

VOUCHER EXCHANGE SCHEME

Asylum seekers receive supermarket vouchers instead of cash to live on, making life even more difficult. To find out more and get involved in a voucher exchange scheme contact: nbnevoucherechange@googlemail.com

Monday 22nd February, 18:00-21:00
Defend Education! Defend Jobs!
Public meeting organised by Newcastle Free Education Network
About potential cuts in university funding
Bedson Teaching Centre, Bedson Building, Room LG 38
Newcastle University

Tuesday 23rd February, 19:00-21:00
Steven Hall from Wigan Peoples' Alliance shares campaigning and election experience
Saltwell Room, Gateshead Civic Centre

28th February
By-election in Primrose Ward, Jarrow
BNP in with a chance of winning first council seat in Tyne and Wear. Vote to stop them!

Monday 1st March, 19:30-23:00
Benefit gig for Palestine
Newcastle University Friends of Palestine
Trent House Pub, Newcastle

3rd March, 19:00-21:00
Socialist Choir
Contact: 01912894241
Cullercoats

Monday 8th March, 19:00-20:30
Tyneside Palestine Solidarity AGM
Muslim Welfare House,
6 North Terrace, Leazes Road, Newcastle

Thursday 18th March, 19:00-21:00
Tyne and Wear Left Unity meeting – all parties and none
St. John's Church, Newcastle

Saturday 20th March, 12:00-16:00
Unemployment: Past, Present and Future
Meeting, speakers, film screening ect...
Sunderland Catholic Club
56-58 Tatham Street, Sunderland

FOR REGULARLY UPDATED EVENTS LISTINGS VISIT:
THEGREYMATTER . WORDPRESS . COM

TO GET YOUR EVENT LISTED HERE FOR FREE, EMAIL:
THEGREYMATTERNEWSLETTER@GOOGLEMAIL.COM

The Grey Matter is an independent newsletter about politics in Tyne and Wear, based in Newcastle. It is not affiliated to any political party. It is run entirely by volunteers. We want to expand our operation and are constantly looking for more people the help out. Got a story? Want to help out? Have a suggestion? Contact:

THEGREYMATTERNEWSLETTER@GOOGLEMAIL.COM

UNIVERSITIES COURT CONTROVERSY WITH THE BNP

The universities of the North East seem to have taken a shine to the racist BNP lately.

Just before the students of Newcastle University went home for Christmas their student council voted to allow the BNP to campaign on campus, despite the fact that punters had voted in favour of a 'no platform' policy a recent debate in the Union. To see the reaction of one student go to:

- <http://thegreymatter.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/bnp-allowed-to-campaign-at-newcastle-university/>

Meanwhile the Durham Uni debating society invited leading BNP members Andrew Brons and Chris Beverley to a debate, only to back down in the face of public opposition.

BLAIR TRIAL SPARKS UNREST CONTINUED...

The testimony given to Chilcot's inquiry in the past few weeks seems to support this.

On the 26th of January two former foreign office legal advisers said they believed the invasion was illegal because it had no UN backing.

The following day Lord Goldsmith admitted that after meeting with some US diplomats in 2003 he'd changed his mind that an invasion would be illegal. He has denied that this was due to any political pressure.

However some protesters were also sceptical about the usefulness of the inquiry.

"Of course I don't know if it was all Blair who did it" one protester told *The Grey Matter*.

"I'd like to see the people on trail who were really in charge".

"The inquiries just a way for the elite to whitewash the discomfort that the war caused" another protester commented.

It seems like it could take much more than a guilty verdict to appease that section of the public who think our countries involvement in Iraq is nothing short of criminal.

INSIDE:

- How the Metro was privatised
- Chilcot enquiry protest
- Universities court controversy with the BNP
- Events listings

Wanted!

For Theft Of The Metro!



Dave Wood Chair of the I.T.A
Arrest On Site!
Better still, vote him off!

The Grey Matter takes a look at how local democracy was sidelined in order to sell off the Tyne and Wear Metro to German company Deutsche Bahn and speaks to Vicki Gilbert of Keep Metro Public (KMP) about the struggle to stop the privatisation...

BLAIR TRIAL SPARKS UNREST

Protesters met at Greys Monument to show their outrage at Tony Blair's involvement in Iraq.



The protest was held the same day that Blair appeared in front of Sir John Chilcot's inquiry, where he defended his decision to invade Iraq.

Public speakers from the Tyneside Stop the War Coalition raised awareness about many of Blair's past political actions involving the Middle East.

Protesters waved signs stating slogans like "Blair Lied One Million Died" and "Tony We Don't Believe You".

A large crowd were gathered around the speakers. Many were in fancy dress with one protester holding a wad of cash and wearing a comical rubber Blair mask. The event was pretty entertaining as well as having an important reason behind it.

After all, for some this inquiry is a cause for celebration, although its introduction has left many wanting to say "I told you so".

Despite claims that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction, a massive section of the British public opposed the war when it began in 2003, as it wasn't supported by the UN.

Public opinion became more widely opposed when no weapons were found.

For some people then, the introduction of this inquiry only confirms their long held beliefs that Blair's invasion was questionable from the very start.

Continued on back page...

DOWN THE TUBE- HOW THE METRO WAS PRIVATISED

So why did anybody want to privatise the Metro, one of the safest, most punctual, lowest subsidised railways in the UK? Bearing in mind the mess caused by privatising the national railways and the London tube, there can be only one answer: Dogma. The ideal that private ownership is always and everywhere good and public ownership is always and everywhere bad started with Thatcher. Spurred on by international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, nobody in power has challenged it since. According to a Nexus PR man, privatisation was the "right thing at the right time" for the Metro. In fact, it was part of twenty years of privatisation of public services.

The Metro wasn't to be handed over to privatisation without a fight though, as Vicki Gilbert, later to become Chair of Keep Metro Public (KMP) and Paul Baker began to ask the council some difficult questions. The response they received speaks volumes about the state of local democracy in this country. The Labour group on North Tyneside Council were asked if they had discussed privatising the Metro. When they were asked a second time having failed to answer, they replied by saying that they had already dealt with that question.

The effect of national Labour Party policy imposed from above also became apparent. One Labour councillor said he was opposed to privatisation in private, only to then write a letter to a local paper in which he declared his support for it.

"CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE"

Then followed what Gilbert describes as a "conspiracy of silence" by local councillors who refused to discuss the issue of privatisation, dismissing the proposals as mere 'market testing'. KMP wrote to the councillors who were on the Passenger Transport Executive (PTA) and met them at their surgeries. Not one opposed the privatisation.

"The key issue for me is accountability", said Baker, "a publicly owned rail system is accountable to democratically elected councillors. A privatised one is accountable to the shareholders of the company that owns it".

There was a mixed reaction from MPs with only Jim Cousins of Newcastle Central and Bill Etherington of Sunderland promoting the KMP campaign.

The response from trade unions also varied. While the RMT put £5000 to the campaign, Unite and Unison pledged money only withdraw it later, leaving the campaign in debt. They chose instead to back an 'in house' bid on the orders of the Labour Party.

Putting the 'in-house' bid together alone must have cost an estimated £1.5million. This was a great deal more expensive than the alternative of hiring consultants to carry out a Service Improvement Programme (SIP), as suggested by Jarrow MP Steven Hepburn, but it was nevertheless sold to the public as a 'value for money' option.

It was against this backdrop; no support from councillors, backing from only one union and a couple of MPs, and fighting against a sham local 'democracy', that KMP, which quickly developed into a network of different local groups across Tyne and Wear, had to make their voices heard.

CONNECTING WITH THE PUBLIC

Things may have looked bleak, but KMP fought a lively and innovative campaign which made great pains to involve the local community. Unusually, KMP **actually talked to people** by travelling on the Metro and telling people what was going on, a tactic which at one point led to them getting chased off the Metro by police armed with tazers!

Attempts to connect with the public were clearly successful however, as around 8,000 people sent post cards to the Minister of Transport opposing the privatisation- the largest post card campaign in the North East for some time.

Some members of KMP were able to broaden the debate to public services in general and stood a candidate for a North Shields by-election under the banner 'Public Service, Not Private Profit', and won 9% of the vote- more than the Greens and Lib Dems.

The campaign was also media savvy. As well as an energetic letter writing campaign to local papers, one particular highlight came after Nick Brown, Minister of the North, ignored several attempts to contact him. Not taking kindly to such bad manners, KMP contacted the local media and waited outside his office, surprising him as he turned up and causing considerable embarrassment. KMP also used a 'fat cat' suit to symbolise the selfish interests behind the privatisation and this generated a lot of media attention.

The embarrassing state of local democracy was also highlighted. KMP activists turned up to a PTA meeting (which many of the councillors failed to even attend). Forbidden from asking any questions, they donned gags; again scoring a media coup.



While there are many good points to the campaign, it also gives a few lessons in how not to do things.

While toeing the party line kept Labour councillors on message, party politics also hampered the resistance to privatisation. One left wing group, for instance, insisted on selling their newspaper at KMP stalls to make it look like their own campaign, rather than one of the broad left and community groups. Another only participated to a limited extent due to their centralised party structure.

Although KMP grew to become a broad coalition of activists, it could have done with more help. Many people who were willing to turn up to meetings and lend their tacit support were unwilling to do the dirty work of campaigning.

Vicki Gilbert highlighted the need to reach beyond the traditional 'left' and build a united campaign. She is also concerned that "the left is too full of machismo in terms of its communications and operation. There are too few women".

Despite the KMP campaign, the Metro was sold to Deutsche Bahn, a company with poor relations with its workforce, a dubious safety record, and which transports most of the UK's nuclear waste. While the democratically accountable Nexus still technically owns the railway, they only control around one fifth of its operations.

BNP ON BRINK OF BY-ELECTION WIN

On the 28th Feb Primrose Ward in Jarrow goes to a by-election, and the BNP have a real chance of gaining their first councillor in the North East. Tyne & Wear Left Unity, a coalition of different parties and activists, is urgently calling for help to canvass against the racist BNP. So far activists have managed to outnumber the BNP stall near Morrisons on Saturdays to the relief of local shoppers. To help out call Jim Perry on 0191 489 7914.