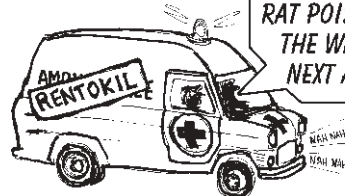


WAKE UP!! IT'S YER BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

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SKYEWAY ROBBERY

“After nearly a decade of struggle against both British, and Scottish Governments we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, we also know of course that there are strong, if somewhat shy, forces strenuously opposed to conceding to our demand that the toll be removed. We need once again to see the united voice of the community demanding the removal of the toll, while celebrating the success of the campaign so far.” - Andy Anderson, Skye & Kyle Against Tolls.

Nearly nine years after its introduction, the controversial toll on the Skye Bridge in Scotland could be abolished by the end of the year. The Bridge, which has faced a barrage of direct action, was the forerunner of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), built and run by a private company, in this case the Bank of America who could then charge motorists what they liked. This new method of financing was described by journalist George Monbiot as “the laboratory for a novel and controversial experiment” which has since spread like a corporate cancer across the country.

Initially hated for its effect on wildlife (it destroyed the second largest Otter colony in Europe), intrusion on the beautiful skyline and ending the island’s romantic isolation, the bridge has the highest toll per mile of road anywhere on earth. Since the ferries were closed on government orders, Islanders have no alternative but to dish out £5.70 each way for a one-mile crossing. A campaign of direct action and legal challenges has been waged by the people ever since (see SchNEWS 45).

Of course when faced with any civil disobedience, governments do what they do best, make new laws to criminalise the protests. Before the bridge was built the Tory Government passed legislation which made it an offence to refuse to pay the full toll demanded. However, despite hundreds of arrests the legislation proved useless and is no longer being used. Now the cops arrest toll protestors for traffic offences like obstruction. Despite the announcement Robbie the Pict, a veteran anti-toll campaigner, said he’d “...believe it when I see it. Just simply removing the tolls is like getting the mugger to stop hitting you. Should we be grateful? The whole thing should never have happened and has not been legal from day one.”

NO PFI-LING MATTER

The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) was a Tory idea, which, in opposition, Neo Labour

strongly opposed. But as soon as the party came to power, surprise sur-bloody-prise it fully embraced it and declared that PFI would become the means by which most of our new public infrastructure would be built. Everything from schools to hospitals to roads are now put under the PFI hammer.

Like some dodgy hire-purchase agreement, PFI allows the government to avoid paying up front for the cost of big building projects. Instead, private companies get to build and run the ‘assets’ and the taxpayer then has to buy back these services, usually over a 20-30 year period. But this isn’t like buying a mortgage, more like paying by credit card.

So we get companies like Jarvis (who are so crap they have had to change their name to Engenda) running schools (see SchNEWS 425), while corporations like Tarmac, Siemens and Rentokil get the hospitals (SchNEWS 404) But as George Monbiot points out “Far from introducing market disciplines, it has become an official license to fleece the taxpayer. Far from reducing the public sector borrowing requirement, PFI is, as the Accounting Standards Board has noted, simply an ‘an off-balance sheet fiddle’”.

Just take a look at the new Edinburgh Infirmary, which would have cost the government £180 million to build, but thanks to the PFI will cost the taxpayer £30 million a year for the next 30 years – that’s £900 million to some lucky corporation - a cost that is already crippling the Lothian health authority. Or what about the plan to build three new hospitals on a single site in the Paddington basin where the rocketing costs - up from the original £380 million to nearly £900 million - means that they may never be built. Still, despite planning permission not even been granted yet, over £5.6 million has so far been spent on consultants fees alone!

In fact there is only one means of meeting the outrageous costs of PFI, and that is by cutting public services. A study by a consultancy company which works for the Department of Health shows that for every £200 million spent on PFI hospitals the result will be a loss of a thousand doctors and nurses. The first PFI hospitals also contain some 28 per cent fewer beds than the hospitals they replaced while many are heavily in debt and closing wards and cutting back services.

Not only that but some NHS Trusts are being fined by the private companies - for treating too many patients! The new Worcestershire Royal Hospital opened in

CRAP ARREST OF THE WEEK

You’ve Bin Nicked! At the Baishakhi Mela festival in East London’s Brick Lane on the 9th of May, police arrested a remote controlled wheelie bin for being a public nuisance. When told that the bin had been booked to perform at the festival the police asked ‘what’s the point?’ Hmm entertainment maybe! The bin was later released without charge.

March 2002 and is already £15 million in debt. Despite this it has been charged £200,000 this year under a penalty clause with the private consortium Catalyst, that said bed occupancy would not rise about 90%. At the University College London Hospitals, they are fined when more than a set number of meals are eaten or bedsheets used!

Meanwhile one of the first PFI hospitals, the Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle, has in its contract a clause that if the buildings workload increases (y’know caring for too many sick people) extra cash must go to the consortium. This is a bit rich coming from the people whose new building included collapsing ceilings, a sewage system which could not cope with the number of users; offices so small clerical and laundry staff couldn’t work in them, spaces between beds so narrow new trolleys had to be ordered, and a glass roof that on sunny days meant the temperature inside the hospital hit 33C. So far 40 cleaners have lost their jobs thanks to ‘restructuring’ and there has already been a shortage of beds. All this for a £67 million hospital that will eventually cost the taxpayer a staggering £500 million.

In fact while Neo Labour tells us if you’ve got nothing to hide, you’ve got nothing to fear when they bang on about ID cards, it seems they don’t seem to want to be under the same sort of surveillance spotlight when it comes to PFI. Almost every leaked document suggests that it is a gigantic fraud upon the taxpayer and that if everyone knew what was really going it would be ditched. But with the Skye Bridge toll victory on the horizon George Monbiot told SchNEWS “This is great news for two reasons: first it shows that persistent protest can eventually win against impossible odds. Secondly it suggests that the Private Finance Initiative - the biggest financial fraud ever foisted on the British people - is beginning to fall apart.”

* Saturday 3rd July is ‘Independence from the stranglehold of an American company Day’ For more on the protests at Skye www.skatonline.org.uk

* Private Eye recently did an excellent ‘idiots guide’ on PFI. To get hold of copies email private-eye@galleon.co.uk

... "SO IT'S GOODNIGHT FROM ME AND IT'S GOODNIGHT FROM HIM"

It's nice that the shock of ex US President Ronald Reagan's death at 93 was so sensitively cushioned by kind words from the corporate media and politicians. According to Business Investors Weekly, Ronnie "revived the US economy, rebuilt its military and faced down the Soviet Union to win the Cold War, thereby giving hope for peace and freedom to billions of people throughout the world." But hang on a minute, didn't he oversee one of the biggest increases in inequality and poverty, cause thousands of deaths by supporting a bunch of nasty Latin American dictators and nearly blow up the world in his fight with the Soviet Union? Er yes, he did.

According to the Heritage Foundation, Ronnie oversaw "the most successful economic policy of the 20th century." This success started within a month of getting the presidency, as Ray-gun cut \$41bn from the US budget, mainly targeting welfare for the poor while at the same time massively increasing military spending. He turned the world's richest country into a debtor for the first time since the Second World War and paved the way for the first increase in poverty since the 1960s. Inequality rose so much that by the 1990s the top 1% of US citizens owned as much wealth as the bottom 95% percent. This was Regeonomics and the beginning of the neo-liberal agenda of market deregulation, flexible labour laws and privatisation.

In a recent White House speech, the incorruptible Vice President Dick Cheney said that he was proud that Ronnie was always "taking risks to advance freedom, justice, and democracy." Like backing Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala, where, according to Americas Watch, tens-of-thousands of people were killed and 400 rural villages were destroyed by government death squads during Ronnie's time in office. Then there's PW Botha who oversaw the apartheid regime in South Africa and of course Suharto of Indonesia, responsible for over one million deaths, both grateful customers for US military hardware. In fact the sort of 'freedom' that Ronnie loved lead to a quarter of a million deaths in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s. Then there's the invasion of Grenada, the bombing of

Libya and Beirut and his support for Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden...

Ray-gun said that his idea of US policy toward the Soviet Union was simple: "We win and they lose". Often complimented with winning the 'Cold War', Ronnie sought to outspend the Soviets with the Star Wars initiative, bigger bombs and faster missiles, winning the Cold War without firing a shot according to close chum Maggie Thatcher. Well he almost did fire, as he kept his options open if the out-buying strategy didn't win. Famously talking of 'recallable nuclear missiles' and 'winnable nuclear war', he meant it. In 1981 he ordered thousands of Minuteman missiles, which were designed to destroy Soviet missile silos. But what's the point in destroying silos if there are no missiles in them? Simple: these missiles were designed as a 'first strike' weapon, to hit the Soviet Union before they hit the US. To launch a Minuteman in those days, an operator had to "unlock" the missile by dialling in a code. However, according to former launch officer Bruce Blair, the U.S. Strategic Air Command was worried that such safety features might slow things down, and set all locks to 00000000. Cementing this legacy the US has just named its latest nuclear aircraft carrier the USS Ronald Reagan.

So why all the positive press for this man? Investigative journalist Joseph Spear describes how the Reagan White House further refined Nixon's tricks of press appeasement, evasion and intimidation to shape opinion and mould public perceptions. Spear called Ronnie's presidency "probably the best staged one in history thanks to his acting abilities and the expertise of his media specialists."

* **Reagan Gaffes:** During his 1980 presidential campaign Reagan declared that "trees cause more pollution than automobiles." Once elected, he promised "Now we are trying to get unemployment to go up, and I think we're going to succeed." Always accentuating the positive, Ronnie once claimed that the rate of poverty in the US "has begun to decline, but it is still going up." And you thought Dubya was the expert. * For more see www.accuracy.org/press.htm

Last Minute Delay

Rail passengers in Sussex were looking forward to four days of free travel this month when members of the RMT Union were due to hold "no-revenue" days on Southern Trains as a protest over the increasing casualisation of their jobs. But, due to repressive union laws introduced by Thatcher, these days of free travel for the masses have been postponed because they were due to start one minute too late!

The anti-union laws state that industrial action must start within 28 days after the last day of the ballot. The "no-revenue" days were due to start at 0:01 on 14th June, technically 28 days and a minute after the ballots closed. But why not just change the start time to 23:59 on 13th June? Well the problem is that the union must give at least seven days notice to the company that industrial action will happen. So what now must happen is that all the members have to be re-balloted, and there must be at least seven days notice before the ballot takes place and then it has to be held and then at least seven days notice before any more industrial action happens, which means it'll probably be another three weeks before SchNEWS can hop on the train out of Brighton for a free day out.

All these legal hoops that unions have to jump through are designed to make life as difficult as possible for effective industrial action to take place. And even if the RMT Union decides to have more no-revenue days it is likely that the

lawyers for Southern Trains will argue that this sort of action is illegal as it is effectively a strike and the union only balloted for "action short of a strike". And then there could be the managers and scab labour stepping in to collect money and issue tickets.

So what are the roots of this industrial unrest? Well its part of the continuing privatisation and casualisation of public services started in the eighties by the late Ronald Reagan and his lover Margaret Thatcher and continued by their bastard love child Tony Blair. Southern Trains have been bringing in agency staff for £2,000 a year less than regular staff which, according to RMT assistant general secretary, Pat Sikorski, "amounts to the thin end of a very large wedge which threatens the jobs, pay and conditions of all our revenue-handling members." But then Southern need to save a few quid after they've wasted millions on re-branding after changing their name from South Central "...each of our 2,800 customer facing staff will get a new uniform emphasising their professionalism and the distinct roles they perform to look after the needs of passengers." says their managing Director Charles Horton. So never mind crap pay and conditions what workers really want is a nice new uniform! A bit like the trains, they've got a new lick of paint, but they still run late.

SchNEWS will keep readers posted of this dispute and let you know if there's gonna be any free travel days. RMT Union: www.rmt.org.uk

SchNEWS in brief

Get out yer feet at a night of Brighton Beats for Colombian Streets. **Colombian Highgrade** at The Zap Tuesday 15 June 10pm-2am. Benefit for exploited Coca-Cola workers. ** There's another demo this Saturday (12) **against arms manufacturer EDO**. Meet 12pm for peace picnic at Wild Park by Lewes road. Bring food, drink, music. March to EDO at 1 30pm. Bring banners, chalk and messages to EDO. <http://boob.safp.org.uk> ** Check out the new **23Topia squatted social centre** in Chapel Road, Worthing, in the landmark town centre building (previously 3TO nightclub) events happening all this weekend www.eco-action.org/porkbolter ** Celebrate the 20th anniversary of the last **Stonehenge Free Festival** on Sat 19th June 2pm til late, Vertigo/491 Gallery, 485 Grove Green Road, Leytonstone, London with photo exhibition, films and bands 07930 255233. www.hoap.co.uk ** The **P10K-Force initiative** is coming to UK, and will be in Brighton on Thurs, July 8. In response to repeated yet unheeded calls for International Observers, P10K Force aims to deploy 10,000 Western citizens to the Occupied Palestinian Territories on Sept 11, 2004. It aims to document acts of terrorism (as defined by law), effect a ceasefire and non-violently compel the application of International Law to end the illegal occupation. To find out about becoming an Observer see www.P10K.net. ** **250 anti-fascist protestors were arrested** on Saturday in **The Hague** for "illegal protest" after demonstrating against a nazi parade. The city authorities had given permission to the anti-fascist march, providing it stuck to a prescribed route. When marchers tried to block the fascists' route the police reacted with extreme violence. Most arrested were charged with being on an illegal demo and fined 200 Euros ** In **Libya, five nurses and one doctor were sentenced to the death penalty** after being accused of deliberately infecting 400 children with HIV in a hospital. However researchers testified that poor hygiene and re-use of medical equipment were the main causes of these infections. During the trial, French Professor Luc Montagnier, Aids expert who first identified HIV, claimed blood samples analysis pointed "strongly against" the disease being spread deliberately. www.petitiononline.com/bulgaria/petition.html ** **Anti ID Card Meeting** this Tuesday (15) at 5.30, The Cowley Club, 12 London Road, Brighton (opposite Somerfield).

Scabby Git

A scabby farmer has destroyed species-rich rare chalk grassland prompting the Brighton Phantom Conservation Volunteers to spring into action with a Summer Solstice Mass Tresspass. The farmer bulldozed and ploughed the old Down pasture hillside known as Scabby Brow, at Ashcombe Farm between Lewes and Falmer. If you fancy letting him know what you think of the damage: Meet 12 noon next Sunday 20 at St Peters Church, near the Level. Bring water, food, sensible footwear, bus money (oh and sun protection). 07966 952 018 on the day for more info.

...and finally...

The Reverend Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping were thrown off Vanessa Feltz' BBC radio show earlier this week, for stating the true costs of Ronald Reagan's policies and Starbucks' anti-labor practices. Show bosses became alarmed when the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir broke in to a chorus of "George Bush Does Not Return To Ground Zero." and the reverend (quite rightly) pointed out that "Wal-Mart is the Devil, and Starbucks presides over infant mortality rates in Guatemala that must drive us from our pose with the double latte..." What else did they expect from a man whose been banned from every Starbucks in America? www.revilly.com

Disclaimer

SchNEWS warns all readers there will be more unabridged sexy tales from the battle against the exploits of capitalism next week. Honest!

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