

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



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an injury to one is an injury to all

SELF-DETERMINATION FOR TAMIL PEOPLE

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OPPOSING THE TALIBAN

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If you think MPs are bad, you should see the people they work for

Tory MP Michael Gove and Labour MP Hazel Blears are both accused of “flipping” their “secondary” homes in order to maximise their expenses

Martin Broughton
Chair of British Airways (salary £2.3 million) and President of the CBI, the “voice of British bosses”. His attitude to BA’s workers? “If we come to confrontation, we will be ready for it”.

From the *Financial Times*: “Shareholders are taken for a far bigger ride by their C-suites [top bosses] than UK taxpayers are by their MPs.... Opponents of John Thain leaked to the media that the one-time chief executive of Merrill Lynch had treated himself to a \$1.2m office makeover, with \$87,000 rugs, \$25,000 pedestal table and \$68,000 credenza. But for every case that makes headlines, thousands do not. Which accounts department queries the spa treatment in the boss’s hotel bill or questions helicopter trips to far-off golf courses?”

“C-suites around the world are, with few exceptions, hypocritical in the extreme, demanding austerity from workforces while living high on the hog themselves...”

The MPs who helped themselves, as they helped the rich grow richer. See page 2

**Euro-elections: stop the BNP, vote Labour or SSP!
But the unions should clean up Labour**

MP EXPENSES SCANDAL

Workers' politics — to fight the bigger looters

By JOHN O'MAHONY

The mass outrage against the politicians that has come with the publication of the details of their petty greed in claiming expenses is fully justified.

Such reports as that:

- A Tory MP charged it to his expenses when he got the moat around his big house cleaned;
- Another Tory grandee drew expenses for having a crystal chandelier installed;
- Yet another billed the Commons paymaster for the cost of having his lightbulbs replaced;
- Many MPs (minister Hazel Blears among them) have had a lucrative line in claiming for “second homes”, decorating them, selling them, then buying another, decorating and improving that at public

expense, then selling that again...

- Home Secretary Jacqui Smith drew public funds for her husband's porn video rentals

— all that has hit “ordinary people” where we live.

Clearing moats and hanging crystal chandeliers apart, most of it is on our own level; it concerns things that are the stuff of everyday living. The thieving by the MPs, with not too many exceptions, is on an everyday human scale.

And so there is outrage. Even so, the outrage is very strange. It is an example of people who have swallowed the camels of the mass looting of public assets that has been going on for over a quarter-century now suddenly gagging at the gnat of comparatively petty looting.

The politicians shown up to be chiselling little spivs, shameless in their

greed, have helped the rich to grown phenomenally richer. They have given them tax breaks. They have allowed many of the very rich to avoid paying taxes. They are now allowing bankrupt banks to pay out enormous sums — of public money — as bonuses to failed fat-cat bankers.

That the politics are pilloried for their sordid little fiddles is like a murderer being charged with pickpocketing. Or, to take a case from history, like the American gangster and murderer Al Capone being jailed for tax evasion. The sums of money involved in the MPs' “expenses” are trivial in the extreme compared to the vast sums looted by the banks, the asset-strippers, and the other beneficiaries over the last quarter-century from “privatisation” of state industries and functions.

The political system in Britain —

Parliament, politicians, and perhaps the so-named “democratic process” itself — is profoundly discredited. and likely to become more so.

It is good that these politicians are shown up and discredited. It is not good that, inevitably, “politics” in general is discredited. Working-class people need to focus on politics, take politics seriously, including electoral politics. Cynicism and nihilism can only work against that.

We need a workers' government — a government which will do for working-class interests what New Labour and the Tories have done for the very rich. If all bourgeois politicians — including the New Labour ones — are a bunch of scrounging connivers, then the answer is not to turn away from politics, but to replace the present crew with honest politics and clean politicians — working-class politicians.

HISTORICAL PARALLEL

When French fascists seized on parliamentary scandal

By GERRY BATES

In the France of 1934, similarly gripped by a world financial crisis, a scandal with some similarities to today's — the exposure of the links of several Radical deputies to the embezzler Alexandre Stavisky — led to the resignation of the then Prime Minister Camille Chautemps on 30 January.

The growing far-right of French politics mobilised massive support for a demagogic campaign against parliamentary corruption. There was a huge fascist demonstration on 6 February 1934.

It led to the resignation of Edouard Daladier (who had replaced Chautemps), in favour of the more conservative Gaston Doumergue on 9 February.

Leon Trotsky wrote: “To the program of deflation, of the reduction of their means of existence, the workers must counterpose their own program of fundamentally transforming social relations by the complete ‘deflation’ of the privileges and profits of the band of Oustrics [Albert Oustric was the Fred Goodwin of his day] and Staviskys who exploit the country! This is the only road to salvation.”

The Trotskyist movement had also been calling for a united front of the workers' organisations against fascism, a perspective rejected by the Communist Party because it branded the social-democrats “social fascists” and by the social democrats because they preferred to call on bourgeois governments to restrain the fascists.

In the days after 6 February, the Trotskyists saw their idea taken up at last. On 12 February the Communist Party and the Socialist Party organised a joint demonstration, backed by the syndicalist CGT.

This “united front” generated great enthusiasm in the working class; but the leaders of the CP and the SP were able, by mid-1935, to convert it into a “Popular Front”, drawing in the bour-

geois Radicals and rejecting class-struggle policies.

Striving to build on the united front mobilisation, Trotsky wrote in June 1934: “The workers' alliance of parties and trade unions must be organized, uniting all the forces of the labouring people without exception...”

“In the struggle against fascism, reaction and war, the proletariat accepts the aid of petty-bourgeois groupings, but such alliances can be only of secondary importance. Above all, the task is to secure the united action of the working class itself in the factories and the workers' neighborhoods of industrial centres...”

Further, he argued that: “As long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie.”

However, we demand from our class brothers who adhere to ‘democratic’ socialism that they be faithful to their ideas, that they draw inspiration from the ideas and methods not of the Third Republic but of the Convention of 1793...” — and he outlined a series of demands to extend and deepen parliamentary democracy..

“A more generous democracy would facilitate the struggle for workers' power...”

“Workers adhering to democratic socialism must further understand that it is not enough to defend democracy; democracy must be regained. The moving of the political centre of gravity from parliament towards the cabinet, from the cabinet towards the oligarchy of finance capital, generals, police, is an accomplished fact.

“Neither the present parliament nor the new elections can change this. We can defend the sorry remains of democracy, and especially we can enlarge the democratic arena for the activity of the masses only by annihilating the armed fascist forces that, on February 6, 1934, started moving the axis of the state and are still doing so”.

BNP Euro-election leaflet

Why we will vote Labour and SSP in the Euro-elections

By RHODRI EVANS

How to vote in the Euro-elections? No-one with any democratic or socialist instincts will fail to vote, since abstentions automatically increase the fascist BNP's percentage of the vote and increase the BNP's chances of winning a seat. But we cannot be satisfied with the advice of many anti-fascist campaigners just to vote for any of the mainstream parties - Tories, Lib-Dem, Labour, Green, whatever.

In Scotland we will vote for the list of the Scottish Socialist Party, which is standing on a joint “European Anti-Capitalist Left” platform also supported by the NPA (Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste) in France and other parties.

Despite the SSP's continuing drift towards putting Scottish-nationalist concerns first, the SSP candidates will represent a socialistic, worker-based challenge.

Elsewhere in Britain, the high costs — around £100,000 for any sort of serious campaign just in one euro-region — have ruled out any slates from the activist left... until such time as we can win many more members and much larger funds.

So we will vote Labour, in the absence of working-class socialist candidates.

We want to see the unions back more genuinely worker-based lists than the Labour ones; but for the unions to see

our socialist stance as one which amounts to letting the BNP or Tories make gains just because we are sitting on our hands will not help that cause of working-class representation.

The big unions are still attached to Labour. Over the last 15 years and more, the link has been weakened and blocked until today it amounts to little more than the unions giving Labour money. But the certainty that the current huge economic crisis will mean political convulsions means that we cannot rule out the possibility that developments will move sharply off the straight-line track of those 15 years. At some next turn in the road the big unions may be pushed into moving to regain at least something like the “old Labour” level of real voice in the Labour Party.

Voting Labour remains the “default” option for keeping out the BNP and the Tories, though we can understand and sympathise with those vote Green in regions where the Green MEPs or candidates are left-wing.

We cannot recommend a vote for the “No2EU” lists. We do not agree with their message — we insist that capital, not the EU, is responsible for job cuts, privatisations, etc.; we positively support workers being able to move freely across EU borders — and the lists do not have an organic link with working-class organisation such as might make us vote for them out of solidarity despite disagreement with the message.

TAMIL TRAGEDY

Left must stand firm for consistent democracy

The civil war that has raged, on and off, for over 25 years in Sri Lanka seems to be approaching a horrible endgame, with the remaining fighters of the Tamil minority cornered into a small area by the Sri Lankan army.

Our immediate priority is solidarity with the Tamils against the army slaughter. The history of the conflict also raises broader issues:

- The need for socialists, in situations of communal conflict, to fight for consistent democracy as the only basis for working-class unity.

- The fact that the previously-favoured can become the oppressed. “Support for the oppressed” can never be *all* that socialists have to say. As Lenin put it: “We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation”.

- “Anti-imperialism” is not a sufficient guide, either. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese chauvinism now reaching a bloody climax rose up wearing “anti-imperialist”, “leftist”, and “socialistic” colours.

Ceylon — as the island was known until 1972 — was ruled by Britain from 1815 to 1948. The Tamils, or, rather, some of them, were a favoured minority under British rule, getting a large share of the administrative jobs.

Ceylon was granted independence in 1948. The Buddhist Sinhalese, who make up three-quarters of the island’s people, came from North India to Ceylon about 13,000 years ago. A section of the Hindu Tamils, concentrated in the north and east of the island, came to Ceylon from southern India about as long ago. For centuries they had a separate kingdom in the north of the island.

Another contingent of Tamils, a bit less numerous, was brought in by the British in the mid 19th century as plantation workers, mainly in the central highlands.

On the face of it, conditions for peace between the communities looked favourable. For an ex-colonial country, Ceylon had a comparatively high standard of living, with a rudimentary welfare state, mass literacy, and universal suffrage since 1931. Most of the land was owner-cultivated. There was a labour movement, and a real working-class Left, on the island.

The ruling class was heavily anglicised: British, rather than Sinhalese or Tamil, in speech and education. The United National Party, which formed the first government of independent Ceylon, projected itself as bourgeois, liberal, and secular. Its first government contained representatives of the Tamil Ceylon Indian Congress.

But one of its first measures was to exclude the great majority of the “Indian” Tamils — those whose ancestors had arrived in the 19th century — from the status and rights of Ceylonese citizenship.

There was a ferment among the Sinhalese rural intelligentsia — village school teachers and Buddhist religious leaders. They wanted more “anti-imperialism” than they were getting from the UNP.

Solomon Bandaranaike split off from the UNP in 1951 and formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Exclusively Sinhalese, it became the prime vehicle for Sinhalese chauvinism as well as being, in populist terms, the “left” party. In parallel, the Tamil Federal Party split from the Ceylon Indian Congress, asserting that the Tamils were a nation.

The SLFP won the 1956 general election and immediately brought in a law to make Sinhala the only state language. After tremendous riots, full implementation of the law was delayed to January 1961.

The Tamil Federal Party had also done well in the election. Its programme was still mild: autonomy for the northern and eastern provinces, parity for the Sinhala and Tamil languages, and civil rights for the Tamil plantation workers.

In 1957 Bandaranaike negotiated a compromise with the Tamils. Tamil was to be one of the languages of administration in the north and east; Sinhalese settlement there was to be restricted; and there was to be a devolution of power to regional councils.

A Sri Lankan soldier stands guard inside a cleared area of Chilawatte, the former military headquarters of the Tamil Tiger rebels

When the deal was made public, in July 1957, there was such an uproar of Sinhalese protest that Bandaranaike abrogated it.

The SLFP dominated populist, “lower-order” politics, with a mixture of communal chauvinism, vague “socialism”, and “anti-imperialism”. But there was a real left in Ceylon, a working-class left.

In Ceylon, Trotskyists — people who had been won to Trotskyism as students in London — had founded the modern labour movement. Their party, the LSSP, set up in 1935, was proportionately stronger than Trotskyism in any other country in the world.

Right up to the end of the 1960s, a lot of the availability of the writings of Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg in the English-speaking West was in pamphlets shipped from Ceylon, where (unlike in the West) the Trotskyists had the resources for a large publishing operation.

The LSSP led a powerful trade union federation; led general strikes in 1947 and 1953; and had representatives in Parliament.

Couldn’t the LSSP have defeated the chauvinists, by providing working-class answers on the social issues on which the chauvinists fed, and tying them to a programme of consistent democracy? Surely it could have done. At the core of the tragedy in Sri Lanka is the fact that, the LSSP, like other, smaller, Trotskyist groups elsewhere, let its politics collapse under the pressure of a desire to adapt to a left-looking populism which presented itself as a revolt of the oppressed.

The LSSP at first championed Tamil rights. One of the main reasons why the UNP government had disenfranchised the Tamil plantation workers in 1948 was the influence the LSSP had among them.

However, the LSSP found itself outflanked by the SLFP in the rural areas. It began to accommodate. In late 1955, and again in 1960, it negotiated no-contest election pacts with the SLFP.

In June 1964 the LSSP joined in a coalition government for six months with the SLFP. That coalition, in October 1964, agreed with the Indian government on compulsory “repatriation” of 525,000 “Indian” Tamils together with their “natural increase” over a 15 year period. The agreement included a promise to give another 300,000 Tamils Ceylonese citizenship — by 1983.

The coalition fell in December 1964, and a coalition of the UNP and the Tamil Federal Party took over. When that government began to talk of “ethnic reconciliation”, the LSSP joined in racist agitation whipped up by the SLFP against the Tamils and “their” government.

In 1970, a “united front” of the SLFP, the LSSP, and the Communist Party came to power. It was a “left” government poisoned by communalism. It nationalised the plantations in 1975 and, in a series of state-capitalist

measures, put the state effectively in control of trade and industry.

With a new constitution, in 1972, Buddhism in effect became the state religion; Sinhalese was enshrined anew as the state language; Ceylon became Sri Lanka. The “United Front” government later made some concessions to Tamil rights.

But it was too little, too late. By then many Tamils were militantly demanding a Tamil state (“Eelam”). In July 1983, Tamil guerrillas killed 13 Sinhalese soldiers. Within weeks, communal violence had led to the slaughter of hundreds of Tamils, the uprooting of at least 50,000 of them, and the beginning of a mass movement by Tamils towards the North.

War has raged, on and off, ever since. The Tamil side has been increasingly hegemonised by the “Tamil Tigers”, a ruthlessly militarist group which developed the use of suicide bombings before they became a common Islamist tactics, and is brutal against dissident Tamils and against Sinhalese-Buddhist and Muslim minorities in areas it has controlled.

As the NSSP, one of the Trotskyist groups in Sri Lanka today (splinters from the wreckage of the old LSSP), puts it: “The only unity possible is the voluntary union of the two nationalities. For this, recognition of the right of self determination of the Tamil people is a precondition. Acceptance of equality, autonomy, and the right of self-determination is the only basis for a democratic unity”.

An appeal to the Socialist Party and the SWP

It is an emergency! For the 2010 general election we should recreate something like the Socialist Alliance of 2001 — a coordination of the activist left able to offer voters a third alternative, a working-class socialist stance opposed to the mainstream parties and to the racist populism of the BNP.

The fascist BNP may well win a Euro MP in the 4 June elections. With the economic crisis, and the growing discredit of mainstream politicians, it can place itself to make serious advances in next year’s general election.

Forming a new Socialist Alliance would be difficult? It would. But what is more urgent: dealing responsibly with the rise of fascism, or cultivating our factional habits and interests?

We urge you to respond.

Cathy Nugent, editor, Solidarity

IN BRIEF

UNITE: You might think the leaders of a union whose members occupied the Visteon factories and took wildcat strike action in engineering construction would be pre-occupied with struggle.

Yet Derek Simpson, joint General Secretary of Unite and his supporters seem to spend much time in an unedifying turf war. The most telling part of this tussle was the leaking of details about Simpson's obscene pay and perks to the bourgeois media.

The red-faced Gen Sec responded not by giving up his bosses' lifestyle but by starting a hunt for the leakers. Kevin Coyne, a candidate in the recent Joint General Secretary election, was suspended from the union at the end of March.

Coyne, a right-winger, has now been reinstated as a Unite official — on the same "rank", but in a position where he has much less chance to build an autonomous base of support.

CIVIL SERVICE: The PCS election results are in. On the National Executive the Democracy Alliance (a lash up between Left Unity, which is run by the Socialist Party, and the soft right) won all but one position. The left, in the shape of the Independent Left (IL), slightly increased its share of the Executive vote but did better in the Deputy General Secretary election where its candidate, John Moloney, lost by only about 2,300 votes to the long time incumbent of that post, Hugh Lanning, winning 46 percent. Such a result shows that when the message is put to members as to what is really happening in the union and an alternative posed then it is possible to get a good hearing. That said the IL is very far from winning power in the union and a tremendous amount of hard work is needed.

CIVIL SERVICE: In the City and Wall Street, many a shady company set up entities called Special Purpose Vehicles. SPVs are typically used by companies to isolate the firm from financial or other risks.

In a vitally important equal pay test case being fought in the Department for Transport (DfT), the Government is arguing that departmental agencies are a type of SPV. The purpose is to isolate the Government from its own equality laws.

The Civil Service is split into over a hundred different bargaining units. Many of these units are called agencies. You may have heard of DVLA, a DfT agency that collects road tax, and the DSA, a DfT agency that tests drivers. Both agencies are just administrative sub-divisions of the department.

The PCS is pursuing a legal case to win equal pay for women in DVLA with men in DSA. The Government in reply states that it is not legally possible for the women in DVLA to compare themselves to men in DSA. They claim that DVLA and DSA are in fact wholly separate and independent from each other, and that Ministers are not in operational charge of the agencies.

In terms of the democracy this is a curious argument. Ministers are voted into power, but according to New Labour they don't have control of the agencies.

More curiously still, under an Act of Parliament, Trading Funds such as DSA and DVLA (such funds are meant to be self-financing) are expressly said to be under "the control and management of Ministers". Despite this law, the Government argues that Ministers do

HIGHER EDUCATION

Build for strike on pay and job cuts

BY CAMILA BASSI (A UNIVERSITY LECTURER, WRITING IN A PERSONAL CAPACITY)

Lecturers at two thirds of higher education institutions face the real threat of losing their jobs. The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) has said that 100 institutions are planning collective redundancies.

While most of these 100 institutions have yet to go public, Liverpool University has announced eight of its forty five departments risk closure, Thames Valley has proposed shutting completely one of its four campuses, and one in four staff at London Metropolitan University face the sack. Reduced student funding in the area of health means nursing and health profession departments across the UK also face cuts. So too do university departments who scored 1* or 2* in the recent RAE exercise, i.e. those places deemed at the 'low end' of a crude audit of academic productivity and "quality".

Work intensification is another major issue, especially if one combines the higher number of students expected to go to university from September 2009

(due to the recession) and planned job cuts and recruitment freezes. The student-staff ratio for UK universities was 9/1 thirty years ago. Today it is 18/1, higher than France, Germany and the United States.

Ballot papers have recently been sent out to higher education lecturers, members of the University and College Union (UCU), posing the issue of pay and job security as grounds for industrial action. UCEA are offering a derisory 0.3% pay rise.

Some will say one ought to be grateful for any pay offer at a time like this. But remember that in a period when workers are (and will be) losing their jobs, many will be our partners, children and other dependents; remember that more students than ever are expected to enter into universities; remember that management will use (and indeed, milk) the "excuse of economics" to push through serious attacks on workers. Now is precisely a time to reveal industrial muscle not weakness.

UCEA insist the ballot does not make sense, since it cannot agree nationally the job safety of any one local institution. That is the autonomous decision of individual Vice Chancellors.

What kind of trade union do we have

and what kind do we want? Clearly, the stance being taken by the union bureaucratic vanguard to flex industrial muscle at a time of major attacks is broadly the right one. This vanguard consists, in the main, of the UCU Left (dominated by the SWP and their alliance of generally decent leftist union bureaucrats).

Member of AWL UCU have long argued (in the UCU and formerly NATFHE) that any kind of meaningful, effective and democratic Left in the union has been driven, organically created, linked to the rank-and-file of the union. UCU Left is not a rank-and-file body. For that reason, in any potential strike the UCU Left must seriously address the gulf that exists between itself and ordinary members.

This union is nothing without quorate branch meetings in every member institution, without active shop stewards, without democratic debate and participation — especially at a critical moment like this when our leadership steer us into what could be a long and significant confrontation with the bosses.

All UCU members should vote yes in the ballot, but also push for a genuine rank-and-file organisation in the union to take up the fight!

not manage and control the Trading Funds.

Like Enron and other organisations of that ilk, the Government is hoping that the SPVs will work their magic. The bottom line is that New Labour doesn't want the equality laws it passed to actually operate; after all equality costs money, and the low paid women in DVLA are not bankers.

LEWISHAM BRIDGE SCHOOL: The campaign to prevent the closure of Lewisham Bridge primary school, in south east London, has gained momentum steadily since the school was occupied by parents and supporters last month. On 9 May, a hundred people marched through Lewisham to protest against the council's decision, followed by a rally at which Martin Powell Davies of Lewisham NUT promised a step up action to stop the closure.

The occupation has gained widespread publicity, even inspiring a brief occupation of another primary school, Charlotte Turner, due to be closed down the road in Greenwich.

The next event in the campaign is a lobby of the Lewisham council — 6.30pm on Wednesday 20 May @ the Town Hall, Catford Road, SE6.

UNIONS AND THE LABOUR PARTY: The Communication Workers' Union conference, starting on 7 June, has a motion tabled for a trade-union drive to restore the right for unions and local Labour Parties to put political motions through Labour Party conference.

Labour Party democracy campaigners tell us that they also have hopes of another major union putting a proposal to restore motions.

When they banned political motions

to conference, at Bournemouth in 2007, the Labour Party leadership promised a "review" of that decision in 2009. They have discharged the promise in the most minimal way possible. A circular has, without any fanfare, been sent out to local Labour Parties and to affiliated unions, couched in terms of asking people whether they can think of ways to make a good thing (the 2007 rule changes) even better. Replies will not go to party conference, but to the National Executive, which is at full liberty to ignore them in what it proposes to the conference.

The Labour Party has not yet abolished the right to put constitutional amendments, or even restricted it in the way that political motions were restricted before 2007 (when, effectively, only the four biggest unions could put motions and have any assurance at all of them getting conference time), so there is in fact a good chance of getting an amendment to restore political motions on the table this year, from somewhere. Three problems then arise.

First, the usual procedure for constitutional amendments is that they are debated the year after the Conference Arrangements Committee accepts them for the conference agenda. So the CAC could accept the amendments but refuse any discussion until 2010.

The CAC may well not want to do that, because the 2010 conference is likely to take place after a Labour election defeat, and to be much more unruly than 2009. So, second, it can instead put the amendment on the 2009 agenda, but timetable it so as to try to knock it out with no proper debate.

Thirdly, the CAC can just rule the amendment out of order. It is difficult to see how, but the CAC has done worse in the past. All of these problems

will be vastly reduced if the amendment comes from a major union.

The process of shutting down life in the Labour Party, bureaucratising and "bourgeoisifying" it, has continued more or less in a straight line for almost 25 years now. Can it be reversed now?

Were it not for the crisis, the answer would be no. But big economic crises change things, and change them in unexpected ways. This crisis has already heavily discredited the New Labour leadership, and pushed the Tories to position themselves well to the right of Labour for the first time in many years. It also points up the need for the labour movement to be able to use its weight politically as well as industrially.

“March for jobs”

**Called by Unite
Assemble 11am
Highfield Rd,
Edgbaston,
Birmingham B15
Transport:
www.unitetheunion.com**

VISTEON DISPUTE

Gains won, but pickets continue

By Vicki Morris

Visteon workers who occupied or picketed their plants when they were sacked without notice on 31 March have won an important victory.

Many of the workers at the three plants in Basildon, Belfast and Enfield had been on Ford mirror contracts, since the company was spun off from Ford in 2000, but when Visteon UK went into receivership the company claimed it did not need to honour the contracts, even though the international company is still solvent.

Ford also tried to wash their hands of the affair, although the fortunes of Visteon remain heavily tied to those of Ford — and vice versa. Yet, in a series of hasty negotiations at the end of April, conducted with Visteon and Ford, the Visteon workers' union Unite managed to get an offer that the workers have accepted.

While accepting the deal, the workers pledged not to leave the plants until the money was in their bank accounts. At Enfield and Basildon, 24-hour pickets continue. At Enfield workers have been told (with the agreement of the union) that they must agree to a date and will be paid on the day they stop the picket. Belfast, which is still in occupation, has a crucial decision to make: whether to leave the plant without the money being paid, as they are now legally obliged to do. Indeed, the latest news is that Visteon have said they cannot have their money until they leave the plant.

The catalyst for the latest serious negotiations — whereas a previous round of talks with Visteon had resulted only in an insulting offer of 13 weeks' pay — seems to have been the threat by Unite to take Visteon workers

to talk to workers at Ford's new plant in Bridgend.

On international workers' day, 1 May, workers at Basildon and Enfield voted overwhelmingly to accept the new offer, and workers at Belfast also accepted the offer on Sunday 3 May.

The offer give all workers 52 weeks redundancy pay, plus 12 weeks pay in lieu of notice, and former Ford workers one week's pay for every year under age 40, and 1.5 week's pay for every year over age 41. For workers who were taken on by Visteon after 2000 and those recruited on the still worse Cash Competitive Rate the offer is less generous but it is still a lot more than the workers stood to get when they were sacked on 31 March and told to come back the next day to clear their lockers. It amounts to what would be, in the normal run of things, a good redundancy package.

However, there is no deal on pensions: Ford contract workers qualify for their pensions when they are 58 but Visteon workers will have to wait until they are 65 and they will only received about 90% of what they should have got. We understand Unite will take a legal case on this issue.

At this stage, an overall assessment of

the Visteon dispute must be: they fought and won! They are an inspiring example to the whole trade union movement.

However, the experience of the Visteon workers has many important lessons for socialists and trade unionists. In the first place, it shows the importance of building rank and file organisation to a much higher level than exists today. The Unite bureaucracy, even at the regional level, has been criticised for its conduct of the dispute. At the very least we can say that they were slow to respond and did not give the full support to the workers that they could have. They organised visits to Ford plants, and launched a financial appeal within Unite itself, only very late on.

I don't share the view of some Visteon workers' supporters that Unite were actually working with Ford and Visteon against the workers, but the gap between the bureaucratic culture that we have and the rank and file culture that we need to build has been exposed.

From my observation of the situation at Enfield, there was not enough debate among the workers themselves about how to conduct the dispute, and not enough information about negotiations reaching rank and file union members. A video on YouTube of Kevin Nolan, the Enfield convenor, announcing the results of the final negotiations, gives a sense of "them and us" between even lay officials and ordinary members, even as the workers are cheering each announcement.

I understand that a democratic vote had been taken when Enfield workers, on the advice of the union, made the crucial decision to leave their occupation; and, as the dispute went on, the union did start putting up a daily bul-

letin for all to read — but they did this on the suggestion of "outsiders" from the support group. Basildon and Belfast might have had better participation of rank and file members in decision making, but there is still clearly much work to do to spread the idea that everyone has a say, that all tactics should be discussed, that disputes need to be run by the rank and file, if members are to feel they own a dispute and make crucial decisions about their own future.

There are many examples from history of factory occupations, but it took individual activists digging out accounts of them to show to Visteon workers for that lesson of our class to filter down, and arguably too late. Visteon workers learned how to do factory occupations, mount and organise pickets, make speeches at support meetings and so on as they went along. The trade union movement, at a rank and file level, could be much more prepared to act; this is bread and butter competence that we need to get back to having among all union activists.

Whatever our assessment of the Unite bureaucracy — on the whole, the union activists will defend their role, and sometimes for good reasons, if the criticism is coming from people who want to bash the unions — it is very clear that the Visteon workers' method of fighting is vastly different from that of the bureaucrats. And it has been shown, in this small dispute, to be vastly superior! Getting a good result where, at the start, none was even remotely on the horizon!

On 16 May Unite have organised a jobs march in Birmingham. That march had been organised before Visteon broke, and it's good that they have called it. But so much more important will be spreading the lessons of the Visteon dispute: fight — even defying

“We’ve been overwhelmed by solidarity”

Rob Williams, Unite convenor at the Linamar (previously Visteon) car parts plant in Swansea, who was sacked on 28 April, spoke to Sacha Ismail.

I've been at the plant for thirteen and a half years. When I started, we worked for Ford, producing components for the company directly.

In 2000, Visteon was spun off as a separate components manufacturer. Since then Visteon workers have had a non-stop battle with management, against their attempts to make us pay for their cost-lowering, as you've seen reach its conclusion with the recent occupations. In Swansea we used to get work from the Ford foundry in Leamington, and sell the parts on to Ford Dagenham — at a loss to us! Of course, the workforce was expected to pay for this disparity.

After we fought successfully to uphold terms and conditions at Visteon, management decided to get rid of the Swansea plant. Last year it was sold, or I should really say given away, to Linamar, a mainly non-union company in Canada. To give you an idea of who these people are, just before Christmas they told their workers they were getting a ten percent wage cut — by email! The

one plant they failed to do it in was the one that was unionised. So they really couldn't stomach our level of organisation in Swansea, and decided to break the union in order to push down terms and conditions.

What happened when you were sacked?

On 28 April, I happened to be in the main office, next to the plant. Brian Wade, whose official title is group president, is the main boss associated with the plant. He asked me to come and have a word, and he and another Canadian manager informed me I was sacked. No right to appeal, no suspension with pay pending a hearing. There was no one from HR present, let alone a union representative.

I told them they couldn't do that, and they complained that whenever they proposed something, I said no. What a terrible crime for a trade union rep to be guilty of!

The phrase they used was “an irretrievable breakdown of trust”. What bothered them was not just the situation in Swansea, but the work we've done in solidarity with the Visteon struggle.

When I refused to leave, they called

the police, five of whom turned up at the plant, but I ran onto the shop floor and into the union office. There were only forty or fifty on the shop floor, but the boys risked their jobs to surround the union office. After a while, supporters started to appear at the gates, so the police thought better of it and left.

Eventually the full time officials were allowed on site, and the company agreed to negotiations with Andy Richards, who's the Unite regional secretary. The shop floor returned to work, but with the understand that if the sacking stood they'd be out again.

And now there's a strike ballot?

I've spoken to all the stewards by now, outside work, and the feeling is for action. Ballot papers will be with members on Monday, so hopefully we'll see. It's an open question on the ballot — how and when we strike depends on the result, and on the stewards' discussions. But we've set up a hardship fund, so we're getting ready for a serious strike.

We've learnt management are proposing a “buy down” of terms and conditions — a one-off payment to bribe workers to break their contract. In that context, it's clear what this victimisation

is all about.

What can labour movement activists do to support you?

We've been overwhelmed by solidarity — not just from unions in Swansea, but nationally and internationally. We're holding a public meeting tonight [13 May] to mobilise support and show the boys in the plant that they're not on their own. We'll be holding a demonstration this Sunday.

Send messages of solidarity, and donate to the fund. But more generally we need widespread action to stop the bosses' offensive against trade unionism. We're asking workers to consider every possible form of solidarity.

All companies want workers to pay for the crisis. Linamar Swansea is small, but if we win, it will give strength to workers everywhere. If we lose, on the other hand, it will mean that a company with two hundred workers in the UK was allowed to ride rough over a union of two million. It will mean the right to be in a union is under threat. So our message is: don't let the two hundred of us fight it alone.

• For how to support the fight see www.workersliberty.org/robwilliams

CAMPAIGNS

Fight the cuts!

By ELAINE JONES

A survey of 129 council leaders by the Local Government Association shows that half the councils in England have axed jobs in the last few months and seven in ten anticipate further redundancies.

In the south-west, 67% of councils have already made cuts in staff; in the south-east, 57%; and so on down to Yorkshire and Humberside (37%).

In some areas, councils are the largest employer, and across the UK they employ 2.2 million workers.

Cuts in jobs mean cuts in services — at a time when the economic crisis means an increase in the need for housing benefit, council housing, debt advice, retraining courses, social services...

The LGA report also shows that council income from services they charge for, land sales and interest from deposits is projected to fall by £2.5 billion next year.

The economic crisis, squeezing public spending sharply over the coming years, is bound to push along further cuts.

In moves like Wirral council's Strategic Asset Review or Barnet's "The Future Shape" programme, councils have already been privatising and contracting local services, with cuts in housing, social services, transport, leisure, waste collection, council tax collection and education.

The councils clearly feel confident that they can get away with large-scale cuts. They may also try to reduce local government pensions.

The Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS), which covers 3.7 million former and present employees of Britain's local authorities, had its deficit was reported as £23 billion two years ago. That deficit rises to £45 billion when restated under the recently adopted pensions accounting standards, and then to about £80 billion following the recent collapse of share values.

Local government spending is about a quarter of all public spending in the UK. Most of councils' revenue comes via central government, through "grants" and through redistributed business rates.

Council tax provides about a quarter of revenue. That means that for a 10% increase in spending, a council would have to raise council tax 40%; but in any case central government has power to "cap" local authority budgets.

Councils thus have much less financial autonomy than they had 25 or 30 years ago. A council rejecting cuts would

quickly have to defy central government — as some Labour councils tried to do in the 1970s and 80s — by deliberately running an "unbalanced" budget and mobilising local workers to demand cash from central government.

No council as yet shows the least sign of doing that. Whether Labour, Liberal or Tory-run, they have been privatising and contracting out as much as possible.

Our Wirral Against the Cuts campaign would like to know about the cuts being made by councils across the country, and about campaigns that have been set up to stop them. We need to begin to link up the opposition as these cuts intensify.

Elaine Jones is vice-chair of Wirral TUC. Contact her at elaine.wtuc@live.co.uk.

Council tries to bully workers into silence

FROM WIRRAL AGAINST THE CUTS

Members of Unison employed by Wirral council have been threatened with immediate suspension if they express their opposition to council cuts and job losses publicly.

Councillor Steve Foulkes has said that their treatment of staff is reasonable as: "The council couldn't have council workers, who are paid by the tax payers, spending 8 or 9 hours a day politically campaigning against the council."

Teachers who have links with the local libraries and who encourage the children to use them have also been threatened with suspension if they publicly support the libraries.

Wirral council is planning to cut 11 libraries, 49 community centres, a theatre, a leisure centre, two museums and a swimming pool, and reduce social care provision.

We would ask trade unionists to contact Steve Foulkes at steve.foulkes@wirral.gov.uk, and to express their concerns to the inquiry team at Sue Charteris, Wirral Public Libraries Inquiry, wppli@sharedintelligence.net.

Wirral Against the Cuts c/o Wirral Trade Union Council, 4 St Ann Street, Birkenhead. CH41 3J

Barnet battles sheltered housing cuts

By VICKI MORRIS

If there had been a national debate on the fate of sheltered housing for the elderly, the cuts that are happening around the country could never have gone ahead!

Why? Because the vast majority of people want to retain sheltered housing and are appalled to learn that it is disappearing.

Instead, we are fighting council by council to save sheltered housing, with barely a word about it in the national press. Cuts have gone through in some areas. In some places, notably Brighton and Hove, they have been fended off. In Barnet we are still battling. On Saturday 9 May, at short notice, we organised a march of 150 through central Finchley, in the ward of Tory council leader Mike Freer.

The cuts had been announced in the proposed budget for 2009-10 as part of a package to save Barnet council money. Around 900,000 will be saved from the budget for elderly people by getting rid of 50 or so permanent wardens, most of them living on site. Instead, sheltered housing residents can be assessed, and those who are most vulnerable might be moved into a high needs scheme. Lynne Hillan, the Cabinet member for community services who is pushing through these changes has recently moved her own mother into such a home, provoking much anger.

Most residents will only have access to a new "floating support" service,

with about one-quarter the staffing level that exists currently. They might get limited support for such things as filling in complicated forms or to help them through a period of bereavement. They will have to book to see a support worker for a set period each week and for a limited time.

This is nothing like the level of support they get now. Many old people will not ask for the help they need because they don't want to be a nuisance. They will be means tested for this support, and for whether they qualify for free provision of the alarm system they all currently have in their flats.

The consultation meetings that the council held in each scheme all showed that residents value the wardens, the sense of community they foster in the scheme, the relationship they build with residents. Knowing that someone is on hand to help enables many residents to live more independent lives.

We have until the Cabinet makes its decision on 8 June to win our campaign. The council argues that sheltered housing residents are treated more favourably than other Barnet elderly people. While that's true, it's presumably because they have been assessed as needing sheltered housing. In any case, the answer is to level up services to the elderly, not to level down!

There is a debate to be had about the place of sheltered housing within an overall assessment of what services elderly people would ideally like. But right now we need to fight to defend this valued service.

Ideas for Freedom 2009

10-12 July

The AWL's annual event will this year focus on the capitalist crisis, and on socialist and working-class responses to it.

Friday 10 July: evening film showing and social at the Bread & Roses pub, 68 Clapham Manor Street, London SW4. Will we be

showing *With Babies and Banners*, the story of women's role in the great sit-down strike against General Motors at Flint in 1936.

Saturday 11-Sunday 12 July: School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H Saturday night social. Cheap food, free creche and accommodation will be provided.

Sessions include

- How economic crises transform politics
- People's Charter or Workers' Plan?
- The state of the labour movement
- The fight for jobs
- What's wrong with the Green New Deal?
- How and how not to fight fascism
- Should the left say "No 2 EU"?
- National Union of Students president Wes Streeting debates Daniel Randall of Education Not for Sale

- Janine Booth introduces her new book on the Poplar Council struggle of 1919-21 and its lesson for today
- French socialists on the New Anti-Capitalist Party and the rising tide of class struggle in France
- The politics of Northern Ireland: Sean Matgamna debates John Palmer
- The war in Sri Lanka
- Revolutionary anniversaries: world revolution 1919; Cuba 1959; Iran 1979; the miners' strike 1984-5
- Introductory sessions: Why capitalism has crises; What is a revolutionary party and do we need one?; Marxism vs anarchism; Violence, non-violence and class struggle

Cheap rates for bookings before the end of May: £18 waged, £13 low-waged/students, £7 unwaged for the weekend. (Day tickets are also available.) Book online at www.workersliberty.org/ideas or email awl@workersliberty.org

NOTTINGHAM

Anti-BNP campaign offers working-class politics

By CHARLIE SALMON

On Sunday 10 May around twenty anti-fascists from the Nottingham Stop the BNP campaign distributed 3,500 leaflets in Bulwell, north of the city centre. This area, which in the 1980s elected a Communist Party councillor, has been targeted by the fascist British National Party (BNP) for several months.

For the first time in a generation, the fascists have been going door-to-door in inner city Nottingham. Bulwell has some of the lowest educational achievement figures in the country, the lowest numbers moving onto higher education, poor housing and widespread poverty. Bulwell has been at the receiving end of anti-working class policies for decades and the BNP know it. Their materials – leaflets and glossy news sheets – appeal to those who’ve been failed by the Tories and New Labour, they aim to offer an alternative.

The Nottingham anti-fascists could have simply ordered “Don’t Vote BNP” leaflets from Searchlight or Unite Against Fascism, held a street stall and avoided the big political questions. We chose not to. Instead, we too went door-to-door with a leaflet challenging the political ground contested by the BNP and offering an alternative set of politics – working class politics.

Those people in Bulwell who came out of their houses to speak to the campaigners or who stopped on the street to chat were unified in their opposition to the BNP. Many wanted to talk politics, others just wanted to exchange expletives about the fascists. One resident who



BNP scum

came out to talk confirmed that “the BNP have been leafleting regularly. I’ve never seen them but if I did I’d see them off this street.” Another said that “I know some people who’ll be voting UKIP because they don’t like Labour or the Tories or the BNP. I can’t vote for UKIP, they’re just like the Tories ... so what do you do?”

At the launch of the BNP’s Euro-election campaign, their self-styled “Battle for Britain” leader Nick Griffin proclaimed that “we are the ones who are really a threat to their rotten, internationalist, liberal system”. At a time when the pig-in-the-trough mendacity of bourgeois politicians has been unveiled in sickening detail and when millions of workers face the fast-materialising consequences of economic turmoil, the BNP’s message cannot but have some reso-

nance.

Add to the mix the weakened trade unions and a divided, politically disorientated left and the prospects for major gains for the fascist right look all too real.

Already, the BNP has invested in new infrastructure and organisation. Videos on their website show impressive looking printing, telecommunications and distribution systems. The website also carries an advert encouraging people to apply for a “career” with the party. They appear to be speculating to accumulate in the run-up to 4 June with the expectation that the publicity and potential prestige of seats in the European Parliament will swell the membership and, perhaps more importantly, the bank account of their racist organisation.

The latest opinion polling shows the

BNP attracting 4% of all likely voters nationwide. This looks like a tiny base of support but the regional picture is somewhat different. In the regions targeted by the BNP, the North West, West and East Midlands, they require only a marginal swing to secure seats in Europe. The necessary percentage could easily be provided, on a very low turnout, by voters disaffected with the major parties and those who voted UKIP last time round.

The stark reality is that, given the state of official anti-fascism, the struggle to keep the BNP out of Europe boils down to pure arithmetic. To keep them out, unprecedented numbers must turn out to the ballot box and vote.

But anti-fascism cannot be condensed down to emergency measures at election time, cannot be reduced to a plea for votes. Even one MEP will drastically boost the BNP’s ability to organise but in and of itself, a seat or seats in Europe are not the determining factor for socialists. They are a symptom rather than a cause. The steady growth in support for the BNP, even before the crisis set in, has been in part a consequence of the political and organisational collapse of the workers movement.

The two are connected and any consistent fight against the BNP must be firmly rooted in working class politics and the fight to renew our movement.

Workers can and must combine in our communities, in the unions and the workplace to forge a set of politics that will transform our movement and win political representation.

- Download the Notts Stop The BNP leaflet at www.workersliberty.org/stop-bnp

“Anyone but BNP” is not enough

By DARREN BEDFORD.

The victory of at least one BNP MEP in the upcoming Euro-elections now looks almost inevitable. To accept this is not to collapse into nihilism or to admit defeat, but to indict the New Labour, Tory and Lib Dem councillors and MPs across the country.

Their policies of cuts and privatisation have created the conditions in which the BNP — posing as a populist alternative to the establishment — have been allowed to grow.

A Euro-MP would give the BNP access to enormous financial resources, allowing them to develop and galvanise their organisation. As anyone who lives in an area of BNP strength will know, any level of significant fascist organisation poses an immediate physical threat to ethnic minorities and LGBT people.

In the absence of a serious socialist electoral alternative, the temptation to advocate a “keep out the BNP vote” — that is, a vote for anyone, of any party, as long as it prevents the fascists from getting elected — is strong. But to make

this the encapsulation of immediate anti-fascist strategy, as many on the left are doing, would not only be a blind alley but, in the long term, dangerously counterproductive.

Both elements of mainstream anti-fascism (Searchlight/Hope Not Hate and Unite Against Fascism) adopt cross-class perspectives, arguing that working with (and voting for) capitalist parties against the BNP is not only acceptable but necessary and desirable. Senior New Labour politicians such as Charles Clarke and even Gordon Brown have appeared on HnH publicity. This strategy is about as effective as lining up with the Arsonists’ League and the Petrol Pourers’ Association in order to put out a raging fire. It reduces anti-fascist activists to electoral foot-soldiers for mainstream parties, and makes us appear to disillusioned workers considering voting BNP as defenders of the status quo.

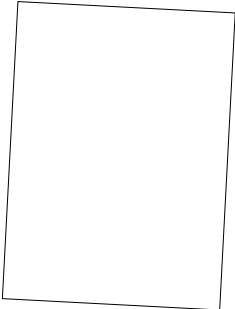
What is needed is a movement not designed to hold back fascism’s worst electoral excesses, but rather to conduct a war against fascist organisation and the social conditions in which it grows.

This means eschewing both the tactics (media stunts, pop concerts, celebrity endorsements) and the politics (class collaborationism) of HnH and UAF in favour of direct action, working-class anti-fascism; physically confronting and shutting down fascist organisation wherever we can, and mobilising working-class people in positive, anti-capitalist campaigns around the legitimate grievances the BNP attempt to exploit.

Members of Workers’ Liberty in Nottingham were involved in initiating the Notts Stop the BNP campaign, and it shows a model of anti-fascism which builds on the spirit of Cable Street and the workers’ anti-fascist defence squads mobilised by the Minneapolis teamsters during their heroic strike of 1934. Socialists must advocate and build around that model now.

Simply going along with the “vote for anyone but the BNP” line of the mainstream anti-fascist movement can only possibly result in the strengthening of the Tories, Lib Dems or New Labour — leading to more years of the same policies that have allowed the BNP be to grow.

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MAY DAY

What kind of international solidarity?

1 May, May Day, is an important date in the history of the workers' movement. This is the collective account (written by Bob Sutton) of how some London AWL activists spent their May Day.

WILLIS CLEANERS

Our day kicked off with a picket outside multinational insurance brokers the Willis Group in the City of London. In mid-2007 cleaners at Willis began to organise under the umbrella of Unite's "Justice for Cleaners campaign", for the "living wage". The living wage was won but the company hit back by putting the cleaners on unworkable night shifts; when they refused to work the shifts the workers' organisers were sacked.

Alberto Durango, an organiser at Willis (and cleaner at Schroeder's where a dispute had been won) explains what happened next: "Unite has abandoned Willis workers, arguing that re-instatement campaigns are too difficult to win. But the cleaners have independently called weekly demonstrations for three

months."

Afterwards we marched together to join the Latin American Workers' Association contingent for London's May Day demo.

This year's London demonstration, was a weird mix — predominantly made up of old timers with Stalin banners. Among this jumble of the left and pseudo-left was a block of around 20 Sri Lankan Sinhalese, who appeared to be a socialist group, complete with red flags, banners and holding up portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin. The group in question are in fact the JVP, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

The first thing to make absolutely clear is that these people have nothing to with socialism. People like Marx, Engels and Lenin gave their lives forming and fighting for a set of ideas that stood against the savagery inflicted on the peoples of Ireland, Ukraine and all oppressed nations. Any socialist should raise the call of "self determination for the Tamils." The JVP on the other hand back their government's war. Their "socialism" has nothing to do with ours.

On 11 May news came in of 3,000

killings in Sri Lanka in a single day: that a massacre upped the death toll since January to perhaps 10,000. There have been London mobilisations against the war of 200,000 and an ongoing protest in Parliament Square. At a time like this, the presence at a left event of a group like the JVP, backers of the communal slaughter, has to be regarded as intolerable.

That is why we took it upon ourselves to disrupt the JVP block, heckle them, argue with them; we held up our paper with back headline 'Stop the war on the Tamil people!', prevented them getting a photo, and chanted "stop genocide" slogans.

The JVP called over the police, then the stewards. The stewards were old hacks who told us to "have your arguments about politics in a room somewhere, we're busy having a march". We said, no, not when 300,000 people are in concentration camps and these people are effectively banging their government's war drum.

This was something quite different to a disagreement we might have with another left group, where we share a

basic commonality of ideas about the world. At a point where there is such a clear and ghastly instance of oppression, they are siding with the oppressor. A shame is on the organisers for ever letting them on the demonstration in the first place.

Whereas the JVP have come to May Day demonstrations for years, this year was the first time for a British Tamil Forum contingent — perhaps 60 or so strong, with banners and placards against the genocide.

As the march moved into Trafalgar Square some of the Tamil youth came over with their drums. Up until then they had possibly not known they were sharing a march with people condoning the extermination of their friends and relatives. They stepped up the noise. We were joined by another of our comrades, themselves Tamil. We started to chant "JVP, you're not welcome in the workers' movement!"

More younger Tamils came over and we urged them to get others to join in with the chanting. The JVP rolled up their banner, packed up their placards, and call in the police to attempt to stop

Every act of solidarity counts

By ROBIN SIVAPALAN

Fighting migration controls is grinding, a daily and often terrible battle, mostly fought by individuals and small groups of people. Often it is inspiring. But there is a lot going on.

On Thursday 7 May Ayodeji Omotade was acquitted by Brent Magistrates Court of threatening and abusive behaviour. That is of shaming British Airways and exposing the reality. In March 2008, Campaign Against Immigrant Controls activists leafleted a BA flight on which Biafran Independence activist Augustine was being deported. We asked people to speak up, to show solidarity. Ayodeji did, in response to screaming appeals from our friend. The whole economy class section was emptied of passengers as they protested at Ayodeji being arrested. The flight took off later with only Augustine in economy; Ayodeji missed his brothers wedding for which he was carrying the rings.

We give our support to Ayodeji in now pursuing an apology from BA. In his words: "What would you do if someone on your flight was distressed and crying out for help? Would you stay silent or would you speak? I spoke and BA didn't like it. This type of corporate tyranny must be challenged and stopped."

But a terrible and significant defeat came on Tuesday 12 May when the ninth monthly mass deportation to Kurdistan in Iraq went ahead. Six activists from the newly formed Stop Deportations network blockaded Colnbrook detention centre for five hours where maybe 45 Iraqis had been herded to in advance of a charted flight.

Using oil cans filled with cement and glass, in which two people could hook their arms to each other, they tried to stop the coaches leaving; a human road block. Two more people blocked the pavement to stop other vehicles mounting it and car-

rying on work as normal. Others chanted, contacted media, co-ordinated with John McDonnell MP's exemplary office, and called the coach companies involved — WH Coaches and Woodcocks.

The International Federation of Iraqi Refugees had contact with a number of detainees inside the camp who resisted by removing their clothes, supported by protests from people of other nationalities. Some had been on hunger strike for 10 days, but were deemed fit to fly. One person was set upon by seven guards. All were handcuffed on the coaches. I haven't heard back, on writing, what happened to our Iraqi brothers. On a previous flight the guard smashed the plane window with an Iraqi's head. The six activists were released late last night, charged, strangely, with unlawful assembly.

The sight of watching comrades being arrested as three coaches pulled out in convoy is not one that I want to repeat. Some pushed back the curtains in response to our chanting and saw people were there, that they hadn't been alone, some raised fists — in cuffs. Our comrade, Samira, from IFIR cried, as we all felt to, from defeat, from anger. There had been media, we had either created a window of hope but probably prolonged an agony for those being restrained and waiting; it is necessary to resist even when you lose, in the hope that it takes you towards a larger victory. We have to be able to stop these mass deportations for a hundred reasons of solidarity, paramount to socialists. And I think we can.

In the lift at Heathrow Terminal Five a young white woman asked us if we were the ones protesting outside Colnbrook. She said she wanted to come out and join us but we'd gone by the time she got out. She's 23 and had been visiting her boyfriend who she's been with since she was 14; they've got a five year old son who thinks he's visiting his dad at work. She lives near me, we're both Brent born and bred, and loyal to it! Her partner is

Tamil (I told her I was too), he's been in there for seven months now, and due to be deported. He fled two years of detention and torture at the hands of the Tamil Tigers in his youth and has scars all over his body.

She didn't know what to do, solicitors cost and he's been through several. She knows that this is all weighted against the poor. She can't afford this. But neither is she the kind of person to give up.

We talked all the way back to Alperton. We talked about the injustice of the system, our own backgrounds, in general and political. She pointed to some cranes where they'd demolished the shelter of a local homeless person. Her and her friend had organised a protest a few years ago. She thinks that even small demonstrations of solidarity are important and he was given sheltered accommodation as a result. We both want a more collective fight. We talked about a local support worker, GMB member, facing eviction that LCAP are trying to build a fight around.

I know of a Tamil solicitor who I heard speak sanely about defending people who were fleeing not just the Sri Lankan government, but the Tamil Tigers. I said I'd get hold of him. In any case, her partner is being done as "foreign criminal" for some petty crime (in the judges own words). She and her partner, as we do in CAIC, have argued that people cannot be punished twice: once for the actual crime; the second time, sometimes with their lives, for being foreign. She comes from a big Irish family, but says she feels for what's going on in Sri Lanka, after all her son is Tamil. He shares both their features. We agreed to go to the Tamil protests in Parliament Square together.

Back later last night at Parliament Sq, at 9pm, there was a speech updating people on the situation. Five male students are on hunger strike, when they stop they are to be replaced by more, people think three thousand civilians have been killed in the

last three or four days. There is utter desperation, and fears that, as in some villages in the East which have been turned into Sinhalese colonial settlements, that the population must be being wiped out.

A young Somali comrade and I spoke for an hour to one Tamil man from Birmingham. He'd been deported by the South Africans to Colombo where during interrogations, when he'd tried to intervene in the rape of a young woman, he'd lost his finger. I explained that we are for self determination, we see the deepening hardships of the Sinhala workers to be directly connected to the rise in Sinhala nationalism; we see this as part of the state's response to the global capitalist crisis. We talked about the massacres of JVP youth in the late 80s, left out of the Tamil nationalist narrative.

I explained why I didn't support the Tigers, that I wanted a socialist programme for the future, based on reality and the real history and prospects for Sri Lanka, for the Tamils. I explained my concern about a separate state, including the effect on the Tamil population Colombo.

My Sinhala friend has just got back from Sri Lanka and insists that things are getting better there for Tamils, on a policy and day-to-day life level, which I find difficult to believe. But can predict a massive backlash against the Colombo Tamil population, apparently now a majority in the capital, through refugees from the north and east.

There's always more to say, these conversations are important. This morning (Wednesday 13 May) the Eurostar cleaners start an official ongoing action, refusing to clock-in to work with finger measurement recorders. Next Monday, there is a student day of action for Tamils that I just found out about. I am now hatching a plan between writing this for Alperton and Harrow with other local comrades.

The fight goes on, for solidarity, for freedom of movement and equal rights for all.

the harrying. After a few minutes of standing around, looking increasingly intimidated, they turned and headed down into the tube station

After the end of the rally we briefly dropped by to the demonstration at KPMG (the accountancy firm), called by Visteon workers and their support group, over the company's instrumental role in the Visteon closure. It has not been lost on any of the Willis cleaners the parallels between the treatment of these two struggles at the hands of Unite. As Alberto Durango put it: "When I saw Steve Hart (of Unite) up at Visteon I thought, 'Don't fucking believe him! They don't have the same interests as the workers. What is he earning?'"

AMNESTY FOR A FEW?

Then off to a meeting called by the Coordinadora Latinoamerica and Campaign Against Immigration Controls to debate the issue of "amnesty" and the position of "papers for all" — a response to the Strangers into Citizens campaign, who were to organise a large demonstration on 4 May.

SIC asks the government to regularise the status of some migrants — those who have been in the UK for six years, have clean criminal records, speak proficient English and can get sponsorship and character references from employers. Along with that they they call for a tightening of border controls and a cap on the number of new migrants entering the country — and ask marchers to carry union jack flags and sing the national anthem.

This 1 May public meeting planned a leaflet, a contingent for the demonstration and alternative speaker rally. We would be arguing against any dangerous division between "good" and "bad" migrants. This discourse conceals the reality of a great majority of migrants in this country, of anti-social working hours, social exclusion, police oppression, and discrimination in the labour market and society at large. We don't want amnesty for *some*, but papers for all and justice for migrant workers.

SRI LANKA AGAIN

Our day ended with another public meeting, this one called by the SWP on Sri Lanka. Prior conversations with several SWP members had shown that their members have an understanding of the situation in Sri Lanka that is not all that different to ours — that the key to ending the oppression of the Tamils is Tamil-Sinhalese working-class unity.

They also, privately at least, recognise the bourgeois-nationalist character of the British Tamil Forum, who organised and hold political hegemony over the Tamil demonstrations.

When our comrades, both Tamil and non-Tamil, have brought leaflets and literature to the BTF mobilisations, particularly at Parliament Square, from CAIC, from the Visteon support group, and even the Stop the Slaughter of the Tamils (SST) campaign initiated by the Socialist Party, we have faced hassle from BTF organisers. Any material other than the officially sanctioned is usually met with several young organisers rushing to check out what is being given out.

During the first week of the Parliament Square protest, we brought down the Brent Trades Council banner. Given that some 40,000 Tamils work in Brent, this was a basic and straightforward act of working-class solidarity. The organisers told us to put it away as we did not have "permission". They then got on their mobiles to some higher authority before eventually telling us

that we can stay.

Anything other than flat, apolitical support, is made very unwelcome. We should ask: why is Tamil nationalism the only acceptable framing for solidarity with oppressed people in Sri Lanka?

The SWP and the broader organised left are not asking these questions. Interventions in the SWP's meeting went no further than to salute the bravery of the Tamils' collective action and generalise about "their" right to armed struggle for national liberation. SWP speakers expressed a clear intention to "work with" the BTF, but made it equally clear that it was "not their place" to have anything to say about the Tamil Tigers, the LTTE. This adds up to a soft ambiguity on the Tigers which makes for a very cheap internationalism devoid of class politics.

We were very clear: we vehemently oppose the genocide, the internment, the rapes, but will not not give unconditional support to an organisation that has liquidated all political opposition, has carried out ethnic cleansing and defines the emancipation of the Tamil people as an issue of nationalism, rather than democracy and self-determination.

Yes, we were met with disapproval. But as many people were nodding along with what we had to say, and we ended up having much more useful conversations. People by no means agreed with us, but appreciated our honesty and clarity. More importantly, spending our afternoon hammering the JVP had shown us to have an understanding of Sri Lanka and seriousness in action.

SWPers we talked to, rather than look to collaborate in further work, responded in a predictably sectarian fashion. They have not even acknowledged the SST campaign or sought to build it. Instead they were quick to draw analogy with our disagreements over Palestine/Israel, which quickly descended into the usual stuff about the AWL being apologists for imperialism.

Of course our approach to Sri Lanka is consistent with what we say about Israel/Palestine. In both instances we see a part of solidarity as being able to take a sharp and clear stance against reactionary and anti working class politics in "national liberation" struggles. The Tigers are a long from a group like Hamas. There are progressive elements to their politics such as abolishing the caste system, arming Tamil women alongside the men. The basic premise of their armed struggle, self-determination, is legitimate. However our criticisms remain.

Maintaining the position of the "third

camp" is, to a large extent, contingent on being among the fiercest fighters against the first camp — the oppressors — whether it be against the aggression of the Israeli or Sri Lankan ruling class. The onus is on Workers' Liberty to do the two things at once.

There is a massacre going on. To come and loftily denounce the politics of the Tigers without having made solidarity against the massacre is not on.

We are in solidarity with the Tamil people, and real working-class internationalism doesn't just flag-wave the existing force acting on behalf of a group. We have a positive programme of working-class solidarity, and if what exists is an obstacle to that then we should confront it openly.

LESSONS

So how do we make solidarity? These May Day events, in different ways, brought this question into sharp relief.

The emergence of highly politicised migrant worker struggles and their coalescence into things like the "papers for all" contingent at the Strangers into Citizens demo is very significant. Where migrant worker self-organisation and resistance has happened, it has often been on politics seldom found elsewhere in the labour movement. Where else would you find people whose own stories illustrate such a full picture of the horrors of globalised capitalism?

Clara Osagiede, secretary of the tube cleaners grade in the RMT union gave an account of the struggles against paper checks and sackings following their living wage campaign. Her speech burst out of the confines of narrow trade-unionism:

"Who is legal? What does this mean? If a cleaner is raped by her manager and is unable to speak out because she is illegal, then what does it mean to be legal? We have to talk about why people are here, about British imperialism, about exploitation of people, of land and resources. Look at Nigeria. Shell devastated the country, Shell's executives travel on the Tubes that are cleaned by migrant Nigerians. We were made into cleaners by these people."

This affirmation of this message, "we are here because you destroy our countries" should be the starting point of fighting against the exploitation and oppression of migrant workers. The line of struggle should not just be to bring migrant workers "under the wing" of the wider "British" working-class movement. Of course they are uniquely vul-

nerable part of our class and urgently need solidarity, but we should see them as a key agency in our fight against the bosses, against union bureaucracy and against British imperialism.

There are three main tasks for us.

Firstly, to fight on these ideas in the labour movement. The position of the mainstream left is that "the working-class is not ready" for a no borders politics. We should forefront this at every level and fight to win over the working-class.

Secondly, we need to start a concerted programme of building and organising within migrant communities. While the programme and class collaboration of SIC is abhorrent, their mobilisation has been impressive. They focus their work on church communities, finding key leaders and winning them over to do the grass-roots organising. A good percentage of the marchers on the SIC march did not know the SIC demands, many believing that they were all there fighting for "papers for all". These contradictions make it an arena ripe for intervention, and the Campaign Against Immigration Controls is beginning to do this.

There is a debate as to how best to have discussions, to organise and to make solidarity. Shift work, stress and apprehension about victimisation mean that migrants' workplaces may not be the best place to go to first. This is a challenge for a left that is on the whole white, and not engaged in the social and community networks of migrant communities, and whose activity is often at trade union branch or trades council level.

The third and perhaps greatest task is to take on the current "leadership of the trade union movement. As Alberto put it "They have more in common with the rulers than they have with us. Inside the union we need a revolution. If we do that it can be a very powerful instrument to change society." But he also says "If necessary, work without the unions." Cleaners at the National Physical Laboratory fought and won without any union support, as did workers at Prisme. This too is an issue to be taken up.

But the challenges and sharpness of this area of class struggle is increasing. On 6 May, after going to a workers' picket of the Olympic site, Alberto was arrested by police and immigration officials who had waited at the offices of his employer, no doubt with their collusion.

Alberto has papers and cannot be deported, but the brutal reality of the use Border Agency remains. This kind of repression is going to get worse. Alberto is from Colombia. When we spoke to a friend of his outside Peckham police station, where he was being held, a friend of his made the obvious point:

"This is terrible, but in Colombia, if you organise, you get killed."

We need a movement that is courageous in the face of adversity, that sees itself as part of a global class. That is what we mean by "solidarity".

Take action!

Demonstrate at Willis Building every Friday lunchtime.

• **Meet 51 Lime Street, London EC3M 7DQ (Liverpool Street / Bank stations). Call Edwin 07931 464 890 or Alberto 07803 634 319**

• **Campaign Against Immigration Controls meets every other Monday 128 Theobald Road, Transport House, Holborn.**

www.caic.org.uk / 07974331053

• **Stop the Slaughter of Tamils www.stoptheslaughteroftamils.org**

Getting Workers' Liberty wrong

Sean Matgamna continues a series on misunderstandings, misrepresentations and lies about the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

"The AWL are just wreckers! You push stances at odds with the rest of the left just in order to stir things up, to be 'different'. You always want to find differences. Lenin had an expression which he used more than once: so and so, he would say, had become famous 'in the Herostratus fashion'. Herostratus burned down a temple in ancient Greece in order that he should be remembered. That's the AWL! You want to burn down the left!"

The first thing wrong here is that you substitute speculation above motives and subjective drives for discussing politics and political positions. You avoid politics, where our positions and record — our real record, as distinct from our "reputation" among our opponents — are publicly available, can be checked, can be judged on their merits and demerits.

You go for something — our private motives and desires — that can not be known to you and where, indeed, as with all political groupings, different motives and desires, to some extent, will be found among different people holding the same political positions.

And, of course, there is also a smug evasion of our politics on your part. You assume that you need something outside of, beyond, separate from, our political arguments in order to explain why we disagree with you! Isn't your approach apolitical? Isn't all this sort of stuff just apolitical abuse?

"But if someone is as consistently perverse and contrary as AWL, then an observer is driven to seek psychological explanations."

All right, for the sake of argument, let's discuss your abuse. You'd find it hard to show that we are as compulsively "contrary" as you say. In fact, our notorious formal differences of political position with what we call the kitsch-left are all to be found in a number of fairly narrow areas.

The main ones are:

- Ireland;
- Israel-Palestine;
- Our broader concern with racism, to include modern anti-semitism, and specifically what we see as the de facto anti-semitism of the kitsch-left;
- And what we think should be counterposed to the imperialism which we oppose (see *Solidarity* 3/150).

What else? Our "Shachtmanism", and the fact that, though a few AWL people adhere to a "state-capitalist" explanation of Stalinist society, most of us are "bureaucratic collectivists" (see *Solidarity* 3/148).

Of course there are and have been plenty of other differences — arguments within trade unions, or in the student movement; differences about how socialists should relate to the Labour Party. But it is the differences in the areas just mentioned which our opponents tend to decy as "abnormal", as signs of perversity.

In fact, all the notorious differences of political position grow out of rather fundamental differences in our approach to politics.

They stem from our attitude to ideas, our sense of responsibility, our rejection of demagogy and loose sloganising, our idea of the proper relationship of theory and practice.

They flow from our rejection of "Apparatus Marxism", the practice in the kitsch-left organisations of subordinating analysis, political line, and slogans to what will best serve "the party" as an organisation.

The clearest issue to illustrate the difference of approach is that of attitudes to the European Union. Of course we oppose many, many aspects of this bourgeois semi-unification of Europe. But the idea that socialists should oppose the bourgeois semi-unification as such — in the name of "British withdrawal" or the like, i.e. in the name of the old walled-off states — is preposterous.

To oppose the bourgeois semi-unification as such, and not instead focus on working-class unity within it, struggle to democratise it, and so on, is possible only for people who have lost the Marxist plot.

On this issue we were for decades pretty isolated. In 1971 it was the immediate precipitating issue for the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency (forerunner of AWL) from IS (now the SWP).

The sometime kitsch-left slogan on this issue — "No to the EU (or EEC), yes to a Socialist United States of Europe" is a prime example of what we mean by demagogic mindlessness. The socialist united states of Europe is not now, and cannot be until there is a socialist revolution in the key states of Europe, the immediate alternative to the bourgeois semi-unification of Europe. The existing separate bourgeois states are! The old, awful system of economically cramped and competing bourgeois states — out of which in the first half of the 20th century erupted two world wars — is!

Our notorious differences of current political position also connect with our attitude to the history of the Trotskyist movement; our reference to the strain of "heterodox" Trotskyism, as distinct from the "orthodox" Trotskyism elaborated by James P Cannon and others, both of which developed after Trotsky's death. All our main Marxist opponents and critics are rooted in "orthodox" Trotskyism (including the SWP, despite its position on the nature of the Stalinist states: see for example <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/4323>). (AWL too originates in "orthodox" Trotskyism — see *Solidarity* 3/148. But we have tried to learn something since then).

Almost by definition, these real and all-defining differences of method are not the traits, standards, and methods which AWL has commonly attributed to it.

"Explain why your attitudes are so perverse on Ireland and on Israel-Palestine"

They are not "perverse". They are Marxist, Marxist in the sense of Lenin and Trotsky.

In principle, Israel-Palestine and Ireland involve the same question — how do socialists relate to communities or nations which are a minority in their region, whose right to be where they are is questioned, and whose right to assert their own identity is denied?

Nobody uses the expression, but the attitude of the kitsch-left, the attitude we emphatically reject, amounts to the belief that there are "bad peoples" — specifically, Israeli Jews and Northern Ireland Protestant-Unionists. (There are Catholic Unionists and Protestant Irish nationalists, but they are atypical).

Marxism recognises no such thing as a bad people. We look to history to explain both Israel and Northern Ireland Unionists. Where communities and nations exists, we do not say that they must voluntarily abolish themselves, or politically submerge themselves, on pain of being forcibly abolished. They acquire rights by the very fact of existing. Marxist socialists, intent on uniting the working class across the divides, then seek ways of

accommodating different rights.

We seek national/communal compromise, and ways for the working classes in those communities and in rival communities to unite, despite the differences, around such "compromises" and mutual recognition of rights.

In all such cases, the only alternative to that approach is advocacy of, or at least support for, the physical conquest of such peoples as the Israeli Jews and the Northern Ireland Protestant-Unionists, a physical conquest that would inevitably involve a large degree of physical destruction.

The seemingly benign versions of the idea that Israel should go out of existence — "secular democratic state", "bi-national state" — all start with the idea that Israel has no real right to exist, was a "mistake", a crime of history and of "the Zionists"; and go on, from condemnation of Israel for not abolishing itself or agreeing to be replaced by an (Arab) "secular-democratic" or "bi-national" state, to support for its conquest by people who would conquer and dismantle it. Or, immediately, to support for people who will "make a start" in clearing out the Jews with homicide-suicide bombers in Israel's buses and cafes.

Marxists such as Lenin have called themselves "consistent democrats". Consistent and honest democrats, as distinct from the inconsistent and dishonest bourgeois democrats. We believe that minorities such as the Jews (and, for example, the Kurds) in the Middle East, and the Protestant-Irish of north-east Ulster have rights — rights trimmed down and attenuated only by practical possibilities. We reject Arab-Islamic, and Catholic-Irish-nationalist, chauvinism just as we reject Israeli-Jewish and Protestant-Unionist chauvinism.

No "practical" difficulties will prove insurmountable to those fundamentally committed to the politics of peaceful coexistence between communities and nationalities, and to working-class unity on the basis of equality of rights.

"In the first place, we are concerned with rights only for oppressed minorities. In the second place, Israel is like apartheid South Africa. Any 'even-handedness' is out of place."

Your first point is an example of the thoughtlessness and sloppy-mindedness that is typical of so much of the would-be left. Of course, our most active and immediate concern is for those peoples denied rights who are demanding those rights and trying to win them, such as the Palestinians. The question of rights is at its most acute when they are actively resisted and denied. That is not where we differ from the kitsch-left.

But think about it for a moment. When we advocate rights for those denied them, do we advocate that the relation between oppressors and oppressed simply be reversed, turned around, stood on its head? That the oppressed and oppressor change places? That, for instance, the Unionist-British-Irish minority in north-east Ulster, who, when they were able to, when the London government allowed them to, ran an oppressive sectarian state, with the Catholic Six Counties minority as its victim, and whose existence frustrates and denies the conception of "Ireland" cherished by the island's majority, be forced into a united Ireland in which they would be oppressed by the denial of their right to a separate identity?

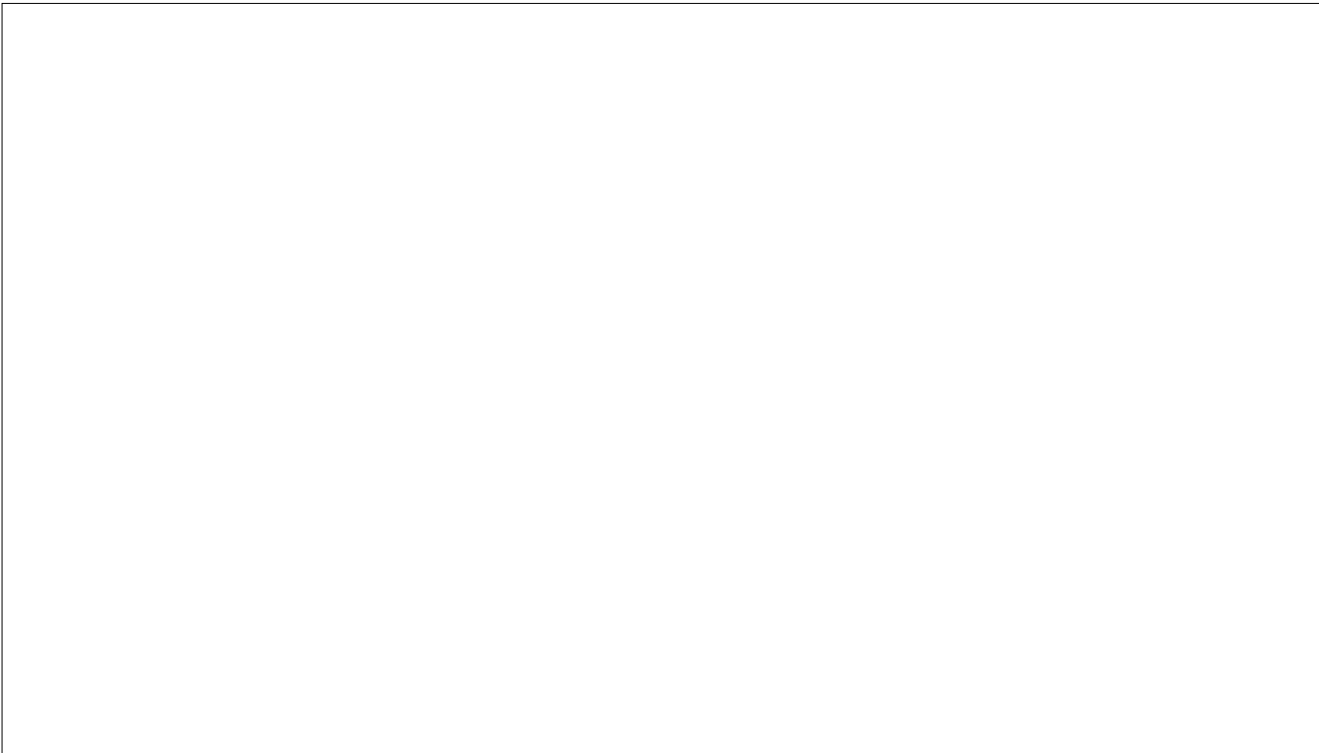
That they should have the place in a united Ireland which the Catholic minority has had in the Six Counties?

And then? We go to the champion the rights of the Protestants? As we champion the rights of the Tamils of Sri Lanka, who, under British rule on the island, were relatively favoured, but now are oppressed?

If not, why not? I assume you will reject the only logical and candid answer: that these "bad" peoples don't have any rights, don't deserve to have any.

And the Israeli Jews? After they had been subjugated in the only way they can be, by conquest, would we champion their rights, their self-determination, against an Arab-ruled regime? Again: if not, and if you are not defining them as a "bad people", undeserving of rights, why not?

Burning the tricolour in Protestant area of Northern Ireland. Such attitudes can only be tackled by politics which promote working-class unity



Top: Jewish militiawoman during the 1948-49 war. The present awful situation for Palestinians was the result of actions by Arab states as well as those of the Jews

Right: Slobodan Milosevic. *Socialist Worker* wound up defending the territorial integrity of the Serbian state.

The idea that we want to reverse the relations between oppressed and oppressor has nothing in common with Marxism, with socialism, or with democratic working-class politics of any sort. In practice, this idea — and it is widespread; implicit in the naive and “obvious” (one-sided, blinkered) posture of the kitsch-left — means that the ostensible Marxists turn themselves into chauvinists of the presently oppressed. They abandon the internationalism and “compromise-ism” without which no Marxist, socialist, or working-class stance is possible in communal and national conflicts.

They reject Lenin’s principle: “We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation”.

Militant “anti-imperialism” here immediately turns into its opposite, into chauvinism — into the “imperialism” of the presently oppressed.

In contrast, our “slogan” is for the working classes to unite and fight — for democratic rights for both “sides”, among other things.

“That is ridiculous. Imperialism is what big powers do. Oppressed nations like the Palestinians cannot become imperialist.”

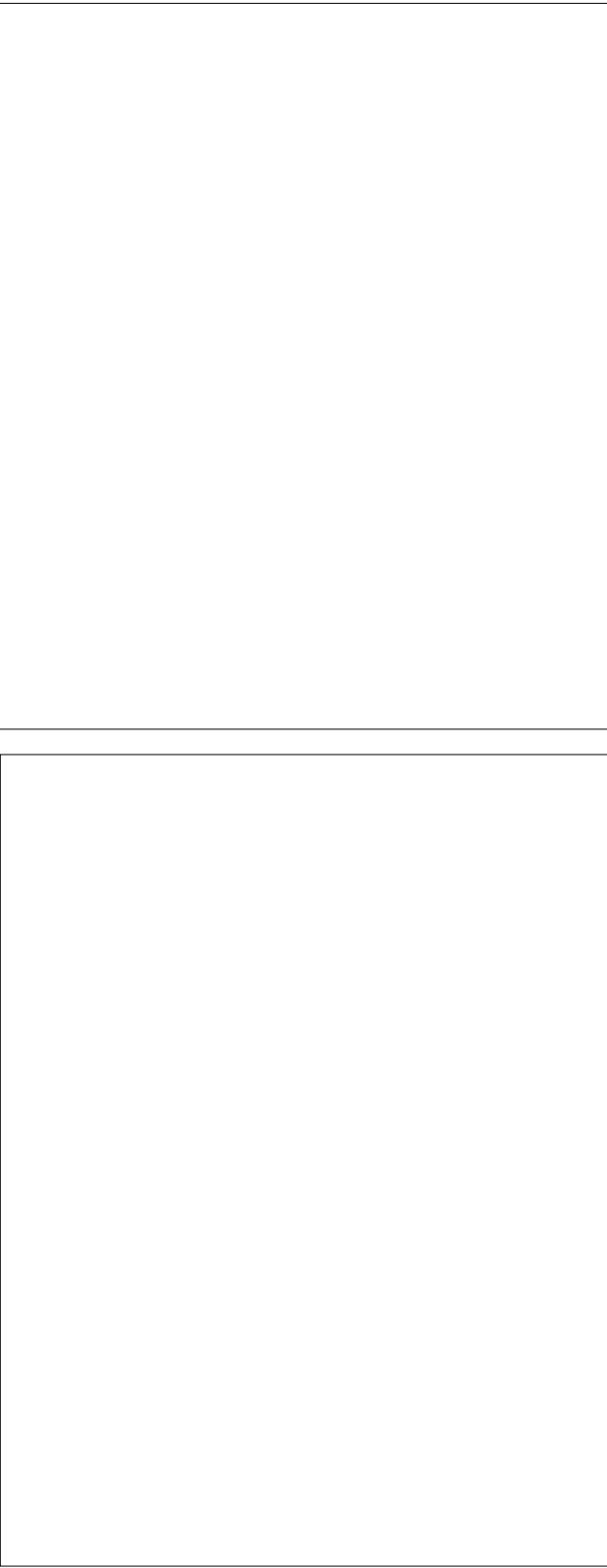
No, “imperialism” is not just the great world-bestridenting imperialism. Marxists such as Trotsky, Lenin, and the early Communist International defined such pre-1939 states at Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia as imperialist because within them there were oppressed minorities — Ukrainians and Jews in Poland; Slovaks and Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia; Croats, Kosovars, and others in Yugoslavia, even though the dominant group in the Yugoslav state, the Serbs, had recently been an oppressed nation. They were absolutely right to do so.

The Trotskyists of Trotsky’s time did not call Stalinist Russia imperialist, for reasons to do with their view that it was still a sort of “degenerated workers’ state”; but they did champion the rights of its oppressed minority nations — Ukraine, for example — to independence.

Your contention here is, I suppose, part of the political derangement of the kitsch-left. It is obsessed, so to speak, by “great power imperialism”, and lets negativism towards that lead it to negativism towards advanced capitalism, in an entirely non-Marxist way that denies the fundament of Marxist socialism — that in history socialism can only come after and out of advanced capitalist society. It is inclined to see an etheral evil spirit of “imperialism” almost everywhere. Yet it has little use for the smaller examples of real, “nitty-gritty”, “hands-on” imperialism. It is a sort of political long-sightedness.

In the last article I mentioned the effective falling-out-of-use of the basic Marxist attitude that we are not concerned with preserving existing state boundaries when they cut across peoples; that the rights of peoples, not states, are primary for us.

A curiosity here is that the UN and the other Establishment “internationals” hold it as an axiom of their functioning that existing states should be preserved as long as their governments want that. The recent backing for Kosova’s independence was a very great exception, coming after a NATO war in 1999



which stopped the Serbian state’s genocidal drive against the Kosovar Albanians.

And, guess what? *Socialist Worker* — under the byline of Alex Callinicos — was there to defend the territorial integrity of the Serbian state and decry the independence of Serbia’s old colony, Kosova, on the grounds that it breached “international legality” and “destabilised” . (www.workersliberty.org/swp-neocon).

“You take refuge in generalities to avoid specifics. Don’t you understand? Israel is like apartheid South Africa!”

Is it? Apartheid South Africa was a rigid system of racial discrimination in which the white minority, as a caste, systematically exploited the labour of black and “coloured” helots. Israel oppresses Arabs in the Occupied Territories, and disadvantages Arabs within its own borders. (In serious part, this is a by-product of the long state of siege by the Arab states of Israel.) But the Israeli Jews do not have such a caste relationship with the Arab population either outside or inside the Israeli state. The Jews are the majority. Israel is not built or sustained on the exploitation of Arab labour.

“The Jews drove out the Arabs in 1948!”

It’s a lot more complicated than that. The plight of the Palestinians does not just arise from what Israel did in 1948.

The UN resolution of November 1947 on the partition of Palestine stipulated two states — one Jewish, one Palestinian. That Palestinian state was destroyed in the war of 1948-9. What happened to the Palestinian territory? Jordan and Egypt seized it (and Israel, a small bit of it).

For the present awful situation in the West Bank to develop, Israel had to take it — but from Jordan, which had annexed it, The point is that the historical fate of the Palestinians was not just a result of Israeli action.

But, for the sake of argument, let us agree to your summary statement. What follows? That the existing Israeli Jewish nation, in 2009, does not have the rights of a nation? That the Israeli working class has no right to a

national identity and national rights? That all rights here belong to the Palestinian Arabs, or to the “refugees”, that is to the descendants of those who were driven out or fled 60 years ago?

The Palestinian Arabs then were not a formed Palestinian nation; their identity was as “Arabs”, largely a common identity with for instance, the Arabs of Syria. Their descendants’ fate has been shaped not only by 1948, and not only by Israel, but also by the refusal of the Arab states, their “champions” against Israel in the UN and at the court of international public opinion, to let them integrate into their “host” states (to allow them to become citizens, or even, in some states, to work). Some of those host states, Lebanon and Jordan, have massacred Palestinians.

The Palestinians have become a distinct nation in large part as a result of their exclusion from the other Arab societies. They have rights. But do they have *all* rights in this situation? Does the other nation, the Jews of Israel, have none?

For how many generations and ages hence will the crimes (real, or, many of them, just alleged) of the founders of Israel — and the crimes of the rulers of the Arab states — deprive the descendants of those founders of national “legitimacy”, and Israel of the right to exist.

You seem to believe in “original sin”. According to the theology of Christianity, the sin of Eve and Adam means that every human child is born in a state of sin. You believe in “national” original sin!

“That is just smart-ass evasion! That is what AWL does best!”

It might be evasion, smart or dumb-ass evasion, if we did not advocate a solution which recognises Palestinian rights — an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. In fact that is the only solution that does not demand the destruction of Israel and therefore push the prospect of relief from oppression for the Palestinians way into the far, far distant future when Israel can be conquered.

If we did not demand that Israel withdraw from the West Bank, if we did not denounce Israeli policy and action towards the Palestinians, if we had not denounced Israeli policy over Gaza this year and Lebanon in 2006, yes, it might be evasion. In fact it isn’t, and it never has been, evasion.

Here you use sleight-of-mind on yourself. We reject your policy — conquer and destroy Israel, deny self-determination to the Hebrew nation — and, you say, “therefore” we “evade” the issue” In fact you “evade” the issue. You and your co-thinkers counterpose a vicarious Arab — and, lately, Islamic — chauvinist wiping-out of Israel to the only realisable democratic solution — two states.

It is AWL that faces up to the realities, and the kitsch-left “absolute anti-Zionists” who evade everything and binge on Arab and Islamic chauvinism. You counterpose to “Two States” a fuckwit’s “anti-imperialism” that identifies Israel as arch-imperialist, and as the USA’s proxy in the area, and makes a political fetish of destroying it!

The truth is that your hostility to Israel has a great deal more strength, verve, and conviction to it than your concern for the Palestinians. There you follow in the tracks of the rulers of the Arab states over the last half-century. But that doesn’t make it any less disgusting.

“We are anti-imperialists!”

Yes. But just as August Bebel’s description of 19th century “anti-capitalist” anti-semitism — “the Jews are the capitalists par excellence”; “rich Jews typify and represent all the rich”; “Jewish capital rules the world” — that it was “the socialism of the fools”, hit that particular nail on the head; so too, “the anti-imperialism of idiots” nails your “anti-imperialism” here. And nonetheless you think it unreasonable of AWL to say that the kitsch-left is de facto anti-semitic!

Think about it. Within my lifetime six million Jews were massacred — two out of every three Jews in Europe. AWL draws concussions from that about Jewish nationalism (Zionism). We do not indulge in the kitsch-left’s peculiar version of “Holocaust denial”, which amounts not to denying that the Holocaust happened, but being hysterically determined to deny it any weight or significance when assessing the history out of which Israel emerged.

“Of course you are unreasonable. We are not racists. The opposite: we condemn Israel’s racist attitude to the Palestinians. And yours too!”

No — we don’t say you are racists. For sure there will be anti-semitic racists who express their racism as fervent “anti-imperialism”, but they are not the representative types of the anti-semitism in the kitsch-left.

You are not racist; yet you are, by the logic of your attitudes, anti-semitic. There are many anti-semitisms in

Continued on page 12

history, stretching back long, long before the emergence of 19th and 20th century racism

The hostility of the kitsch-left to any Jew who maintains an instinctive (even if critical) identification with Israel and “Zionism” has parallels with age-old Christian hostility to any Jew who would refuse to be converted.

“Whatever you say, your confrontationist attitude to the left on this issue is perverse, a form of attention-seeking! Common sense alone would lead you to shut up about it, go with the flow. You enjoy attracting hostility — isn’t that it?”

What is the point of a small group of socialists — essentially, a propaganda group, spreading basic Marxist ideas, explaining the world, trying to develop and teach a coherent independent working-class understanding of events and issues?

Above all it is to discern, define, and tell the truth. We tell the truth as we see it to the working class and the labour movement — and to the ostensible left. Anything else is a waste of time and life.

In a healthy left-wing movement, or in a healthy democratic centralist party — as distinct from the bureaucratic centralism that dominates in, say, the SWP and the SP — the working assumption would be that honest people seeking the same goal, subscribing to the same political tradition, using the same method, can arrive at radically different conclusions, and that therefore progress, clarity, the truth of the situation, can only be established by honest discussion of the issues, free of abuse, demagoguery, misrepresentation, heresy-baiting or bullying of the Stalinist or Zinovievite type.

Each point of view would feel an obligation to engage with the others, honestly assess, and only then, if appropriate, in extreme cases, condemn and denounce.

Not the least advantage of that is that the participants would avoid rendering themselves stupid by way of self-righteous self-approbation and moral apoplexy!

You and your co-thinkers relate to the Jewish-Arab conflict as if the Holocaust was not a major factor in creating mass Zionism and the Israeli state; as if the fact of six million Jews being murdered in the four years after the mid-1941 Nazi invasion of Russia were irrelevant. And we, who refuse to go along with you, are the queer ones here?

“That is one of the main points. AWL is a sterile propaganda group, content just to make propaganda. The SWP, for example, organises people to do things. In that work you have to be guided by what you want to achieve, who you want to influence, whom you must not offend or risk offending”.

It is far from the truth that AWL is only a “big-ideas”-propounding propaganda group! We do work in trade unions. We take part in, and occasionally initiate, demonstrations, and so on. We have, when such things were possible, organised the Labour left.

The delusion that a small group, the size of the SWP, can change things on a large scale by “agitation”, and therefore that in “agitation” you can say whatever gets the response you want or avoids the response you fear — that agitation is not spun out of propaganda and programme, and limited by those basic ideas — that idea is part of the political distemper of the kitsch left.

Lenin destroyed that approach for any serious Marxists back in 1902, in *What Is To Be Done?* — and even then he followed in the footsteps of older Marxists such as Plekhanov and Engels.

Trotsky, facing the armed Great Lie that was Stalinism, summed up the rules for socialists here: “To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one’s programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives”.

“But the scale of Israel’s crimes against the Palestinians makes denunciation of Israel a priority”.

Doesn’t it occur to you that there is something decidedly odd and suspect about the kitsch-left’s overwhelming focus on Israel and Palestine? I write this on the morning of Monday 12 May 2009. The mid-night news last night reported the death of four hundred Tamile, some of them children, at the hands of the Sinhalese army invading Tamil-majority parts of the island of Sri Lanka. Vast numbers have been reported dead in Darfur and in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Where is the mass demonstration of British leftists and pacifists to protest against the massacres of Tamils, or of the people of Darfur, and to back the right of the Tamils to a state of their own where they are the major-

The equation of Israel and apartheid South Africa does not stand up

ity? Who calls for the destruction of the Sinhalese Sri Lankan state?

I agree, of course — and *Solidarity* said as much — that Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians during the Israeli onslaught on the Hamas rulers of Gaza was grotesquely out of scale with Hamas rocket damage to Israel, and outrageous. I agree that there is a very great deal to condemn in Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.

Even so, don’t you think there is something decidedly odd in the embracing by the would-be left of the most extreme Arab and Islamic chauvinist policies against Israel — that it must be forced to abolish itself, or failing that be wiped out?

Is there anything like that for other national and communal conflicts? Does anyone advocate that the many-millioned Tamil state in south India — or the central Indian state on its behalf — should invade Sri Lanka and subject the Sinhalese there to the rule of the Tamils, who count as the big majority if you bracket Sri Lanka together with adjoining south-eastern India? (And why not do so? For a long time the Sri Lanka Trotskyists advocated unity of Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it then was, with India).

Apart from in Northern Ireland, where, in what conflict of nations, communities, septs, do we advocate the equivalent of what the kitsch-left advocates for the Arab-Israeli conflict? Nowhere!

“How about South Africa?”

No proper comparison. But let us look at South Africa. As I have already said, the whites were a distinct, exploitative, ruling caste. That is a truth, and a fundamental truth.

But look at South Africa in the longer perspective. There was a Boer — ex-Dutch — nation in South Africa stretching back to the 17th century. They always exploited some black agricultural labour — slave labour, too. But, over hundreds of years, they developed most, at least, of the characteristics of a nation. They claimed, plausibly, that they were in the area before the Zulus came.

With the development of modern capitalist industry in South Africa, they evolved into a caste on top of a vast helot black and “coloured” population.

We were for the destruction of the rule of South Africa’s white caste, for their subordination in politics to the majority. But if the Boers had maintained some heartland areas, where they were the majority and did not depend on exploited black labour — where there was a Boer working class that was not, or not primarily, part of an exploitative caste — would socialists have demanded the extirpation or submergence of that nation? In the name of what would we do that? In the name of some doctrine holding that all Africa, by geopolitical principle, was and could only be the territory of black-skinned people?

The ethnic tidying-up of the globe would be no part of our concern, still less part of a socialist programme. There is a Jewish, or better perhaps Hebrew, nation in Israel. It is the overwhelming majority there. There is a Hebrew working class and a Hebrew working-class movement.

There is also a segment of foreign “guest workers” who, as in many developed countries in Europe and

America, play an important role doing the less desirable jobs in the economy and society.

Even with the influx of Russian Jews after the collapse of the USSR (1991), native-born Israelis are the majority, some of them the third or fourth generation born there. The big, big majority of those designated Palestinian refugees were not born in post-1948, pre-1967 Israel. As we have seen above, there is a big element of scapegoating in holding Israel alone — and not also the Arab regimes that cynically used them as political pawns — responsible for the plight of the Palestinians.

From what socialist, or seriously democratic, point of view do the Israeli Jews born in Israel have less right there than people born elsewhere in the Middle East? Historical revenge? Some quasi-mystic ethnic rights inhering in the Arabs? A claim that Israel stands on “Islamic” territory?

Of course, the Palestinians have a right to proper, decent lives, and of course resources should be found to facilitate that. Of course a genuine independent Palestinian state should be created, and helped to catch up with Israeli standards of living, and as soon as possible. The Palestinians should have justice.

But beyond that — in any move to deny the Israeli Jews rights as a nation — lies gross injustice to the Jewish nation, and injustice which they will fight to ward off, as any nation would and always will.

The equation of Israel and South Africa does not stand up. It is blatantly untenable if you remove from it the idea that the Hebrew nation can never acquire rights in Palestine, no matter how many generations of them are born in Israel, no matter how much they have transformed the semi-wilderness that was so much of Palestine before Jewish settlement into the present advanced bourgeois-democratic society.

There is, however, a “parallel” between Israel and South Africa that the left would do well to remember. The expanding British empire seized the Cape of South Africa during the Napoleonic wars, and began to put pressure on the Boers.

Starting in 1835, many of the Boers went off inland and founded new states. Eventually British expansion from the Cape caught up with them. The Boer War of 1899-1902 followed.

The Boers fought a heroic guerrilla war. The British, in response, interned large numbers of Boer women and children, “concentrating” them in large camps where many died of fever and dysentery, thus giving the world the phrase “concentration camps”.

Everywhere Britain was disliked. People backed the Boers. So did socialists. There was mass opposition to the war in Britain, including from the Liberals and future Prime Minister Lloyd George.

Britain’s war was denounced by much of the anti-war “movement” as “a Jewish war” — a war for the interests of “Jewish financiers” and on behalf of Jewish settlers in South Africa. Though it is now half-forgotten, that was a large component of the case against the war made in Britain — and perhaps elsewhere: I don’t know — by the anti-war campaign, and it was a big, vigorous, raucous campaign.

The Boer republics had denied equal political rights to new settlers, and that fact was used as an ideological weapon to justify Britain’s war. What settlers? “Jews”, said much of the anti-war movement. (Including some leaders of the British Marxist organisation, the SDF, Henry Hyndman and Harry Quelch. Hyndman’s use of anti-semitism in anti-war agitation was part of the bill of indictment which the British followers of Daniel De Leon, who split from the SDF in 1903 to form the Socialist Labour Party, drew up against him. Hyndman was far from being alone in the SDF on that).

Such people as the Liberal J A Hobson, on whose study of imperialism Lenin would draw during World War One, also denounced the war as one for Jewish settlers and for international Jewish finance.

The “Jewish settlers” were the “Israelis” in the war; “international Jewish finance” was the world Jewish (or, today, “Zionist”) conspiracy or quasi-conspiracy; and Britain was what the USA is today, the chief backer of “the Jews”. The campaign against the “Jewish settlers” and Britain was a campaign on behalf of the Boers — who were the foulest anti-black racists.

No, I don’t think it was wrong to oppose the Boer war, any more than deploring the politics of the anti-war movement in 2002-3 made me think it wrong to oppose the invasion of Iraq. But serious socialists try to learn from history — not to relive past errors, as the “absolute anti-Zionists” now are doing.

At the beginning of the 20th century, those who fulminated against “the Jews” had no inkling that they were feeding a fire that would engulf two-thirds of Europe’s Jews. The kitsch left today operates in full knowledge of the Holocaust.

BOOK

Hope and its discontents

Martyn Hudson reviews *Unforgiving Years* by Victor Serge (New York Review of Books, 2008)

Richard Greeman's translation of Serge's final novel is yet another blow struck against Stalinist despotism and for the recovery of an authentic socialist tradition from the 'midnight in the century' of totalitarianism.

This project is part of what Vasily Grossman called the 'radiant dossier' that would emerge from the debris of NKVD archives that one day would be opened. Its so fitting that the experience of working-class defeat documented in Serge's novel comes to us in this historical moment when the vestiges of Stalinism (or what Serge calls the 'ruling psychoses' of dictatorship) and liberatory socialism are still in confrontation on the British left.

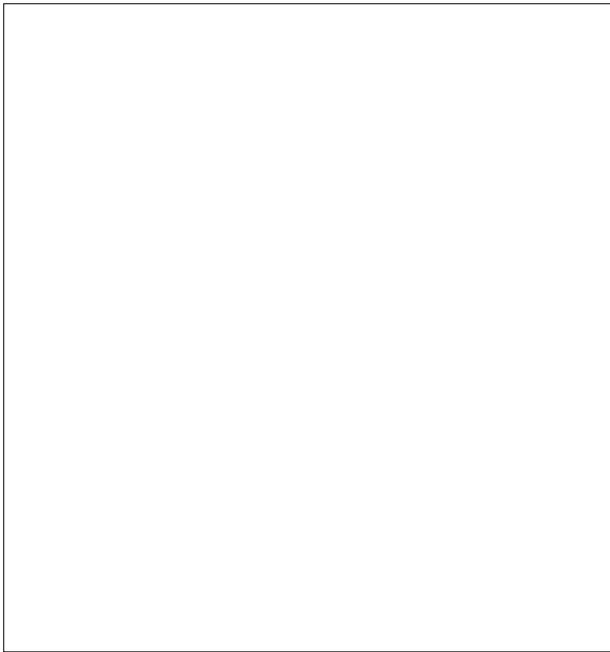
Serge was imprisoned for his anarchist activities in Belgium; was involved in the abortive Spanish revolution; made his way to Russia and fought for the Bolsheviks; became a Comintern agent in Germany; joined the Left Opposition; was imprisoned and exiled by Stalin and then, surviving those experiences, finally made it to Mexico after the collapse of France to the Nazis.

His individualistic and idiosyncratic understanding of socialism aside, he was a hugely important witness to the destruction of the individual conscience by despotism and was one of the first generation to understand that the USSR was a new form of society — a form of bureaucratic collectivism.

Recent work by Suzie Weissman and by the translator of this novel, Richard Greeman, have pointed to the unparalleled significance of Serge — not only for where he was situated geographically and historically — at Kronstadt, in the camps, in the frenzy of revolution, with Trotsky and Natalya Sedova in Mexico — but also because his conscience and his spirit were so untainted by despotism and he remained till the end of his life full of hope for the future.

As he wrote in his memoirs at the end of his life: "I have undergone a little over 10 years of various forms of captivity, agitated in seven countries, and written 20 books. I own nothing. On several occasions a press with a vast circulation has hurled filth at me because I spoke the truth. Behind us lies a victorious revolution gone astray, several abortive attempts at revolution, and massacres in so great a number as to inspire a certain dizziness. And to think that is not over yet. Let me be done with this digression; those were the only roads possible for us. I have more confidence in mankind and the future than ever before."

His novels documented a series of revolutions from *Birth of our Power* (Spain) to *Conquered City* (Red Petrograd), but they also developed the idea of the counter-revolution of the soul that he saw developing with the embryonic emergence of stalinism. He was opposed to the formation of the Cheka and to the banning of parties under Bolshevism. He took part in the suppression of Kronstadt, but also argued that it was one of the worst consequences of the revolution and could have been avoided. On this he was taken to task by Trotsky later; but it is clear, particularly with the work by Ida Mett and Paul Avrich on Kronstadt, that



Victor Serge

the uncritical acceptance of the Trotskyist Left Opposition of the validity of the suppression was a step too far — addressing "error through terror" as Serge would have it.

It was the clear-sighted recognition from within the camps of the nature of Stalinism (through debates with imprisoned left communists, workers and left oppositionists) that led to many of his disagreements with ortho-Trotskyism after his release; but it was also clear, as Natalya Sedova recognised after Trotsky's death, that Serge was correct in his third camp assessment of the USSR, long before significant events like the invasion of Finland.

His two major novels on stalinism — *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* and *Midnight in the Century* — are perhaps the two most significant fictional understandings of totalitarianism, matched only by the later work of Vasily Grossman himself in *Life and Fate* and by outside observers such as Orwell, with whom he has many affinities.

Only through the resurrection of our massacred dead can we finally overcome the legacies of Stalinism and particularly to overcome the kinds of fatal infections leading to the politics of hatred and terror — "The end justifies the means, what a swindle. No end can be achieved by anything but appropriate means. If we trample on the man of today, will we do anything worthwhile for the man of tomorrow? And what will we do to ourselves?"

There has been some controversy over Serge's political development and it is why his later novels such as *Unforgiving Years* are so important to the socialist movement now. What is striking about this recently translated text is its tone of darkness — out of all of his novels, as Greeman writes, it is "the most bitter, the most cerebral, and the most poetic". It is constructed around four sections and each section is based on the experiences of two operatives, Daria and D. The first is based around

the defection of a lifelong communist to the left oppositionist camp and immediately it becomes clear that this fictional case study has a resonance with the history of both Walter Krivitsky and Ignace Reiss.

The second part is based within Leningrad during the advance of the Nazis, and documents both the siege and the role of ordinary workers in surviving and hoping.

The third section is set in Nazi Germany during its experience of annihilation and tells of the experience of a dissident Soviet agent uncovering the horror of that victory/defeat for ordinary people.

The final section witnesses the escape of the central character "new world" of Mexico where the physical Europe of totalitarianism is left behind in a way that its ideological legacy and heritage is not — importantly Serge notes that "it is surely fugitives, rather than conquerors, who led the way to new worlds".

It was as a fugitive that Serge died in the end, like his mentor Trotsky, and it is as fugitives from Stalinism that Daria and D come to understand the inner workings of authoritarianism.

The understanding of the distortions of Stalinism and what it does to its operatives is a key to the book — "D believed in secrets, ciphers, stratagems, silence, masks, and in playing the game impeccably". Until he had to flee as all liberated minds had to in the "midnight".

The novel wavers on the brink of despair, but only because paradoxically for a socialist humanist, many of its themes work on biological, geological and evolutionary analogies in highly abstract ways — making this a truly great piece of art as well as a political document. Still within the horrors of the Lubyanka there is hope and an unsullied revolutionary tradition which will survive the slanders and the massacres.

"Capital of Torture! The microphotography labs, the special training schools, the dungeons of the secret prison vibrating with the subway trains, the cryptography departments, the central Power. The place of execution, a solidly reinforced cellar no doubt, thoroughly hosed down, rationalized, into which so many men have descended, suddenly realizing the annihilation of everything: faith, reason, life's work, life... the red flags... The red flags, the first raw shoots of socialist humanism that no amount of dust, filth, and blood could besmirch entirely".

An exile, a political exile and an exile in the realm of ideas and literature, Serge was a constant outsider. Having intervened in so many revolutions, he is paradoxically our best internal critic of the kinds of germs which can lead to dictatorship. As an exile and as a critic he never, however, abdicated hope and a commitment to the socialist future.

"What border", as he says in this truly great book, "would not dissolve before the mere presence of a superior humanity." And only in that unsullied onslaught against the border of the earth and those divide our consciences against one another can Serge's legacy be understood.

A story of imperialists

Rosalind Robson reviews Radio 4's dramatisation of J G Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (Sundays 3pm)

Ivery much enjoy historical novels but JG Farrell's Booker Prize winning book (part of a trilogy about the British Empire) had until now, escaped my notice. This story, one episode in, was so cracking I went straight to Amazon to get my copy.

Set in a fictional garrison town, events are loosely based on the 1857 rebellion against the British East India Company by sepoys (Indian soldiers). In the first episode the rebellion begins and the British residents

come under siege. The story will be about what happens to a motely crew of civil servants, business men, and their female relatives — the sons and daughters of the Victorian bourgeoisie — as they come under pressure from the people they so carelessly and often brutally rule.

The many aspects of Victorian culture that are portrayed here come at you thick and fast (maybe the result of the condensing of the novel). But, as I say, I enjoy historical detail in the fictional context and this was no exception — the story covers the Great Exhibition, phrenology, the siege of Sebastopol, opium eating and much more.

This is not a story of the structures of Empire so much as an examination of the ideas and characters of the imperialists. One theme is the meaning of capitalist civilisation at the time, with its emphasis on machines and materialism; it is abhorred by Mr George Fleury (a "poetic type", a throwback to an earlier, Romantic era). Pity then that Mr Fleury is such a inarticulate weakling. Another theme is the contrasts between the different female characters. Two women so far are in their different ways the "new women" of mid-19th century Europe. They have minds of their own — a shocking thing at the time.

A great story. Catch it if you can.

PAKISTAN

“Unite those opposing both Taliban and military”

By FAROOQ AHMAD, LABOR PARTY PAKISTAN

The Swat situation is complicated. Both sides, the religious fanatics and the government are trying different tactics and are not sure which one will work. The prices for their blunders is paid by ordinary people of the area.

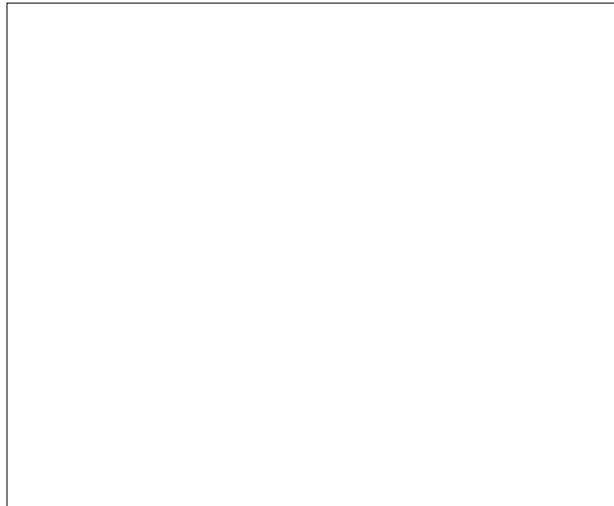
The Taliban settled in Swat long ago and were integrated in the area. Between 1994-95, there was a religious movement of Tehreek-e Nafaz-e Shariat-e Mohammdi (TNSM), led by Maulana Sufi Mohammed for the implementation of “Islam”. But the government and the Sufi Mohammed compromised.

When the US attacked Afghanistan over 15,000 fundamentalists and followers of Sufi Mohammed went to Afghanistan for jihad. After the defeat of the Taliban local people were angry with Sufi Mohammed. The local people wanted to ask him why he had taken their sons to Afghanistan without their permission and many had lost lives during the Afghan adventure. He was arrested by the government to save him from people’s anger.

Until 2006, the LPP had good progressive forces in the area. Some of the main leaders of the Awami National Party (a secular Pashtun party in the area) joined the LPP. Later most of the ANP leaders of the area were either killed or they left the area to save their lives.

But in 2008 general elections, in Swat, Boner, Dir and Chitral, no religious person was elected. (The LPP boycotted the general elections of 2008 on the appeal of the lawyers’ movement).

So this whole area had many political ups and downs. Fundamentalists have spread in the area within the last three years, and particularly after the general election of 2008, because they were organised and armed. They had resources and were using fascist tactics. The ANP and PPP went along with the fundamentalists after the general elections, and released Sufi Mohammed. That strengthened the fanatics. The failure of the main political parties to mobilise people



Taliban in the Swat region

against the fundamentalists paved the way for their growth.

There are three main groups among the Taliban. And the ISI [Pakistani intelligence agency] and the CIA have their own groups among the Taliban. There are many incidents in Swat where truckloads of arms were captured by police and then army personnel let it go. Some sections of the Taliban were supported by some sections of the army.

Taliban activities have had devastating and shocking effect on the lives of the peoples in the area. Women are worst hit. The flogging of one woman shown to the media is just one incident — this has become a norm under the Taliban.

On LPP comrade told us that he was travelling with his seven year old daughter. The Taliban stopped them and asked “Why no veil for your daughter?”

The Jamaat-i Islami supports the Taliban and are the agents of Taliban in the cities. Because of Taliban control, the Swat economy is ruined. The factories are

closed.

The Taliban movement is a fascist movement, not a religious one. They are eliminating their opponents. I know some Taliban who do not pray or go to religious preaching.

Amn Committees, or Defence Committees, cannot be done now, it is too late. But there is no other solution but to arm the people. Although we have to see how in Afghanistan those who were armed to fight the Taliban themselves became armed groups and war-lords.

In Rustam, my small town in Murdan district, the Taliban came on motor bikes. They contacted the criminals, asked them to come to the mosque. They had a cheque book and said that money was no problem. All tactics are used by them.

There is no military solution of this issue, either from the army or the Taliban — neither are trusted by people.

Now, the Taliban are fighting a guerrilla war and we must oppose it and fight against it. There are some leftists who says let the Taliban be killed by the Americans and the army. This attitude must be opposed. The situation of Afghanistan is the best example of why. The military operation has resulted in the devastating effect of the displacement of hundreds of thousands.

People will fight back if mass mobilisation is the main strategy. We have to build an alternative. We have to unite all the forces opposing Taliban and also those who oppose the military solution. The labour movement has to play a role, mainly in the Punjab. Many displaced people are coming to Murdan. We have to help them.

• www.laborpakistan.org

IRAQ

Workers’ action continues

According to US Labor Against the War, the revival of Iraq’s labour movement first marked by the protests on government workers’ pay in August 2008 is continuing.

Basra’s oil pipeline workers, who had been staging occupations of the facilities since April 27 to demand back pay, scored a victory in early May as the Baghdad administration agreed to meet with their leaders and negotiate a payment schedule. The administration capitulated after the workers threatened to shut down the pipeline and call a general strike. Union leader Faisal Hamdan told management the workers were prepared to immediately shut down all exports from Basra’s harbour.

Electricity workers in Nasiriyah have been holding daily public mobilisations demanding the status of “permanent employees” rather than “contractors”. Ahmad Salim of the Federation of Worker Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), says: “This demonstration is a pressure on the authorities, to oblige them to answer the workers’ demands.”

The recent international labour conference organised by Iraqi unions and held in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, called for international protests to support Iraqi workers’ demand for a democratic labour law - something promised by the Iraqi government, which nevertheless keeps Saddam-era laws on the books. Solidarity is also needed for the Iraqi Teachers’ Union, facing a government attempt to oust its elected leadership. Watch this space for protest plans.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Obama signals drive for a deal

By JOHN NIHIL

So long as the Jewish and Arab workers in the Middle East remain subordinate to the forces of Israeli and Arab (or Islamic) chauvinism — as they are now — the only hope for Palestinian progress towards their own state is from intervention on their behalf from outside governments.

Of those, the USA is the decisive one.

The US government has the power to force Israel out of the West Bank and to insist that Israel accept the creation of an independent Palestinian state — of the Palestinian state stipulated in the November 1947 UN resolution that authorised the setting-up of Israel. (That state was crushed before it could come into existence, its territory annexed by Jordan, Egypt, and, very much the runner-up, Israel. It would be twenty years before Israel came to control the Palestinian territories annexed by Jordan and Egypt, after the 1967 war).

The question is whether or not the new US government will exert enough pressure on Israel. It is now six years since the Americans, the United Nations, Russia, and the European Union adopted the ill-fated “road map” for Middle East peace. The core of it was that the Arab state would recognise Israel in return for Israeli agreement to withdraw from the Occupied Territories and to facilitate the creation of an independent Palestinian state, in contiguous territory, alongside Israel.

The sentiments were good, the objectives rational and in broad terms the only way to accommodate the just demands of both the Palestinians and Israel. The “roadmap” came to be a dead letter for lack of insistence by the USA and the others that the oppression of the Palestinians by Israel could not be allowed to continue,

Now the Obama administration has committed itself to secure a Middle East settlement on the basis of “two states”.

Simultaneously, the right-wing Netanyahu government which has assumed power in Israel has withdrawn even the verbal — and hypocritical — previous Israeli commitment to a Palestinian state. However, if the US government is determined to see it through, then a Palestinian state can be set up.

The US government is signalling heavily that it is “serious” about it. For sure, it is in the long-term interests of the USA and the other great powers to reach a settlement.

Socialists will maintain our own independent stance and perspective. We can never rely on US diplomacy, or give it credit in advance. But socialists should hope that the US administration is indeed serious about pressing for “two states”. In the calculable future, with anything like the current disposition of forces, there is no other road to serious alleviation of the situation of the Palestinian people.

MARXIST ECONOMISTS ON THE CRISIS: ROBERT BRENNER

“The economy in a world of trouble”

In an interview first published in a Korean newspaper, Robert Brenner* argues that “the basic source of today’s crisis is the declining vitality of the advanced economies since 1973 [due to]... a persistent tendency to overcapacity in global manufacturing industries”. This is the first part of the interview. The next part will appear in our next issue.

Songjin Jeong: Most media and analysts label the current crisis as a “financial crisis.” Do you agree with this characterization?

Robert Brenner: It’s understandable that analysts of the crisis have made the meltdown in banking and the securities markets their point of departure. But the difficulty is that they have not gone any deeper.

From Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Fed Chair Ben Bernanke on down, they argue that the crisis can be explained simply in terms of problems in the financial sector. At the same time, they assert that the underlying real economy is strong, the so-called fundamentals in good shape. This could not be more misleading.

The basic source of today’s crisis is the declining vitality of the advanced economies since 1973, and, especially, since 2000. Economic performance in the United States, western Europe, and Japan has steadily deteriorated, business cycle by business cycle in terms of every standard macroeconomic indicator — GDP, investment, real wages and so forth. Most telling, the business cycle that just ended, from 2001 through 2007, was — by far — the weakest of the postwar period, and this despite the greatest government-sponsored economic stimulus in U.S. peacetime history.

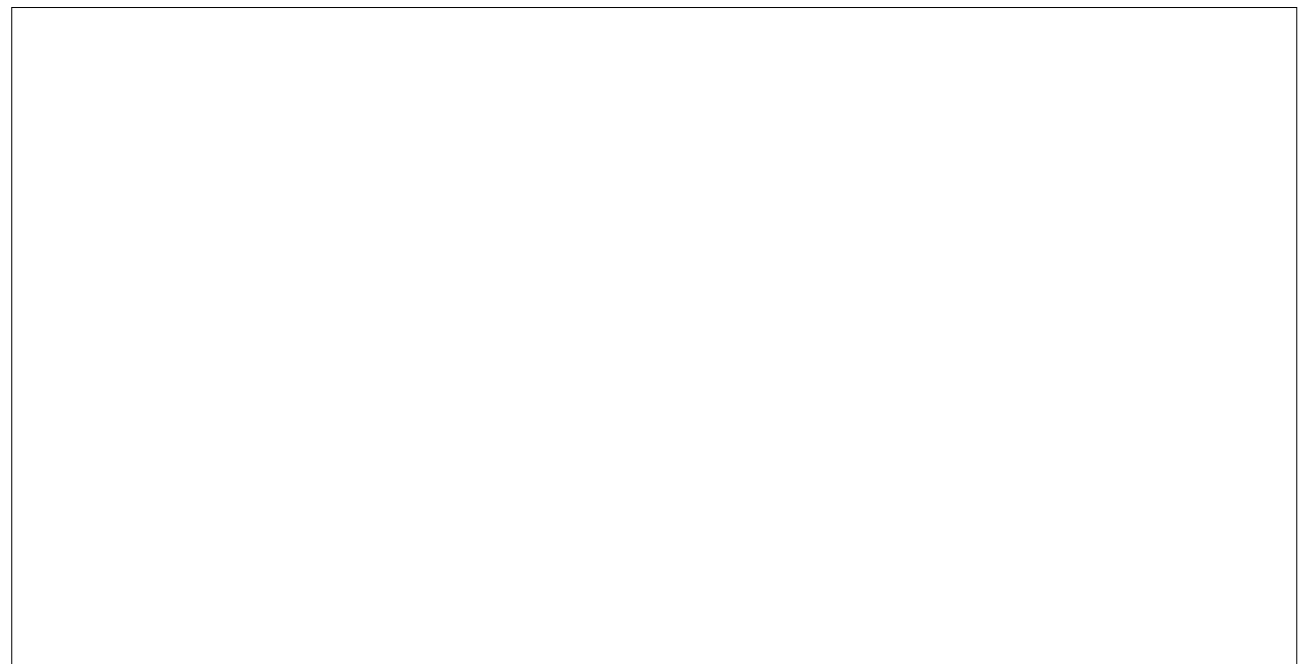
SJ: How would you explain the long-term weakening of the real economy since 1973, what you call in your work “the long downturn”?

RB: What mainly accounts for it is a deep, and lasting, decline of the rate of return on capital investment since the end of the 1960s. The failure of the rate of profit to recover is all the more remarkable, in view of the huge drop-off in the growth of real wages, over the period.

The main cause, though not the only cause, of the decline in the rate of profit has been a persistent tendency to overcapacity in global manufacturing industries. What happened was that one after another new manufacturing power entered the world market — Germany and Japan, the northeast Asian Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs), the southeast Asian Tigers, and, finally the Chinese Leviathan.

These later-developing economies produced the same goods that were already being produced by the earlier developers, only cheaper. The result was too much supply compared to demand in one industry after another, and this forced down prices and in that way profits. The corporations that experienced the squeeze on their profits, moreover, did not meekly leave their industries; they tried to hold their place by falling back on their capacity for innovation and speeding up investment in new technologies. But of course this only made overcapacity worse.

Due to the fall in their rate of return, capitalists were getting smaller surpluses from their investments. They therefore had no choice but to slow down the growth of plant and equipment and employment. At the same time, in order to restore profitability, they held down employees’ pay, while governments reduced the growth



US GDP growth from 2001-2007 was by far the slowest of the postwar epoch

of social expenditures.

But the consequence of all these cutbacks in spending has been a long-term problem of aggregate demand. The persistent weakness of aggregate demand has been the immediate source of the economy’s long-term weakness.

SJ: The crisis was actually triggered by the bursting of the historic housing bubble, which had been expanding for a full decade. What is your view of its significance?

RB: The housing bubble needs to be understood in relation to the succession of asset price bubbles that the economy has experienced since the middle 1990s, and especially the role of the US Federal Reserve in nurturing those bubbles.

Since the start of the long downturn, state economic authorities have tried to cope with the problem of insufficient demand by encouraging the increase of borrowing, both public and private. At first they turned to state budget deficits, and in this way they did avoid really deep recessions. But as time went on, governments could get ever less growth from the same amount of borrowing. In effect, in order to stave off the sort of profound crises that historically have plagued the capitalist system, they had to accept a slide toward stagnation.

During the early 1990s, governments in the United States and Europe, led by the Clinton administration, famously tried to break their addiction to debt by moving together toward balanced budgets. The idea was to let the free market govern the economy. But because profitability had still not recovered, the reduction in deficits delivered a big shock to demand, and helped bring about the recessions and slow growth between 1991 and 1995.

To get the economy expanding again, US authorities ended up adopting an approach that had been pioneered by Japan during the later 1980s. By keeping interest rates low, the Federal Reserve made it easy to borrow so as to encourage investment in financial assets. As asset prices soared, corporations and households experienced huge increases in their wealth, at least on paper. They were therefore able to borrow on a titanic scale, vastly increase their investment and consumption, and in that way drive the economy.

So, private deficits replaced public ones. What might be called “asset price Keynesianism” replaced traditional Keynesianism. We have therefore witnessed for the last dozen years or so the extraordinary spectacle of a world economy in which the continuation of capital accumulation has come literally to depend upon historic waves of speculation, carefully nurtured and rationalized by state policy makers — and regulators! — first the historic stock market bubble of the later 1990s, then the housing and credit market bubbles from the early 2000s.

SJ: You were prophetic in forecasting the current crisis as well as the 2001 recession. What is your outlook for the global economy? Will it worsen, or will it recover before the end of 2009? Do you expect that the current crisis will be as severe as the Great Depression?

RB: The current crisis is more serious than the worst previous recession of the postwar period, between 1979 and 1982, and could conceivably come to rival the Great Depression, though there is no way of really knowing. Economic forecasters have underestimated how bad it is because they have overestimated the strength of the real economy and failed to take into account the extent of its dependence upon a buildup of debt that relied on asset price bubbles.

In the United States, during the recent business cycle of the years 2001-2007, GDP growth was by far the slowest of the postwar epoch. There was no increase in private sector employment. The increase in plant and equipment was about a third off the previous postwar low. Real wages were basically flat. There was no increase in median family income for the first time since World War Two. Economic growth was driven entirely by personal consumption and residential investment, made possible by easy credit and rising house prices.

Economic performance was this weak, despite the enormous stimulus from the housing bubble and the Bush administration’s huge federal deficits. Housing by itself accounted for almost one-third of the growth of GDP and close to half of the increase in employment in the years 2001-2005. It was therefore to be expected that when the housing bubble burst, consumption and residential investment would fall, and the economy would plunge.

SJ: Many assert that the current crisis is a typical financial crisis, not a “Marxian” one of overproduction and falling profit, arguing that the financial speculation-bubble-bust has played the central role in this crisis. How would you respond?

RB: I don’t think it’s helpful to counterpose in that way the real and financial aspects of the crisis. As I emphasised, it is a Marxian crisis in that it finds its roots in a longterm fall and failure to recover the rate of profit, which is the fundamental source of the extended slowdown of capital accumulation right into the present. In 2001, the rate of profit for US non-financial corporations was the lowest of the postwar period, except for 1980. Corporations therefore had no choice but to hold back on investment and employment, further darkening the business climate.

This is what accounts for the ultra-slow growth during

Continued on page 16

* Robert Brenner, author of *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, was interviewed by Seongjin Jeong for *Hankyoreh*, Korea’s leading daily newspaper. This interview was published in Korea on 22 January 2009 and is reproduced here (with permission) in the slightly edited version printed in the US socialist journal *Against The Current*, March-April 2009. For interviews with other Marxist economists on the current crisis, www.workersliberty.org/marxists-crisis. For a critical discussion of *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, www.workersliberty.org/brenner

the business cycle that just ended. Nevertheless, to understand the current collapse, you have to demonstrate the connection between the weakness of the real economy and the financial meltdown. The main link is the economy's ever-increasing dependence on borrowing to keep it turning over, and the government's ever greater reliance on asset price run-ups to allow that borrowing to continue.

The basic condition for the housing and credit market bubbles was the perpetuation of low costs of borrowing. The weakness of the world economy, especially after the crises of 1997-1998 and 2001-2002, plus East Asian governments' huge purchases of dollars to keep their currencies down and US consumption growing, made for unusually low long-term interest rates. At the same time, the US Fed kept short-term interest rates lower than at any time since the 1950s. Because they could borrow so cheaply, banks were willing to extend loans to speculators, whose investments drove the price of assets of every type ever higher and the return on lending (interest rates on bonds) ever lower.

Symptomatically, housing prices soared and the yield in real terms on US treasury bonds plunged. But because yields fell ever lower, institutions the world over that depended on returns from lending had an ever more difficult time making sufficient profits. Pension funds and insurance companies were particularly hard hit, but hedge funds and investment banks were also affected.

These institutions were therefore all too ready to make massive investments in securities backed by highly dubious sub-prime mortgage, because of the unusually high returns they offered, ignoring their unusually high risk. In fact, they could not get enough of them. Their purchases of mortgage-backed securities allowed mortgage originators to keep lending to ever less qualified borrowers. The housing bubble reached historic proportions, and the economic expansion was allowed to continue.

Of course, this could not go on for very long. When housing prices fell, the real economy went into recession and the financial sector experienced a meltdown, because both had depended for their dynamism on the housing bubble. Today, the recession is making the meltdown worse because it is exacerbating the housing crisis. The meltdown is intensifying the recession because it is making access to credit so difficult. It is the mutually reinforcing interaction between the crises in the real economy and financial sector that has made the downward slide so intractable for policymakers, and the potential for catastrophe so evident.

SJ: Even if one grants that postwar capitalism entered a period of long downturn in the 1970s, it seems undeniable that the neo-liberal capitalist offensive has prevented the worsening of the downswing since the 1980s.

RB: If you mean by neoliberalism the turn to finance and deregulation, I do not see how it helped the economy. But if you mean the stepped-up assault by employers and governments on workers' wages, working conditions, and the welfare state, there can be little doubt that it prevented the fall in the rate of profit from getting worse.

Even so, the employers' offensive did not wait until the so-called neoliberal era of the 1980s. It began in the wake of the fall of profitability, starting in the early 1970s, along with Keynesianism. Moreover, it did not result in a recovery of the rate of profit, and only further exacerbated the problem of aggregate demand. The weakening of aggregate demand ultimately impelled economic authorities to turn to more powerful and dangerous forms of economic stimulus, the "asset price

Keynesianism" that led to the current disaster.

SJ: Some have argued that a new paradigm of "financialisation" or "finance-led capitalism" has sustained a so-called "Capital Resurgent" (Gerard Dumenil) between the 1980s and the present. What do you think of such a thesis?

RB: The idea of a finance led-capitalism is a contradiction in terms, because, speaking generally — there are significant exceptions, like consumer lending — sustained financial profit-making depends on sustained profit-making in the real economy. To respond to the fall in the rate of profit in the real economy, some governments, led by the United States, encouraged a turn to finance by deregulating the financial sector. But because the real economy continued to languish, the main result of deregulation was to intensify competition in the financial sector, which made profit making more difficult and encouraged ever greater speculation and risk taking.

Leading executives in investment banks and hedge funds were able to make fabulous fortunes, because their salaries depended on short-run profits. They were able to secure temporarily high returns by expanding their firms' assets/lending and increasing risk. But this way of doing business, sooner or later, came at the expense of the executives own corporations' long-term financial health, most spectacularly leading to the fall of Wall Street's leading investment banks.

Every so-called financial expansion since the 1970s very quickly ended in a disastrous financial crisis and required a massive bailout by the state. This was true of the third-world lending boom of the 1970s and early 1980s; the savings and loan run-up, the leveraged buy-out mania, and the commercial real estate bubble of the 1980s; the stock market bubble of the second half of the 1990s; and of course the housing and credit market bubbles of the 2000s. The financial sector appeared dynamic only because governments were prepared to go to any lengths to support it.

SJ: Keynesianism or statism seems poised to return as the new Zeitgeist. What is your general assessment of resurgent Keynesianism or statism? Can it help to resolve, or at least, alleviate the current crisis?

RB: Governments today really have no choice but to turn to Keynesianism and the state to try to save the economy. After all, the free market has shown itself totally incapable of preventing or coping with economic catastrophe, let alone securing stability and growth. That's why the world's political elites, who only yesterday were celebrating deregulated financial markets, are suddenly now all Keynesians.

But there is reason to doubt that Keynesianism, in the sense of huge government deficits and easy credit to pump up demand, can have the impact that many expect. After all, during the past seven years, thanks to the borrowing and spending encouraged by the Federal Reserve's housing bubble and the Bush administration's budget deficits, we witnessed in effect probably the greatest Keynesian economic stimulus in peacetime history. Yet we got the weakest business cycle in the post-war epoch.

Today the challenge is much greater. As the housing bubble collapses and credit becomes harder to come by, households are cutting back on the consumption and residential investment. As a consequence, corporations are experiencing falling profits. They are therefore cutting back on wages and laying off workers at a rapid pace, detonating a downward spiral of declining demand and declining profitability.

Households had long counted on rising house prices

to enable them to borrow more and to do their saving for them. But now, because of the buildup of debt, they will have to reduce borrowing and increase saving at the very time that the economy most needs them to consume. We can expect that much of the money that the government places in the hands of households will be saved, not spent. Since Keynesianism could barely move the economy during the expansion, what can we expect from it in the worst recession since the 1930s?

To have a significant effect on the economy, the Obama administration will likely have to contemplate a huge wave of direct or indirect government investment, in effect a form of state capitalism. To actually accomplish this however would require overcoming enormous political and economic obstacles.

The US political culture is enormously hostile to state enterprise. At the same time, the level of expenditure and state indebtedness that would be required could threaten the dollar. Until now, East Asian governments have been happy to fund US external and government deficits, in order to sustain US consumption and their own exports. But with the crisis overtaking even China, these governments may lose the capacity to finance US deficits, especially as they grow to unprecedented size. The truly terrifying prospect of a run on the dollar looms in the background.

SJ: What is your general assessment of the victory of Obama in the last Presidential election? Many regard Obama as a FDR of the 21st century who will bring a "new New Deal." Do you think the anti-capitalist progressives can give critical support to some of his policies?

RB: The triumph of Obama in the election is to be welcomed. A victory for McCain would have been a victory for the Republican Party and given an enormous boost to the most reactionary forces on the U.S. political scene. It would have been seen as an endorsement of the Bush administration's hyper-militarism and imperialism, as well as its explicit agenda of eliminating what is left of unions, the welfare state, and environmental protection.

That said, Obama is, like Roosevelt, a centrist Democrat who cannot be expected on his own to do much to defend the interests of the vast majority of working people, who will be subjected to an accelerating assault from corporations trying to make up for their collapsing profits by reducing employment, compensation, and so forth.

Obama's backed the titanic bailout of the financial sector, which represents perhaps the greatest robbery of the US taxpayer in American history, especially as it came with no strings attached for the banks. He also supported the bailout of the auto industry, even though it is conditional on massive cuts in the compensation of auto workers.

The bottom line is that, like Roosevelt, Obama can be expected to take decisive action in defence of working people only if he is pushed by way of organized direct action from below. The Roosevelt administration passed the main progressive legislation of the New Deal, including the Wagner Act and the Social Security, only after it was pressured to do so by a great wave of mass strikes. We can expect the same from Obama.

WHERE WE STAND

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists' relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.

Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses.

Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

We stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
- Open borders.

- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.

- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.

- Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.

- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

LABOUR AND THE UNIONS

Why we should not back CWU disaffiliation

In a discussion article, Sean Matgamna considers the implications of the economic crisis for perspectives in the labour movement.

The world economic crisis, which already is devastating economies, causing mass unemployment, widespread bankruptcy and business failures, and crises of government finance, is in its early stages yet. How deep, how prolonged, how destructive it will be, nobody now knows.

Barring an improbably political miracle, New Labour is heading for a crushing defeat in next year's General Election. It will get a first instalment of that defeat in the upcoming Euro and local government elections.

There will be a Tory government. That government will attempt to slash public spending, including welfare spending. It will attack the working class in a way patterned on the Thatcher government at the start of the 1980s, and perhaps more so.

For many years New Labour and the Tories have, in terms of policy, been Tweedledum and Tweedledee — identical twins, with minor differences. Not so now. The Tories are the party of "economy" and "budget-balancing". They have radically separated themselves from New Labour government economic policy, gambling that government measures to limit the effects of the second Great Slump will be a failure.

They will face the electorate with more right-wing policies and intentions than the Tories have had for many years. Already they are promising to rip up all the agreements about public sector workers' pensions.

The main fascist organisation, the BNP, is growing, and looks set to register further advances in next month's European and local government elections. On all past experience, the economic and social conditions now coming into existence will help the BNP to grow. Britain has anyway long lagged behind other European countries, for instance France, Italy, Austria, Belgium, in the "development" of a sizeable fascist movement. Now we seem to be on the eve of "catching up".

It would be too mechanical to expect an exact repetition of the early 1930s, when mass fascist movements attacked and destroyed bourgeois democracy in many European countries. Nonetheless, the elements that shaped the politics of the 1930s are identifiable, and they are growing.

The current scandal about MPs' expenses further increases the likelihood of a crushing New Labour defeat in the general election. Polls show that the Tories, no less than New Labour, have been discredited in the expenses scandal. But New Labour is the government, held responsible for everything including the world slump and its impact in Britain.

It is not inconceivable, even, that New Labour will suffer "meltdown" — reduction to 100 or so seats in Parliament.

What does all this mean for the prospects of creating a new mass workers' party based on the unions? And for the prospects of a revolution within the moribund and occluded channels of New Labour?

In the last few years AWL has argued that the longer the ultra-bureaucratic New Labour structures survived unchallenged by the unions, the less likely would be any Labour renewal by way of internal revolt to break those blockages to rank-and-file involvement in the Labour Party on which New Labour rests — its abolition of the democratic channels of the old Labour Party, its dispensing with Annual Conference in all but name, its transforming of the National Executive Committee, its choking-off and isolation of local Labour Parties.

It seems to me that the developments outlined at the beginning of this article demand that we revise our assessment, or at least open our minds to a serious possibility that things may move in a different direction from the more-or-less straight tracks they have followed for 15 years.

Labour will fall from power to a right-wing Tory government in the worst slump for 80 years.

A Tory government would slash public spending. Differences will open up between Labour and the Tories

According to former Lib Dem leader Paddy Ashdown (2 May), some leading Blairite MPs may hive off to the Lib Dems (in the same way as the old Gaitskellites formed the SDP in the early 1980s, and later amalgamated with the Liberal Party).

If there is any life at all in the Labour structures, there cannot but be indignant questioning of the record of the Blair-Brown government. The move towards state interventionism by the Government in recent months is and cannot but be seen to be an indictment of all the "wasted years" when Blair, Brown, and their gang were unashamed bag-carriers for bankers, capitalists, and every sort of profiteer and rip-off merchant. The system of unregulated bandit capitalism has already been widely discredited. So has the government.

Within the labour movement — in the first place the unions, but also in what is left of the constituency Labour Parties — criticism of all that the Blair-Brown regime fostered and served is surely going to go much further in the balance-sheet-drawing period after a general election defeat.

Working-class people facing an onslaught from the new Tory government will look for organised means to protest and resist, and — the activist left outside the Labour Party still being weak — may turn in some numbers to the unions and Labour for that.

With that situation, the prospects for a revival within the Labour Party cannot but be better than they have been for the last 15 years. How much better? With what outcome? I can't judge.

The tragedy of the situation in the last 15 years has been that any political action by the unions has depended on the union leaders. The layer of union leaders before the current one supported the Blair-Brown coup within the Labour Party which created New Labour; without their support the coup could not have happened. Their successors, the current generation of union leaders, have made "oppositional" noises sometimes. But they have done nothing. The "working-class" aspect of the Labour Party has withered almost to nothing.

It is not ruled out that the union leaders will do nothing to restore the functioning mass trade-union party that Blair and Brown stifled. In that case, remnants of the old Labour Party imprisoned in New Labour will slink their miserable way towards the political grave.

No-one should paint up the New Labour of today by "reading back" from the possibility of a revival after 2010. AWL will be running Jill Mountford as an independent working-class candidate against Labour deputy leader Harriet Harman in the 2010 general election, and we will call for the maximum coordination and mobilisation of socialists to run as a broad spread of such candidates as possible.

Even so, as responsible socialists, we must orient to the new situation that may be shaping up with the

larger forces beyond our control.

Over the last dozen years AWL has argued that the best thing would be for the unions to raise the banner of revolt against New Labour, rally those who could be rallied to recreate the old, relatively open, Labour structures that Blair and Brown cemented over — and hive off the New Labour element.

We conceded that it was unlikely that more than a smallish part of the Parliamentary Labour Party would adhere to such a revived union-based Labour Party. But against those who were intimidated by the prospect of a "new 1931" — a repetition of the Labour split when Ramsay MacDonald broke away in 1931, which was followed by huge election losses for Labour in 1935 — we argued that without the 1931 split there would never have been the Labour victory of 1945 which created the modern welfare state.

As year followed year of New Labour governing for the bankers and the rich, AWL began to argue that politically dissenting unions should regroup, creating in the political field something like (in the industrial field) the Congress of Industrial Organisations which organised the mass unionisation in the USA in the 1930s — recreating a party of working-class parliamentary representatives.

We edged towards supporting moves in the unions to disaffiliate from New Labour, saying that if and when it became clear that no moves would be made to reverse the New Labour Bournemouth conference decision of 2007 to ban political motions from unions and local Labour Parties, disaffiliation could not be opposed.

The seriously increased prospects for an explosion within the New Labour structures demand we reorient.

We have polemicised — and we need to take back not a word of it! — against those who argued for an indefinite policy of waiting passively for the union leaders to "do something", of opposition to any political initiative by the more dissident unions, on the grounds that eventually, in a year or a decade or two, "something" might turn up, and the unions could then act in lock-step to recreate a real Labour Party. That policy of "waiting" for an indefinite time would have ruled out anything other than a slow "bio-degrading" of revolutionary socialists into mere trade-unionists and labour movement routinists.

What is new now is that it is not a matter of indefinite waiting. There is a definable, and short, time with which, as a result of the slump and New Labour's likely crushing defeat, things will move in something like the way we want them to. Or they won't.

One practical conclusion: it makes no sense to continue along the straight lines we have mapped for the last 15 years or so, which would suggest, for example, supporting the disaffiliation motions which are coming up at the CWU conference in June (counterposed to a motion for a campaign to restore the trade-union right to push political motions at Labour Party conference).

We should oppose disaffiliation. To those who support disaffiliation, for reasons with which we have very great sympathy, we should say that now the only sensible policy is wait and see. Not to wait indefinitely; to wait until we see how things shape up with the big unions and the Labour "base" after the general election. If there is then no revolt within the Labour structures, or only a feeble one quickly suppressed, then the question of disaffiliation will be back on the agenda.

Were we wrong in the past? I don't think so; but prospects have, maybe, changed, as a result of the slump, the radical discrediting of New Labour, and the opening up again of a clear political gap between the Tories and Labour. The question is: if they have changed, maybe, are we flexible and "tactical" enough to register that and respond?

So far, only *maybe*. But if the possibility exists of reclaiming the Labour structures, or sections of them, from the New Labour hijackers, then that is by far the better, most economical, quicker development, com-

INEQUALITY SOARS

So much equality law, so little equality...

By MATT COOPER

At the start of May, new figures showed that the gap between rich and poor is now bigger than it was when Thatcher left office in 1990. Inequality lessened under Major, to 1997, but has increased every year since Labour were elected except for a small fall between 2000 and 2003.

The introduction of the Child Tax Credit, the brief social democratic moment of the current government, was probably the reason why the gap between rich and poor fell between 2000 and 2003. Brief it was.

Yet at the end of April the government published its Equality Bill 2009. This tidying up operation incorporated many existing pieces of legislation such as the Race Relations Acts, the Sex Discrimination Act, the Disability Discrimination Acts, the Equality Act 2006 and other pieces of anti-discrimination legislation.

Never has there been so much legislation for equality, accompanied by so much increase in actual inequality. Why?

The older laws against race and sex discrimination were part of the project of the “revisionist” right wing of the Labour Party in the 1960s. Those “revisionists” preferred the concept of *equality of opportunity* to any drive for *actual* equality in the distribution of society’s wealth and power.

Actual equality was utopian, they argued. But to discriminate on the grounds of race or gender, or to deny educational opportunities to children from poorer families, was unfair; and, moreover, it was economic nonsense, squandering society’s resources. Equality of *opportunity* could allow a rational, somewhat more civilised, capitalism.

Noone would face unfair or irrational discrimination on the grounds of race colour, sexuality, their parents’ income, or any other irrelevant characteristic. People’s aptitude would gain them education; the skills and qualifications won through education would win them employment; their money would buy goods and services.

There would still be billionaires and paupers, bosses and wage-slaves; only, the selection of who would become a billionaire boss would be based not on family background but on talent and drive (or, at least, *some* talents and drives...)

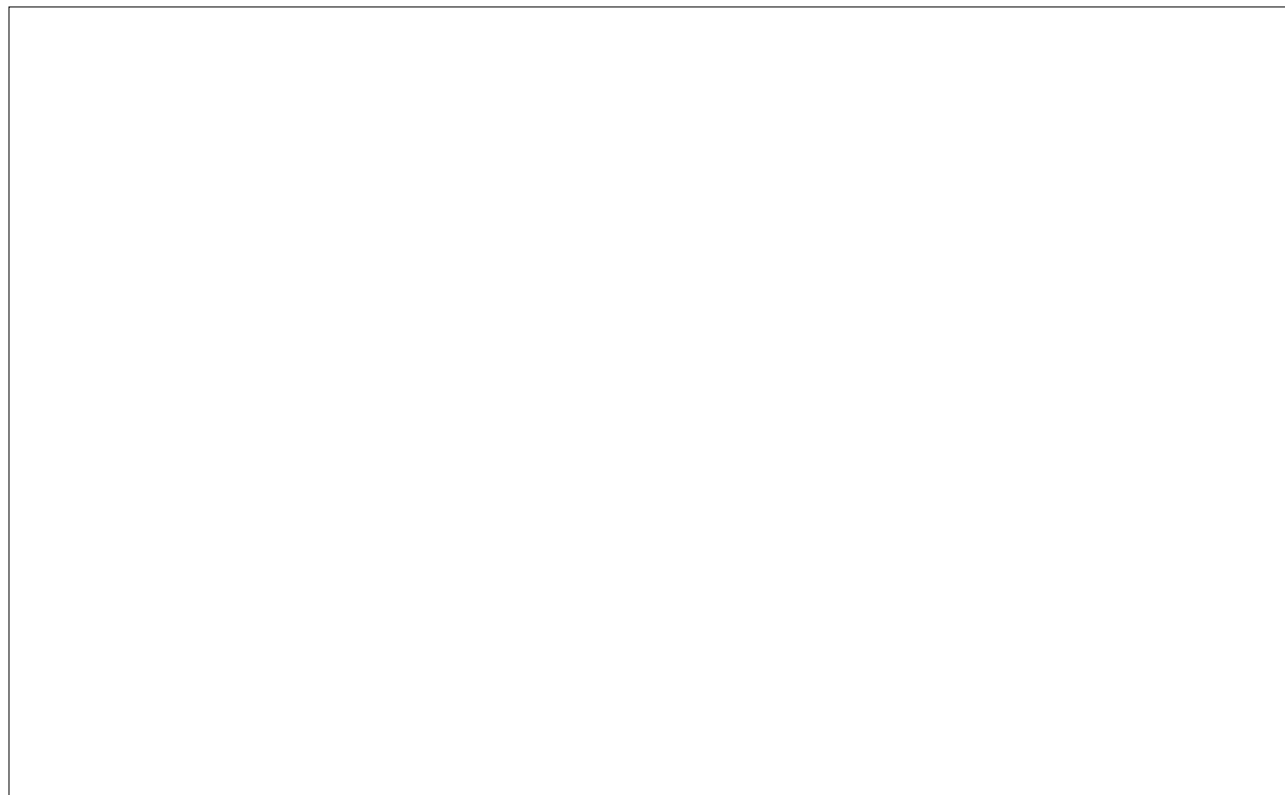
One kind of inequality (based on prejudice and irrational discrimination) would be replaced by another (based “rationally” on ability). There would be a “fair” distribution of inequality, so that white people and black people, gay people and straight, and so on would have the same chance of ending up poor.

Whether all that was desirable or not — the term “meritocracy” was originally coined to denounce the idea that this was any sort of just society — it was in any case unrealistic. So long there are families with wealth, and families without, children will be on an uneven playing field. “Money don’t get everything, it’s true” — but on the whole, in a competitive, money-based society with *formal* equality of opportunity, children will tend to follow in the occupational, educational and cultural footsteps of their parents.

Social mobility — that is, not equality, but the opportunity for people from poor family backgrounds to move “up” the social ladder — did increase for those born between 1958 and 1970. That was largely caused not by formal equality-of-opportunity legislation, but by the moves towards comprehensive education, which to some limited degree offered a chance for all children in secondary education; a push to improve teaching so it reached all children irrespective of background; and attempts to put more funds into schools into deprived areas.

These were highly limited measures, done better in other capitalist states. But in any case social mobility has stalled or worsened for cohorts born after 1970.

It is difficult to say whether social mobility has changed for children born under the New Labour government — a child of nursery age in 1997 will only just



The drive to get more and more young people into university has, paradoxically, worsened social mobility

be leaving school now — but research by the Sutton Trust provides solid reason to think that mobility will not increase.

Labour’s love-affair with “diversity” and “choice” in education is often choice only for better-off parents and back-door selection, increasing inequality of *opportunity*.

The drive to get more and more young people into university has, paradoxically, probably worsened social mobility. In the 1950s or 1960s, a large proportion of the children even of the well-off did not go to university, and a large swathe of well-paid jobs were open to people without university qualifications. A talented, ambitious child from a poor family could rise high through promotion in the workplace.

Now, almost all children of the well-off go to university; university qualifications are needed for the big majority of well-paid jobs; and the talented young person who has failed to get to university faces an almost impassable barrier.

MARX

Marx understood well that mere formal equality of rights could not lead to actual equality. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx stated that formal equal rights would lead to unequal outcomes. He argued that society should be run on the basis: “From each according to their ability, to each according to their need”; and that this could be achieved by the abolition of private property in the means of production and its replacement with free human co-operation to produce for need.

In fact, many liberals, too, have recognised the inadequacy of mere formal equality, or equality of *opportunity*. As early as the 1880s some liberals were saying their their version of equality of opportunity required that all be fed, housed and educated, and recognising that this called for collective intervention, whether through voluntary mutual and friendly societies or through the state.

The modern welfare state may have been a key achievement of the post-war Labour government but its architect, William Beveridge, was a Liberal.

More recently, one liberal political theorist, Ronald Dworkin, has gone as far to argue that real equality of opportunity can only be measured by its success in cre-

ating equality of outcome. Dworkin argues that if all, whatever their level of physical and mental ability, are to have equal opportunities, it must be an equal opportunity that means that all will finish the race at the same time, and for some this will mean a considerable and continuing support.

Such liberalism is lost on the atavistic free-market obsessed liberals of New Labour.

No socialist will disagree with laws to outlaw discrimination in employment, housing or provision of services to people on the grounds of gender, race, age, sexuality, transgender identity, disability or religion. The trouble is, even if the law ends such discrimination, in a society that is dominated by class, that will merely alter the distribution of inequality in society, not the existence of inequality itself.

For example, when the Race Relation Acts of 1965 and 1968 gave immigrants (on paper at least) equal access to housing and jobs, the equality was very often equality at the back of the queue to compete with other marginalised sections of society.

The only form of Blair-Brown equality legislation that requires anyone to spend any money helping people have a genuine equality of opportunity is the law on disability discrimination. Even there, an employer or service provider need only suffer “proportionate” expense for “reasonable” changes. The examples that the law’s explanatory notes give are of ramps, new desks, Braille keyboards and off-the shelf software. Most employers will continue to make a “business case” against any substantial effort, and the law will not change that.

The idiot shadow of past attempts to create a more equal society is seen in the current Equality Bill’s requirement that any government strategic planning body give “due consideration” to the “desirability” of reducing economic inequality. Anyone who has been the kind of “impact assessment” that public bodies are required to produce in strategic planning exercises will know what an entirely meaningless paper exercise these can be.

Any government body that wishes to avoid promoting greater economic equality will be able to continue to do that while adhering to the latest rhetoric.

HIGHER EDUCATION

London Met workers and students fight back

By Stuart Jordan

Thursday 7 April saw the beginning of a fight back by workers and students in Higher Education. UCU members at London Metropolitan University staged a walkout, and the Universities UK conference on privatisation of higher education was disrupted by free education activists (see page 7).

London Met is threatening to cut 550 full-time equivalent positions, potentially affecting over 800 staff — a quarter of the workforce. This comes after gross mismanagement by the college’s Vice-Chancellor, Brian Roper, who fiddled the books, making up paper students in order to secure extra £56 million funding over several years. When the university watchdog, HEFCE, found out about the fiddle, it imposed a “claw back” of £38 million, starting with a £18million cut to next year’s budget.

The workers at London Met have organised. They fought off the victimisation of their rep. After a very public battle, they built enough pressure to force Roper’s early retirement. (Albeit on a fat pension and with nine months holiday on full pay!)

The 7 April strike saw a large picket lines of workers and students across the various London campuses. Unfortunately, Unison did not call out its members on the day although it is balloting as we go to press.

The strikers are calling on HEFCE to bail out the university, correctly arguing that the workers and students shouldn’t be punished for the corruption and incompetency of their management. They are demanding London Met “opens the books” so they can see exactly where the money is — if that had been standard practice, this disaster would not have happened.

Staff know that the university has just pocketed £25 million for the sale of a building, and they also know about three management positions being advertised on salaries of £60,000. However, there is still no transparency, management is still fudging, and thousands of workers, students and family members are left worrying about an unknown future.

Workers on the picket line in East London talked about a plan to not teach for the first week in the autumn term. Students have now gone into occupation.

The problems at London Met show the need for universities to be run under democratic worker and student control. Currently if the bosses screw up, then they just line their pockets before heading off for long retirement. Meanwhile, workers and students are left to pick up the pieces, pushed onto the dole. What is

London Met students back workers’ action with occupations

Following a successful day of UCU strike action against the massive cuts being imposed by the management of London Metropolitan University on 7 May, London Met art and design students have occupied part of the university’s Commercial Road site in East London in solidarity. After Prisme, Visteon and the student occupations over Gaza, the tactic is catching on!

London Met workers will be holding another day of action on 23 May.

Messages of solidarity to savelondonmet@gmail.com

happening at London Met is a taste of what is coming to other universities. We need to link up the struggles and build a fight not just for jobs, but for a different form of education under worker and student control.

• A large online network has grown up around this dispute. See

savelondonmetuni.blogspot.com
www.thelondonmetcrisis.blogspot.com
www.lmuucu.org.uk
twitter.com/savelondonmet

Facebook: “Save London Metropolitan University”

March to defend jobs and education

March with us to say ‘NO’ to this avoidable cull of jobs, ‘NO’ to the narrowing of educational choice and ‘NO’ to the shrinking circle of opportunity.

- Assemble 11am, Saturday 23 May Highbury Fields, N1.
- March from Highbury Fields to rally in Archway Park.

Followed by an evening of music and comedy to Defend Adult Education, 7.30pm, the Cross Kings, 126 York Way, N1. Organised by CALL, (Campaign for Adult Lifelong Learning)

Supported by UCU, London Met Unison, PCS, Islington National Union of Teachers
For more savelondonmetuni.blogspot.com

Education Not for Sale action shuts down university bosses’ conference

By Patrick Rolfe

On 7 May, ENS and other free education activists shut down a conference organised by Universities UK, the government’s Higher Education Funding Council and the “Association for University Research and Industry Links” — a conference held to discuss how to best hand over our higher education system to profit-making businesses.

The protest was planned at the 18 April student conference which grew out of the university Gaza occupations.

About thirty activists demonstrated outside the Westminster conference centre where the event was held. The centrepiece, though, was the dozen of us who dressed up smartly and went inside. We were pretty much the only students at an event dominated by university bureaucrats and business people. (Both in terms of the make up of the audience and the bland, corporate jargon hiding a sinister intent, it was like a lefty caricature of such an event.)

When the incredibly pompous head of the National

Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts finished speaking, but before union bureaucrat-turned-boss Diana Warwick of Universities UK could take the stage, we occupied it.

After taking the podium, we took turns to read out speeches denouncing the privatisation of education which business is so enthusiastically pursuing with the encouragement and sponsorship of the Labour government. When a few attempts to remove us failed, the organisers cleared the hall and temporarily adjourned the conference!

We left before the police arrived and took the demonstrators outside up to London Met for the UCU strikers’ picket lines and rally. But we’ll be back for more. UUK were clearly rattled, and as the struggle over the future of education hots up lots more such direct action will be needed.

- www.free-education.org.uk
- The next ENS (open) meeting will be Saturday 6 June in London. For more information email education.not.for.sale@gmail.com

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Support Pakistan's labour movement against both Taliban and army!

BY CATHY NUGENT

More than 800,000 people have now fled fighting in the Swat district of Pakistan. They join a total of around 1.3 million refugees who have fled recent fighting in other parts of the North-West Frontier Province, fleeing, on the one hand threats of violence from the Taliban against people who do not join their "jihad", and on the other the gunship helicopters of Pakistan's army.

Since the end of the US's 2001 war in Afghanistan, the North West Frontier Province, along with Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, have become a base for a resurgent Taliban. This in turn has created a recruiting ground for al-Qaida-affiliated jihadist groups. Since December 2008 Swat's Islamist militant leader Maulana Fazlullah and his group Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi have banned education for girls and have bombed or torched schools and government buildings.

The resurgence of jihadism happened to a very large extent with the backing of the Pakistani army, in the full view of the former military dictator Musharraf and was ignored by Pakistan's US government sponsors. The Taliban's offensive represents an enormously dangerous challenge to Pakistan's weak civilian regime — the Swat valley is just 100 miles from Pakistan's capital Islamabad.

The Taliban have even infiltrated western and southern part of Punjab province, the second largest city of Lahore, and the southern port city of Karachi.

Three things have led to the recent military incursion.

In the middle of April the Pakistani People's Party government approved a deal with the local Taliban. A ceasefire had already halted military action against the Taliban, military action which, though far more gentle than the current operation, made hundreds of thousands of people into refugees.

Now they were agreeing to some form of Sharia system of justice in Swat. The justification was

that this would bring peace and would win over "moderate" Talibanis. More to the point, local politicians did not believe that the Pakistani army had any intention of expelling the Taliban from the area.

But such a deal could only give legitimacy to the sharia courts the Taliban had already set up in the area and give them further opportunity to enhance their power. That is what happened. The Taliban came out of their Swat stronghold and attacked neighbouring districts.

At this point the army launched a full-scale counter-operation — there are now up to 15,000 troops in the area.

The new military operation coincided with a visit by President Asif Ali Zardari to the United States. Once again the incentive of new cash from the US, lay behind a military offensive.

Pakistan's economic situation is dire: in the first nine months of 2008 the Karachi stock market fell by 40 percent, the rupee lost 22 percent of its value and inflation was running at 25%. US cash is not yet forthcoming and it will be linked to "strict" conditions i.e. that the Pakistani army actually uses sufficient force against the Taliban and other jihadists and does not, as they are apt to, let them slip away to some safe haven in Afghanistan, elsewhere in Pakistan or the Gulf states.

Obama's tough stance is continues that of the previous US administration — they had finally woken up to the growth of the Taliban in northern Pakistan.

The operation has very broad support in Pakistan and this the army cannot, for now, afford to ignore.

We have to make solidarity with the labour movement and the socialists of Pakistan. The Labor Party Pakistan is the biggest socialist organisation in Pakistan. Some of its members have to operate in areas terrorised by extreme Islamism (they say they have 2000 members in NWFP). In the coming months they may face terrible danger and difficulty. On page 14 of this paper we publish an account from Faroog Ahmad, LPP member from the Murdan region, NWFP which gives us some idea of those dangers.

Tube: vote yes for action (again!)

BY AN RMT MEMBER

The RMT is re-balloting nearly 10,000 of its members across London Underground and Transport for London for strike action around disputes centred on jobs, pay and breaches of disciplinary and attendance agreements. This ballot (which starts on 14 May) follows an earlier positive vote for strike action in a ballot which was subsequently ruled invalid by a court order from a legal action brought by Underground bosses. Management's lawyers picked up on trivial errors in the balloting process.

It is a good thing that the re-ballot is now underway and RMT activists will need to go all out to ensure that there is another massive vote in favour of strike action and make sure our feelings are made loud and clear.

There are three areas of dispute:

Jobs : London Underground bosses are trying to tear up an agreement aimed at safeguarding jobs, and have refused to rule out compulsory redundancies. TfL is also threatening compulsory redundancies as part of a £2.4 billion cuts package.

Pay cuts: LUL has also refused to budge from an unacceptable five-year pay offer that gives no real-terms increase for four years, and which could even see pay cuts. TfL has so far failed to table any pay offer at all.

Bullying staff: LUL management have been breaching the agreed disciplinary and attendance procedures and have encouraged aggressive and punitive behavior by local managers.

If the bosses use the courts again, unofficial action may be our only option as a response. But this is a tactical call for any union, which would have to be made on an assessment about how much support there is among members for defiance of legal threats.

This underlines why every aspect of a dispute should be under the control and scrutiny of the rank-and-file workers whose jobs, pay and conditions are at stake.

Vote yes for strike action and action short of strike!

• www.workersliberty.org/twblog

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