in wages and conditions of work.

Dark times

Anyone at the time suggesting that the utilities, the railways and other key industries would all end up in private, and often foreign, hands, that the distinction between the private and public sectors in education and health would become extremely blurred through marketisation and outsourcing, that the stock of council housing would be reduced to a bare rump and that trade union membership would decline by almost a half, along with the conditions of work for large numbers of the

workforce, would have been regarded as quite mad, a complete fruit cake. And yet this is precisely what has happened.

Hayek and all that

So, how has this extraordinary counter-revolution been achieved, not only in the UK but also across the globe, especially in the USA? Well at the heart of this fightback against social democracy was the Austrian-born, LSE-based economist, Friedrich Hayek. His seminal book, *The Road to Serfdom*, published in 1944, was an enormous success, which was aided by fear of state power in the form of fascism and Soviet communism. In his book, Hayek argued that the replacement of markets by governments, exemplified by Roosevelt's New Deal in the USA and the development of the welfare state in the UK, would inevitably lead to totalitarian control and a loss of freedom. The way forward would be through a policy of laissez-faire, involving a diminishing of state intervention in economic affairs, with an accompanying reduction in taxation, especially for the rich.

The narrative that Hayek constructed against social democracy especially appealed to some of the world's wealthiest people and their foundations. The stage was thus set in 1947 for Hayek's brainchild, The Mont Pelerin Society, the first organization to spread the



Provision of housing for low-income families was an acknowledged 'merit good'

doctrine of neo-liberalism, a doctrine that would one day sweep the globe. To members of the society 'the central values of civilization' were in danger and this situation had 'been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market'.

The advance of the think-tank

In addition to Hayek's forming of the Mont Pelerin Society, in her excellent book, *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer describes how Hayek spawned the idea of the think-tank as a 'disguised political weapon'. She describes how, around 1950, a British libertarian named Anthony Fisher, an Eton and Cambridge graduate who believed that communism and socialism were overtaking the democratic west, sought Hayek's advice on what could be done. Hayek advised him against going into politics and instead recommended him to start a 'scholarly institute' that would 'wage a battle of ideas', with some deception about its true aims, which, if successful, would change the course of history. With his partner, Oliver Smedley, Fisher went on to create the Institute of Economic Affairs, the daddy of free market think-tanks, and thereafter another 150 or so such institutions across the globe, all funded by rich backers who had no objections to using pretexts and disinformation in the service of what they regarded as 'a noble cause'.

Another major UK free market think tank, The Adam Smith Institute, was founded in 1977 by one, Madsen Pirie, a loyal disciple of Hayek and Milton Friedman. Keith Joseph, a prominent and influential member of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet, as well as the Mont Pelerin Society, had previously pronounced that British politics had become 'a socialist ratchet' and Pirie vowed to bring about a 'reverse ratchet' through the promotion of his institute's neo-liberal agenda.

Towards Thatcherism

Despite its lavish funding and corporate backing, the neo-liberal agenda being promoted by the multitude of think tanks throughout the world remained at the margins for much of the post-war period. During this time, the ideas of the British economist, John Maynard Keynes, held sway, with an acceptance that governments needed to intervene in the economy to maintain full employment, that welfare safety nets were needed to prevent poverty and that steeply progressive rates of tax were justified. However, the economic crises of the 1970s increasingly called into question the efficacy of Keynesian policies and gradually the ideas of Hayek and Friedman began to move from the fringes to the mainstream.

By the time that Margaret Thatcher had come to power in 1979, the free market think-tanks and their loyal band of journalists and corporate lobbyists were



Friedrich Hayek



Jane Mayer



Our generation of trades unionists can also play its part in bringing about the demise of Hayekism

pushing on an open door, and Thatcher sought to implement the Hayekian, neo-liberal agenda in its entirety, namely: privatization, deregulation, outsourcing and marketisation of public services, large tax cuts for the rich and powerful and a full-frontal attack on the trade union movement.

Later release of cabinet papers also showed that Thatcher was also considering dismantling the welfare state, including the NHS. Successive governments in the UK, including the Blair Labour Government, and across the globe have continued with these policies to this day, supplemented internationally by the IMF, World Bank and WTO. A brief challenge to this consensus was mounted by Jeremy Corbyn and his band of supporters within the Labour Party but was successfully snubbed out not only, as to be expected, by the ingenious, but erroneous, narratives constructed against him by the right-wing media, but also by the treachery of a sizeable group of Blairites within the Labour Party itself.

Current nightmares

So where are we today after 40+ years of uninterrupted neo liberal policies? Seemingly not in a very good place, with: a world that's on the brink of climate disaster (it would have been a gross violation of the Hayekian doctrine for governments to have intervened meaningfully to prevent global warming); tens of thousands unnecessarily dead at the hands of an ideologically-driven, do-nothing-until-too-late or until-forced-to-do-so Tory government that was fatally and intentionally unprepared for a pandemic of whose likelihood and its consequences it had been given ample prior warning; grotesque inequalities within and between

countries, with nearly 2.5 million people in the UK living in destitution; billions stashed away in offshore tax havens lest the super-rich account holders should have to make any sort of significant contribution towards the societies from which they'd extracted their wealth; a broadly acknowledged housing crisis within the UK; a dramatically weakened trade union movement with large numbers of gig economy, and other workers, at the mercy of their employers; out of control, and substantially foreign owned (more than 70% in the case of English water companies), private monopolies supplying our gas, electricity and water; an NHS facing an ongoing, undercover 'dirty war' of privatisation and outsourcing: social care in a state of outsourced crisis and disarray; and a state education system distorted at all levels by policies to marketise it and remove it from the democratic control of local authorities.

Future Possibilities

Any chance of this particularly malign, essentially Hayekian/Thatcherite variant of capitalism, coming to an end sometime soon? It wouldn't appear so as things stand, although, much to the horror of the loyal disciples of this variant, the pandemic has, in the short term at least, forced greater spending and borrowing on the UK Government, as well as higher taxes.

However like the Coronavirus itself, it is unlikely to disappear without a significant push and we in the trade union movement, even us old 'uns, can certainly play our part in bringing about its demise and maintaining our fight for a better world!

Henry Tiller