

Leamington Spark^{#5}

In this issue (1st March 2004), the Spark sheds some light on – local Land Rover strikes at Gaydon and Solihull, an update on DAWN and care home closures, university fees and their relevance to Leamington, and Deeley Properties' questionnaire on their proposed new supermarket...

Recommended donation: 20p. For contact/archive/subscription:-
<http://latest-info.com/leamaltnews>
leamaltnews@yahoo.co.uk

The last few weeks have seen a heated industrial dispute at Land Rover plants in Solihull and Gaydon explode into strike action. The 8,000 strong workforce had not walked out for 16 years, but during this time they have had to put up with ever-increasing demands from a management intent on keeping wages down whilst at the same time asking more and more 'flexibility' from workers.

The lead up to the strikes had seen the workers fighting back with an overtime ban and a withdrawal from their 'flexible working agreement' – they argue that the company is intruding into their free time and making it difficult for them to see their families or to simply relax. There have been pickets of up to 1,000 workers at the Solihull plant at weekends to enforce the overtime ban.

The strikes were called as a response to the strings attached to Land Rover's recent 6.5% pay offer, which would give the company even more power to increase working hours as and when it chooses, as well as giving the workers less say in the type of work that they do. A TGWU shop steward describes the demands as

Warwickshire Workers Walk Out Of Land Rover



“they want ‘Martini’ working – any time, any place, anywhere.” Another put it even more simply - “they want us to work more for less.” It is hardly surprising, given the boasts of Land Rover bosses that theirs is one of the most profitable parts of the Ford empire, that they are keen to wring every last ounce of surplus value from their workforce.

However, that workforce is determined to resist the changes and with two 24 hour strikes in the past two weeks they have shown that they have the stomach for a fight. Each strike has halted the production of around 1,000 cars, costing Ford at least £20 million. “We might be losing money, but they’re losing more” said one worker. Ford are predictably unimpressed, even making veiled threats to close the plant down, claiming that it would be “increasingly difficult” to justify new

investment if the workers don't shut up and do as they're told.

All this comes against a background of increasing strike action across the country as ordinary workers become disillusioned with the right wing, pro-business policies of Blair and New Labour. “We’re all union here. We voted for Tony Blair, we thought he’d work with us. But he doesn’t want to know. He’s turned his back on us. Then with things like tuition fees, it hits people who work here who’ve got children that maybe would like to go to college.”

The unions involved in the Land Rover dispute, TGWU, Amicus and GMB, will have watched closely the recent expulsion from the Labour party of founder member the RMT union, for the ‘crime’ of allowing some of its Scottish branches to affiliate to the Scottish Socialist Party. Many

union members are angry at their union's continued financial support for a government whose policies are inimical to their interests. David Snooks, one of the Land Rover strikers, said "I voted for Labour twice. I've always been Labour. I thought they might introduce a few laws for the unions. But with everything they've done, I won't vote for them again."

If you are a trade union member it is more than likely that part of your membership fees are going straight into the coffers of the most right wing Labour Party this country has ever seen. To prevent this from happening you can copy the following and send it to your works wages section and your TU's local head office:-

Political Fund Exemption Notice. I hereby give notice that I object to contributing to the Political Fund of the union and am in consequence exempt, in the manner provided by Chapter 6 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (consolidation) Act 1992, from contributing to that fund.

Sign it, print your name, union membership number, address, union branch and date. Your money will then be used to fight for better pay and conditions for you rather than going into the pockets of Tony and his union-bashing, privatising, warmongering mates.

Euthanising Useless Elders

Rhisiart Gwilym

This is what happens when you lose the democracy from your country. Or in the case of Britain, when you never had the real article anyway, just a sophisticated fake.

Consider Sandra Coombs. I heard her speak about her work last night: specialist one-to-one care for Alzheimer-dementia sufferers. You'd think hearing a nurse talking about her work in this field would be a pretty dull event, right? Wrong!

Sandra is homely, motherly, unassuming, Scottish; also, that dangerous thing: an angry ordinary citizen with the bit between her teeth. The crooks in Whitehall need to look out when enough people like Sandra get



angry enough to set off on a campaign - as she has.

We've written about the causes of her anger in previous Sparks: economic - actually, just straight commercial - reasons forced the closure of Magnolia House, Leamington's one specialist sanctuary for dementia sufferers. Within a month of this terminal disruption, five of the vulnerable ex-residents died. People do this when their world is turned upside down. Especially the frail elderly.

Our Blairista local MPs were no help. Andy King told Sandra, after she had watched her elders die, that there was no care-home crisis. After a lifetime of paying tax and national insurance on the trust that when their time came the bond would be honoured, and they would get the care they needed and had paid for, these 'unimportant' citizens were betrayed.

Penny-pinching of any public service which can't be turned into commercial, profit-generating businesses for private investment has now become an epidemic; against the wishes of the electorate, who never voted for such a philosophy, and reject it steadfastly whenever the polls ask them.

And yet, again without our permission, the Whitehall mobsters - abjectly poodling up to their Washington overlords - can find billions of our taxes to fight imperial wars of criminal aggression against battered, helpless Third World countries, in order to get a stranglehold on their vital assets, ready for the oncoming global oil famine. The unnecessary tragedies visited on our helpless elders go crashing also onto our fellow citizens in far places, courtesy of our massively expensive, bloated 'defence' forces.

Sandra didn't say any of this, actually. This is just your friendly, neighbourhood wild-eyed radicals at full rant.

What Sandra described, from her position of intimate expert knowledge, and her quiet, understated compassion, was how, with right, tender personal care, even the victims of these bleak life's-end illnesses can be helped to squeeze out their last drops of happiness. And dignity.

But this costs. We can't fund this *and* the vicious colonial wars, *and* the safeguarding and subsidising of the super-rich minority's investments - which is what these war-crimes are all about.

Time for some serious, glasnostic democracy in Britain, maybe? That will happen swiftly when enough of us - the commons - take the bit between our teeth like Sandra and start insisting.

To learn more about DAWN (Dementia Alzheimer's Warwickshire Network), and help their struggle for justice for the old, contact DAWN at 5 Reeds Park, Ufton, Leamington or on 01926 613685.

University Challenged

A comment piece about university funding and the role of students in Leamington

At the end of January the Blair government narrowly won the latest phase of its 'university fees' crusade. (Despite initial reservations, both James Plaskitt and Andy King MP eventually sided with the government, but this was so predictable as to render it unworthy of comment.)

The Higher Education Funding Bill (HEFB) stipulates that, from 2006, universities will be able to set their own fees, up to a limit of £3,000 per year. With this move, the government is shifting more of the cost of university funding onto students, and introducing a fully-fledged market in HE. Using classic 'doublethink' tactics the government argues that increasing the debt burden on students is some mighty victory for socialism. Wrong. Like other public services, we should think of access to HE (and other forms of post-16 education and training) as a right of citizenship with equal terms of entry for everyone, independent of income, and funded through progressive taxation. [1]

The argument that wealthier citizens should pay more may sound like popular socialism but is in fact a cynical divide-and-rule mechanism to turn the working classes and lower middle classes

against each other, and - perhaps more insidiously - it gives legitimacy to the real problem i.e. the radical and persistent wealth inequalities that are disgracefully allowed to continue in this country. [2] [3]

This wealth inequality, a product of neo-liberal economic policies, is at the root of the issue, and in timeless fashion the government is using inequality caused by the system to justify more inequality.

Also, the argument that HE money should be spent on more needy causes (such as nursery education) is understandable but falls into the trap of assuming that we are only allowed one or the other. Is it so far-fetched to imagine a society with comprehensive nursery education and a right to state-funded HE?

No, of course not, although as a caveat I would propose a radically iconoclastic re-assessment of what HE is 'for' and (for example) whether corralling 50% of the country's population into universities is necessarily A Good Thing. (I would propose diversifying post-16 forms of education, and overcoming our perception of a degree as being more valuable than other more practical forms of skill, rather than trying to cram everyone into universities.)

The creation of a bona fide 'market' from 2006 (with that £3,000 fee cap certain to be increased over time) has been less discussed, but is in the longer term the more disturbing development. Pricing education in accordance with supply and demand will inevitably exacerbate access and debt problems, but will also accelerate the transformation of universities into entities that not only operate in accordance with market principles - by pricing and tailoring courses to the inevitably short-term perspective of

individual "consumer demand" - but also into the intellectually bankrupt apologists for the status-quo that the majority of them have become. [4]



Leamington and Warwick University

There are over 4,000 Warwick students in Leamington and, while the relationship between students and 'locals' seems (on the whole) relatively harmonious, it is a real shame that students do not integrate more with the local community. To a certain extent this 'separateness' is understandable, with most students spending only two years in Leamington, but I continue to think that the formation of stronger bonds between students and Leamington civil society could yet release great benefits for both parties. (This is something that will be explored in greater detail in a future Spark).

Indeed, while I would endorse calls for free (Higher) Education and a return to grants, I don't think we can sustain the traditional situation where students spend their time at university in a separate social/community sphere to the people amongst whom they live, only co-operating on a basic economic level. A new pact for the

country's post - secondary institutions and students would see a return to adequate funding levels but on the understanding that time must be invested in community initiatives and other forms of socially progressive activity that lie outside the formal economy.

[1] It's not ideal, but a big step forward from the government's plans: "An Alternative Future For Higher Education", Oxford University Students' Union, 2004.

[2] "High Wire: Our struggling welfare state will only work if we establish a fairer society." Peter Scott, Guardian, July 1st 2003.

[3] "We're all in a class apart", Nick Cohen, Observer, Feb 15th 2004.

[4] "No hope or humanity: Our social conscience has been swept away by the rising tide of globalisation", Peter Scott, Guardian, June 3rd 2003.

Deeley Properties ask for it!

Patrick MacLeod Cullen

At <http://www.queensway-leamingtonspa.co.uk/questionnaire.php>, Deeley Properties - the developers who plan on building the supermarket that was exposed in Spark #3 - are asking you for your views on the project. The questionnaire is a fairly typical six-part 'lesser of two evils' set of tick boxes (all of which you have to fill in before you can submit the questionnaire), but step six is where we at Spark have some ideas about what we should be telling them. Step six is a simple "Do you wish to add any other comments?" box, and we say - tell them where to stick their supermarket.

The supermarket will cost the local area (roughly) a net 200 jobs as it forces smaller independent shops

out of business. The quality of the available jobs, too, will decline, and their suppliers will have the screws tightened even more. So, we at Spark ask you to tell Deeley Properties not to build the supermarket. Tell them to build a farmer's market, or a park, or even more allotments! In fact, anything but another supermarket. Spark staff think the questionnaire is a superb chance to make our opposition heard, to try and oppose the takeover of our local economy.

Local Listings

Tue 2nd March - Djevara - politically charged alternative rock from ex-local band, 8pm, The Cooler, Students' Union, University of Warwick, tickets £4/£2 NUS, 8pm, 02476 572768, meccleshall@sunion.warwick.ac.uk

Fri 5th March - Vanilla House Band - the trio play Hot Club, Latin, Flamenco, Arabic, Klezmer, Tango, Bluegrass and thrash metal, The Cock Horse, Rowington, free, 01926 770031, vanillahouseband@hotmail.com

Sat 6th March - International Women's Day - free activities, entertainment, information and advice for women, 12 - 6 pm, Bath Place Community Venture, Leamington Spa, 01926 338421, bathplace@hotmail.com

Sat 6th March - Practical Conservation with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, 10am, Shadowbrook Meadows near Hampton in Arden, 02476 308993, www.warwickshire-wildlife-trust.org.uk

Sun 7th March - Rageh Omaar speaks on "Revolution Day: The Human Story of the Battle for Iraq", 7.30pm, Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick, tickets £5/£3.50, 02476 524524, www.warwickartscentre.co.uk

Sun 7th March - Ozomatli - Latin American revolutionary hip-hop collective, 7-11pm, The Cooler, Students' Union, University of Warwick, tickets £10 (advance only), 02476 524524, meccleshall@sunion.warwick.ac.uk

Fri 19th & Sat 20th March - Graham and Nikki Shurvinton present Kidney Kabaret - Pieces of Eight! - cabaret to raise funds for kidney unit at Walsgrave Hospital, 7.30pm, Priory Theatre, Kenilworth, 01926 863334

Fri 26th March - Le Cod Afrique - a blend of traditional and modern dance styles featuring hurdy-gurdy, African rhythms and

Arabic dance, Grange Hall, Southam, 01926 770031, www.lecodafrique.org

Sat 3rd April - Special Brew - Coventry ska outfit play 60s and 70s covers and original songs, The Roebuck Inn, Warwick, free, 01926 494900, www.specialbrew.info



Due to the coming departure from Leamington of two of our writers, one of whom is also our current main person responsible for editing the Spark together (i.e. the techie stuff), the Spark is urgently in need of new writers, as well as anyone who can offer technical (and of course, as always, financial) support...

If YOU live locally and have any good ideas for articles to write, or think you could contribute in any other way, then please contact us by email at leamaltnews@yahoo.co.uk, phone Steve on 07931 421947, or come along to our next editorial meeting, which will be at Gaia on Wed 10th Mar 8.30pm

The Spark is produced totally non-commercially by committed local people, and we aim to keep it that way! So if you would like to keep on seeing a radical community newsletter in Leamington, speak up for yourself. The Spark is YOUR voice, if you want it to be!

DON'T HATE THE MEDIA, BE THE MEDIA!