Yeltsin's dirty war in Chechenia

By Dale Street

IN MID-DECEMBER of last year — the 50th anniversary of Stalin's mass deportation of the Chechen nation to the Soviet far east for alleged "collaboration" with the Nazis — Russian troops invaded Chechenia.

They are now smashing through the capital, Grozny.

The Russian government claims that the purpose of the invasion is to restore "law and order" in Chechenia, which declared independence from Moscow in 1991.

Russia is in economic crisis.

Living standards continue to fall, as too does industrial output.

Last October the ruble went into free fall on the international currency markets, losing over a quarter of its value in a single day. Inflation has taken off again and now runs at over 10% a month. An estimated five million people are unemployed.

There is now profound disillusionment with Yeltsin throughout the Russian population.

In the past Yeltsin would scapegoat "Communists" and blame economic problems on the legacy of Stalinism. But in 1995 such excuses no longer have any credibility.

Yeltsin must have hoped that a war against Chechenia, envisaged as a brief blitzkrieg-style affair, would dampen discontent in the armed forces.

Oil also plays a part in the reasons for the invasion of Chechenia. Russia wants control of the oil pumped out of the Caspian Sea off the coast of Azerbaidjian. But the pipeline which would carry the oil across the Caucasus to the oil terminals in Novorossiysk on the Black Sea runs through Chechenia.

The invasion of Chechenia was also intended as a warning to other regions within Russia and to former republics of the Soviet Union with whom the Russian government is in dispute.

Estonia is demanding the return of the Pecharsky region, incorporated into Russia after Stalin's annexation of the Baltic states. Lithuania has cut off Russian military supplies to Kaliningrad, a Russian-controlled town on the Lithuanian coast. Azerbaidjian and Kazakhstan are in dispute with Russia over access to the Caspian Sea oil fields.

The ex-republics of the Soviet Union are also at odds with the Russian government over the expansion of NATO. The former want to join NATO, whereas Russia itself is against any expansion. At the summit conference held in Budapest last year these divisions came out into the open.

Within Russia itself a number of regions are also asserting the right to a greater degree of autonomy, both political and economic, in order to free themselves of control from the centre in Moscow.

All the signs are that Yeltsin's invasion has backfired politically. It has not rallied support around Yeltsin or created a wave of jingo patriotism. Yeltsin is more isolated than ever.

Victim of Yeltsin's dirty war

Virtually all major Russian parties and politicians, including those who have hitherto served as Yeltsin's closest allies, have condemned the invasion (even if only for pragmatic and opportunist reasons).

Only Zhirinovsky and his semi-fascist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia have backed the invasion. According to Zhirinovsky, the troops are "fulfilling a noble duty at a difficult hour for the motherland... whilst bandits, journalists and politicians shoot them in the back."

There is little popular support for Yeltsin's military adventure. Before the invasion, opinion polls showed 57% opposed to such military action. After the invasion opposition quickly rose to 70% and is still increasing.

Only 15% of the Russian population back the invasion. In other words, not even all of those who voted for Zhirinovsky in last year's elections support the attack on Chechenia.

Rather than diverting attention away from economic problems, the war has made those economic problems even worse.

The war is already costing Russia 28.5 million dollars a day. Once, as seems likely, Chechenia is finally fully occupied by Russian troops, the cost of maintaining those troops and rebuilding devastated towns and villages will be millions of rubles.

Rather than dampening discontent in the armed forces, the fiasco of the invasion has increased unrest at all levels of the military.

For the commanders, the humiliations suffered by Russian troops in the fighting are conclusive proof that Yeltsin has failed to allocate sufficient resources to the armed forces and has allowed them to degenerate into a raggle-taggle of unwilling and untrained squaddies.

The conscript soldiers thrown into Chechenia lacked enthusiasm from the outset and have been further demoralised by the bloody defeats inflicted on them by the Chechen irregulars. A recent report in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* provided an eye-witness account of the mood amongst the troops:

"They are cut off from all information. They do not know why and for what lofty goals they have to go on the offensive, shoot, and kill. The commanders do not explain anything to them. The lack of any goal or sense of purpose leads to drunkenness and drug-taking. We were witness of this."

Even if Russia succeeds in the military conquest of Chechenia, this will not guarantee the flow of oil through the pipeline which runs from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea.

Guerrilla resistance on the part of Chechen irregulars will continue. Russia will have neither sufficient troops nor money to protect every meter of the pipeline, thus leaving it exposed to guerrilla attacks.

Nor has the invasion served as a warning to other regions of Russia and ex-republics of the Soviet Union. Far from being a display of Russian military might, it has been a public exhibition of Russian military weakness and incompetence.

Similarly, the invasion has weakened still further Russian attempts to prevent the expansion of NATO.

Despite the disgraceful failure of Western governments to condemn the invasion — they have dismissed it as an internal Russian affair — they are now much more likely to support an expansion of NATO to include ex-republics of the Soviet Union, out of fear that Russia may unleash military action in other regions of the former Soviet Empire.

Yeltsin's government is weaker than ever before. The question now is whether the massive discontent in Russia can be rallied by the small socialist forces there, or whether the crisis will usher in an even more authoritarian, military-based regime.

Socialists in this country must redouble their efforts to assist the socialists in Russia. A failure to do so will leave Russian socialists exposed to be the first victims of a new Russian dictatorship.

80,000 new Labour Party members: who are they?

By Colin Foster

IN 1994, SOME 80,000 new members joined the Labour Party. Membership has risen from a low point of 261,000 in 1991 to 305,000 at the end of 1994. It is the first substantial rise in Labour's individual membership for a long time, perhaps since the early 1950s: quirks of the method of counting make it impossible to say how much membership increased in the big Labour Party democracy battles of 1979-81.

The wards and constituencies are still shrivelled. The latest total is still lower than the figure when the current method of counting was introduced in 1981, and very much lower than the peak figure (on a more generous tally) of 1,105,000 in 1953.

Yet the new influx is, or may be, important. What sort of people are the new members? The only academic study so far has been by Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley of Sheffield University, but they looked at new members recruited in 1991 and 1992. Their political questionnaires in 1990 and immediately after the 1992 election showed no great shift in attitudes.

In 1990, 23 per cent agreed that "the production of goods and services is best left to the free market", and 60% disagreed; in 1992, 20% agreed and 63% disagreed. In 1990, 70% wanted more nationalisation; in 1992, 69%. (*New Statesman and Society*, 9 December 1994).

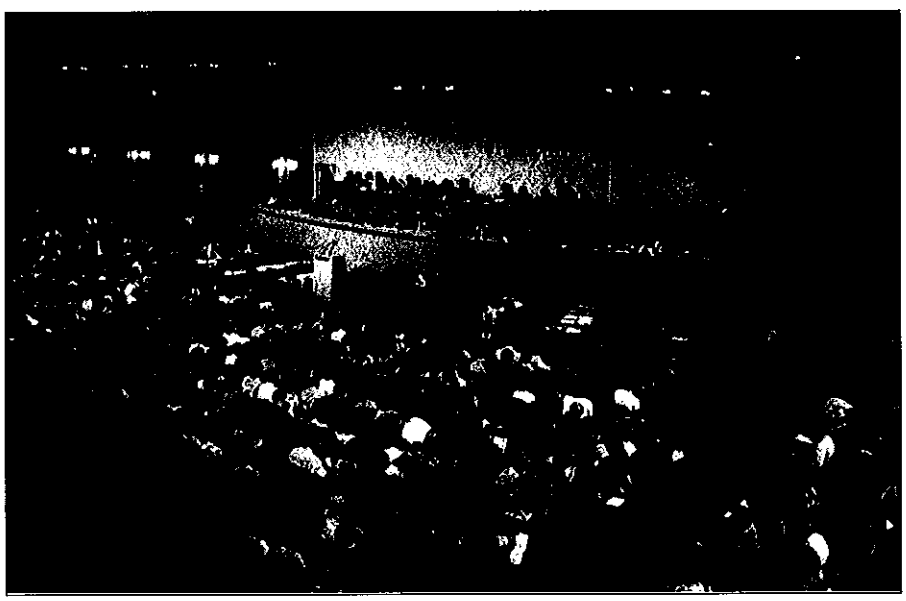
On the attitudes and social composition of the new members who have joined since Tony Blair became leader, we have only impressions to go by. Workers' Liberty collected some from organisers and activists around the country.

A comrade from Leicester reported: "Our branch membership has risen steadily, doubling over two years. People join because they are encouraged by the prospect of the Tories falling and Labour winning the next election. They tend to start off being pro-Blair, because they think Blair will beat the Tories, but they are very open to left-wing argument on the issues.

"Elsewhere in Leicester membership has risen, but less. Attendance at meetings has increased only fractionally."

At a different end of the range of responses, a comrade from Isleworth said: "If 80,000 people have joined the Labour Party, it certainly hasn't been in Isleworth. I went to my last ward meeting after missing several because of other meetings which clashed. There were five people there, and they gasped when I came into the room."

Some 30,000 of the new members have joined under the scheme whereby levy-paying members of affiliated unions can sign up for £3, rather than the full rate of £15.



Who are Labour's new members?

From Manchester, the report was: "Most new members have joined as a result of parliamentary selection battles. There are also quite a lot coming in through the trade-union scheme. Some young people are joining, and they seem to be left-wing — or open to being made left-wing by the Clause Four dispute."

From Glasgow Shettleston constituency, too, the word is of "a steady trickle of new members, mainly through the cut-price trade-union scheme. In general, few new members seem to attend meetings."

A railworker from York added: "I don't know the general picture, but I have personally recruited four new members through the trade-union scheme recently, on the basis of disgust with the Tories and a feeling that Labour will renationalise the railways."

In Romford, east London, so a local activist reports: "Our last constituency meeting reported our biggest-ever monthly intake of new members, thirty in a CLP with a very low membership (about 270). The local Union of Communication Workers has recruited quite a few through the trade-union scheme and the campaign against the selling off of the Post Office.

"We have also recruited a fair number of youth across our Young Labour area — mostly working-class youth from Further Education colleges. The £1 membership for people under 18 is crucial to this."

From Nottingham, a comrade reports: "A Labour Club has been set up at Nottingham Trent University for the first time in many years. The main activists are left-wing or open to left-wing ideas. Most of the activists have gone on to join the Labour Party too."

Left Unity organiser Elaine Jones reports, however: "In general the active membership of college Labour Clubs is only about 10 to 30. It is only a slight increase over last year."

From Islington, north London, one comrade reports: "Membership in my ward — in a solidly working-class area — has nearly tripled in a few months, but only a couple of the new members are active so far. At first they were vaguely pro-Blair, but now they support Clause Four." A different ward in the same constituency, covering a more middle-class area, gave a different impression to a comrade who went to speak there on the Welfare State Network. "There were a lot of young people, but they were very right-wing." A ward member adds: "All the new members here are from the middle-class part of the ward, none from the council estates."

And from Peckham, south London, the report is: "The new members are mainly Christians, recruited through a concerted effort by God-squadders in the constituency, and they are mostly inactive."

Which impressions come closest to the overall reality? And what can socialists in the Labour Party do to mobilise and get across to the new members if many of them are trade unionists and youth open to our ideas? Please send your views and impressions to *Workers' Liberty*.