

# **Workers ACTION**

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**Workers Action welcomes correspondence and  
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**Workers Action is a revolutionary socialist journal produced by the former Workers International League majority. The WIL was dissolved in November 1997 after it became clear that political differences threatened the group with disintegration. Workers Action fights for the same political line as Workers News, the paper of the WIL, which ceased publication with the split. We hope that comrades who supported Workers News in the past will become regular readers of Workers Action**

## Benefit cuts

# Backbench revolt fizzles out

The Labour government's attacks on welfare and party democracy continue, but the left has failed to capitalise on anger over benefit cuts or the expulsions of Ken Coates and Hugh Kerr. **Jonathan Joseph** searches for whispers of discontent

Since the parliamentary 'revolt' against single-parent benefit cuts last December, the talk has been that Tony Blair's honeymoon has come to an end. The truth is that while the Labour government has started to lose credibility, its overall direction has not been seriously questioned.

The Liberal Democrats describe their attitude to the government as 'constructive opposition'. This term might also describe the role of Labour's so-called rebels and the whole benefits revolt fiasco. Objections have been raised to some of the unsavoury trimmings, but not to the government's project of 'overhauling' the entire welfare system. Indeed, the attitude towards benefit cuts is that Blair is right, welfare 'reform' is necessary, but that he is going about it in a heavy-handed way.

Forty-seven Labour MPs voted against Blair's proposals to remove the additional child benefit currently paid to single parents – £4.95 a week for those on income support and £6.05 for those in work. Among them was Scottish Office Minister Malcolm Chisholm, who resigned his post along with four parliamentary aides. Many other Labour MPs, while vot-

ing with the government, expressed dissatisfaction at having to push through this Tory policy. Although the bill was passed with a massive majority the revolt was still an embarrassment for the government. In his Budget in March, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, attempted to defuse the row by announcing a £2.50 a week increase in the benefit paid to all families for the elder child, and £2.50 in the means-tested benefit for children under 11. However, he made it clear that the cuts in single-parent benefit would stand. 'There is, in my view, no case for a one-parent benefit and we will not return to that,' he said.

Further trouble lies ahead if Labour pushes through its attacks on disability benefits, where the scale of the revolt has the potential to be much bigger. Up to two-thirds of those who currently receive disability living allowance (DLA) will not be entitled to it if the government acts on the recommendations of its DLA advisory board, which says that the benefit of up to £84.10 per week should only be paid to 'the most severely disabled'. By 2001, the government is expected to have made savings of £2.5 billion by sticking to the

Tory policy of replacing invalidity benefit with incapacity benefit, and neither Blair nor Social Security Secretary Harriet Harman have denied that they are planning further huge cuts in this area.

As the liberal press has already pointed out, there is a lot of hypocrisy in the government's position. The £90-billion welfare system is regarded as costly and ineffective, but cutting lone-parent benefits removes just £60 million from this. There have been plenty of alternative suggestions as to where the savings could be made – cutting Tony Blair's huge hospitality budget would do the job. On the night of the benefit cuts, Blair was busy wasting money entertaining the likes of Chris Evans. Closing tax loopholes would also save money but, as Blair says, this government has certain priorities. So while single parents and the disabled are attacked and accused of being cheats, multi-millionaire Geoffrey Robinson is invited into the cabinet as Paymaster General and defended from criticism about his off-shore trust in the tax haven of Guernsey, and Formula One racing is allowed to continue being sponsored by tobacco companies. If you have money and influence, that will do very nicely for New Labour.

Little wonder then that there has been an open revolt against Blair and Harman, not just by MPs but also among the Labour Party membership which, instead of rising to an expected 450,000, has plummeted to barely 400,000. Blair has tried to take control of the situation and will now chair a new ministerial group on welfare reform ahead of a green paper next autumn. In doing so, he is playing the old back-me-or-sack-me trick, knowing full well that no-one will sack him.

What is happening is that the disgruntled comment is coming, by and large, from people who support the fundamentals of the Tory, now Labour, project to trim billions of pounds off the welfare budget. It has become part of mainstream political thinking that the welfare state is

## In memory Eileen Gersh 1913 – 1998

**Workers Action is sad to announce the death of our comrade Eileen Gersh on March 18th, after a period of illness. Eileen has asked that there be no funeral for her. An obituary and details of a memorial meeting will appear in the next issue. Our thoughts go to her partner, her comrades and all who loved her.**

a thing of the past that needs drastic modernisation, even if the detail causes controversy. The New Deal welfare-to-work programme, which obliges unemployed people to accept low-paid work or training, is widely accepted, even by supposedly left-wing MPs. In fact, the New Deal is just another in a long line of cheap-labour schemes, since there are no plans to invest in jobs or education.

In crude terms, what Blair is doing is continuing the attack on the working class, the poor and the specially oppressed started by the Tories under Margaret Thatcher. He has to overturn the gains made by the working class in the post-war period and introduce a further shift towards unregulated (or re-regulated) market mechanisms if Britain is to remain competitive. New Labour's language is little more than the ideological cover for very old ruling class concerns, adapted to the needs of joining the single European currency. Blair's catchphrase of 'with rights go responsibilities' actually means 'single parents who do not work are irresponsible'. For Blair, working at McDonalds is more socially valuable than staying at home and looking after another human being, and it is perhaps unsurprising that in the week that Blair and Harman told single parents to go out and get a job, McDonalds announced a massive expansion plan that will see them emerge as Britain's largest employer of young people.

In his Budget, Gordon Brown underlined the government's intention to drive people off benefit by announcing an extension of the welfare-to-work programme to all those unemployed for more than two years, and also the Working Families Tax Credit, a reduction in tax for those on low incomes. Brown issued this warning: 'I say to those who can work: this is our New Deal. Your responsibility is to seek work. My guarantee is that if you work, work will pay.'

New Labour's vision of the future is a vision of the past – a society where the poor are castigated for being poor, where they are separated from their children or forced to go to the workhouse (the new hostel, or 'foyer', scheme). Those who do not have a job are at the disposal of the system, to perform whatever menial labour can be squeezed out of them. The poor must rely on the beneficence of worthy institutions like McDonalds. It conjures up the image of Oliver Twist begging for another BSE-burger.

Blair's New Britain is designed to be a part of a new Europe, and Europe has caused some problems for Blair in the form of a revolt by a handful of 'left'

MEPs. Ken Coates and Hugh Kerr flouted the Labour Party's new code of conduct forbidding the criticism of party policies in public in order to warn of the plan for central control over the selection of candidates for the European elections next year, the first to be held using a system of proportional representation. They were expelled from the Labour Party in early January, a few weeks before the NEC endorsed the new method of selection.

Again, the significance of this has been somewhat overstated. Labour MEPs are a relatively uninfluential group, and the revolt only involved a handful. Coates and Kerr probably took the view that they were unlikely to be re-selected as Labour candidates, and that under PR they stood a better chance as independents, or members of smaller parties. Their decision to effectively offer themselves up for expulsion rather than fight to broaden the resistance to the leadership should be seen in this context.

But the Euro-revolt has highlighted the potential that PR opens up for left critics of Labour. Coates is planning to link up with the Scottish Socialist Alliance to form a new left coalition capable of achieving the necessary percentage to win a seat or two. With the 1999 Scottish Assembly elections also being held under PR, this looks a likely prospect.

We cannot rule out the possibility of significant splits from Labour at some point in the future. Neither should we dismiss as fantasy the idea that there could be some kind of 'national government'. The Blairites have no loyalty to the Labour Party and the political consensus between themselves, the Liberal Democrats and the pro-European Tories could lead to a realignment – although this is only likely to occur under conditions of deep crisis.

However, both these scenarios are very unlikely in the short term, and it is important that we do not let conjecture get in the way of an evaluation of the current situation.

First, the revolt against the cuts in lone-parent benefit occurred because the government was intransigent on what was considered to be an extreme measure. Most MPs opposed the government reluctantly, and whether they can be mobilised into forming some kind of opposition movement remains to be seen.

Second, the left grouping that currently exists – the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs (SCG) – is woefully incapable of forming an effective opposition to Blair. In fact, some of the SCG MPs did not even vote against the benefit cuts. Ken Livingstone is currently being courted by the press as a possible leader of the left, but while he opposed the benefit cuts,

he has made it clear that he accepts much of the modernisation project and that a bit of economic jiggery-pokery is all that is required. He also accepts the project for closer European integration and must, therefore, accept much of the Maastricht framework. Quite simply, Livingstone's main critique of the current Labour government is based on his own personal ambitions.

Third, as we have said, the MEP revolt is unlikely to have any significant impact, although it does at least indicate that there is profound discontent with the policies of the Labour leadership and the possibility of further small splits.

Finally, and most significantly, these arguments are all being fought out at the party political level and have not, as yet, involved workers themselves. For this reason, it is wrong to talk about the end of the Blair honeymoon. At most, Blair has angered some traditional Labour supporters, including some from the labour movement, several of whom are moving towards a critical position.

Nevertheless a number of Labour MPs have certainly felt the pressure of rank-and-file sentiment. The idea put about by some sections of the left that Labour members can no longer have any influence over their party is over-pessimistic. However, the benefits row indicates that rank-and-file anger has been confined to discussions in the local parties, where opposition to the government is given a tokenistic character. It must not be forgotten that Blair's attack on Labour Party democracy at the last conference was specifically designed so as to provide his entryist current of spin-doctors, journo and SDP rejects with the kind of insulation necessary to withstand the wrath of the party rank-and-file.

But the current opposition to Blair is at the level of words only. The party membership has been deprived of the mechanisms through which it can exert any significant pressure. The people who can make a real difference have yet to take action. Blair's benefit cuts will hit some of the worst-off sections of society, but these are people who are in a bad position to fight back. The mass of organised workers have yet to be confronted.

A more substantial opposition to Blair will grow as his project unfolds. As Britain's entry into the single currency draws closer and the gains of the working class are swept away, new struggles will emerge. The feeling of anger and betrayal over benefit cuts will be nothing compared to the militant class action should unionised sections of the workforce be attacked in the name of modernisation. Our hope must lie beyond the corridors of Westminster.

After the left walks out of the Socialist Labour Party

# Regroupment a necessity

**Pete Bloomer**, chair of Birmingham SLP until January 1998, reports on the congress that convinced most of the SLP's left wing that it was time to go

The Socialist Labour Party was prematurely launched at the insistence of Arthur Scargill after the Labour left failed to prevent the scrapping of Clause 4 of the Labour Party constitution. Although Scargill was active in the Clause 4 struggle he had no prior record of organising a left within the Labour Party and the split from Labour was consequently small. The largest component of the initial membership of the SLP came from trade union militants already outside the Labour Party, the vast majority of whom were not part of any organised group. Not being part of Blair's New Labour became the sole justification for the SLP project.

## The setting up of the SLP

From day one, the SLP had a rigid and bureaucratic constitution, introduced by Scargill, which excluded other left groups – notably the Socialist Party (formerly Militant Labour), which had offered to join forces with Scargill in forming the new party, but had been refused. This undemocratic constitution – which was not presented to the membership for adoption until the December 1997 conference, and even then was smuggled in as part of a discussion about the conference agenda – gave all power to the national committee and national officers. It excluded the possibility of a National Executive Committee based proportionally on the differing political positions in the membership. It enabled Scargill to form a national committee composed of minor union bureaucrats and loyal sycophants under his undisputed leadership.

The politics of the NEC were quickly revealed as left-reformist in character. The SLP was given an exclusively electoralist strategy, with candidates standing in all parliamentary by-elections and in many local elections in an attempt to raise the party's profile. Some of the local election results were reasonable, but the by-election results were uniformly abysmal.

Meanwhile, Scargill was consolidating a party in which members were refused the right to hold caucuses and in which left-

wingers were told to accept the NEC line or leave. With an internal regime even more undemocratic than the Labour Party, it was inevitable that the principle of democratic functioning would become the focal point of opposition.

## The SLP left and its limitations

Those comrades concerned about democracy and the need to build a revolutionary left within the SLP were forced to organise in a semi-clandestine manner. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which opposed this method, was quickly reduced to having just one member in the SLP, as Scargill launched a witch-hunt against Vauxhall Constituency Socialist Labour Party and a number of individual militants. By refusing to accept the necessity for security measures against exclusion and publishing every titbit of information about the SLP left – with or without the authors' agreement – the CPGB became the pariah of the SLP left. *Socialist Labour Action*, the bulletin put out by Workers Power supporters, also gained a bad reputation after it published names of members of the Left Network of the SLP and 'outed' a comrade of the LCMRCI.

This lack of solidarity, combined with the need for secrecy, severely hampered the SLP left's development and its ability to win an increasingly alienated rank and file. After the Labour landslide and the generally poor SLP vote in the May 1997 general election the SLP moved into crisis, with no lead being given by the NEC and a decline in the active membership adding to the difficulties in organising an opposition. In a number of branches the left wing became dominant, but was unable to establish much of an alternative programme to that of Scargill.

Finally the NEC did develop a line, although not one aimed at mobilising the masses! They instructed members to 'form yourselves into Constituency Parties or have no rights to delegates, or to put resolutions or amendments' at the December 1997 congress. The effect of this was further to centralise power in the

hands of the NEC. Despite the problems of maintaining a presence in the SLP, the core of the left rank-and-file steeled themselves to conform to the bureaucratic twists and turns (and there were many) in order to have representation at the congress and fight the leadership. Future involvement was to be reviewed in the light of what happened there.

## The December congress

The second congress of the SLP took place on December 13-14, 1997. Well in advance of the congress itself it became clear that democracy was under concerted attack. One-third of the resolutions submitted – essentially all those from the left – had been ruled out of order on various pretexts. The rules on electing delegates had been very recently changed as part of a number of structural changes aimed at stifling dissent. It seemed clear that there would be a majority of Stalinists and Scargill loyalists amongst the 250 delegates.

As the meeting got under way a number of delegates stood up to challenge the fact that resolutions had been ruled out of order. The chair put the whole agenda to the vote and called for ratification of the constitution at the same time. Through this manoeuvre, anyone not in the know was pressurised to cast a loyalty vote for Scargill without a chance to hear what the real issues were.

There was then a group of resolutions on the question of membership eligibility, again unfathomable to an outsider. The constitution states that only people with one year's 'residency' in Britain can join the SLP, which has the effect of excluding, for example, asylum seekers, in a totally racist way. In the debate on the eligibility of Irish people to be members, rather than attacking the reactionary idea of citizenship the leadership put forward legalistic quibbles about what 'residency' means, and the resolutions on this question were either voted down or remitted. The possibility of organising the SLP within the North of Ireland was not ruled out, even though it is inconsistent

for those who oppose the partition of Ireland to support the continued organisation of British trade unions and workers' parties in any part of Ireland. We must stand for an independent all-Ireland basis of organisation.

An amendment to remove the provision for a Black Section from the constitution, supported by the leadership, was moved by Indian Workers' Association member Harpal Brar. In an animated speech, he argued against the self-organisation of Black people, describing it as tokenism. The voting on this issue was to cause probably the greatest controversy of the weekend.

### **Manipulating the block vote.**

On the eve of conference the North West, Cheshire and Cumbria Miners' Association (NWC&CMA) affiliated to the SLP. Under the constitution a trade union affiliate commands votes according to its membership figures. It would seem obvious that a miners' welfare association containing only ex-miners, and having no claim to be organising workers at the point of production, is not a trade union. But not in the SLP, and the NWC&CMA delegate was given 3,000 votes! The rest of the conference delegates had around 1,000 votes between them – so one Scargill-supporting delegate wielded an absolute majority of votes in the conference! The methods of operation used by Stalinists in the Labour Party have been transferred unchanged to the SLP.

Pandemonium had broken out after the first card vote of the congress was announced. The conference organisers had not bothered to tell delegates of the development with the NWC&CMA or the size of its voting block. When it came to the amendment to close down the Black Section, it appeared that it had been narrowly defeated until it was pointed out that the NWC&CMA vote hadn't been counted. The embarrassed top table mused over what to do, then called for the vote to be taken again. Naturally, it went heavily in favour of the amendment. During the furore a number of left delegates walked out of the conference to jeering and abuse from the Stalinist wing.

Members of the so-called 'Fourth International Supporters Caucus' (FISC), led by Carolyn and Pat Sikorski and Brian Heron, had known about the NWC&CMA block vote before congress and raised no objection to it, but when it was used to vote the Black Section out of existence they went ballistic. It seems that this move was an attack on them and their influence within the Black Section. Scargill had shifted to a

new tack and cemented an alliance with the IWA. Such is the level of principle in the SLP these days! After the result of the second vote, a procession of FISC-ites announced that they would not take up their seats if they were elected on to the NEC. The next day, a tearful Heron announced that they would!

After the walkouts, there was little real focus to the conference. It was a routinist crawl through a long agenda of resolutions. All of these went the way of the leadership or were remitted to the new NEC. Scargill used the block vote to determine every issue and to impose his slate for the NEC. Without the block vote, one of the left candidates would have been elected, with another in place if any resignation occurred during the term of the NEC. The leadership did everything it could to pretend that everything was fine with the party, but in fact many members whom the left had failed to organise tore up their cards as they left on the Saturday evening. The left groupings held a joint meeting of around 75 delegates which passed a motion condemning the stitching up of the conference.

### **After the congress**

Subsequently most of the left has resigned, either as individuals or as a

block around the Socialist Perspectives grouping, and the SLP is consolidating itself as a Stalinist party. At its inception, the SLP had some potential of becoming a force on the left, but the Scargill leadership has put paid to that. Many serious militants clearly feel that there is nothing to be gained from a prolonged dogfight with Scargill, the Stalinists and their fellow-travellers, and that now is the time to leave.

Socialist Perspectives is contacting SLP members to urge them to resign and participate in the debate on forming a new organisation outside the SLP – with the questions of joint activity and regroupment with other organisations of the left high on the agenda. Having played a small role within the SLP, Workers Action has been invited to participate in the discussion on the politics and programme of the new grouping, together with other forces. We will be arguing for a labour movement orientation and for revolutionary socialist politics and principles to be adopted. The intervention of revolutionary Marxists will be important in determining what will eventually emerge from this left split from the SLP, and Workers Action has a policy of positive engagement in this process.

**WA**

# Magnet strikers

by Pete Bloomer

**T**he struggle of the sacked Magnet Kitchens strikers goes on. Having put up with a wage freeze from 1993, workers at the company's Darlington factory took legal strike action in pursuit of a pay claim in August 1996.

That month management had offered 60 per cent of the workforce a three per cent increase and the rest nothing at all. After three years of what was in effect a three to four per cent annual pay cut, this derisory offer, coming at a time when the company was announcing healthy profits, was rejected by the workers, who voted instead for limited strike action. As has become all too common, the company sacked the strikers and since September 3 1996 the 350 workers have been engaged in a prolonged and bitter campaign to get their jobs back.

This is an official dispute, recognised by all four unions represented at the plant. Nevertheless, fellow trade union members

are making deliveries to the factory and collecting kitchen units made by scab labour. The union leaders are enforcing a strict policy of staying within the law.

The strikers have therefore concentrated their efforts on other forms of protest – a militant boycott campaign, the hounding of Magnet Kitchens executives, maintaining a 24-hour picket of the factory, establishing a women's support group, and building solidarity around the labour movement.

Trade unionists at local and regional levels have supported the strikers financially and helped keep the dispute going, and Magnet Kitchens is reported to be losing around £2.5 million each week. Unfortunately, these losses are being covered by Magnet's large parent company, Berisford, which so far seems to be prepared to sit out the dispute.

The frequent solidarity pickets of Magnet showrooms around the country, which have occasionally included occupations and other forms of disruption,

# Lessons of the Liverpool dockers' dispute

The Liverpool docks dispute which finished in defeat last January had run for nearly two and a half years. **Jim Dye**, President of Liverpool Trades Council, outlines the reasons for ending the dispute and what we can learn from it

The end of the Liverpool dockers' struggle, after 850 days of heroic resistance, is a serious set-back for the working class as a whole. The dockers stood as an inspiration to all workers who wanted to fight against the restrictive anti-trade union laws, the greed of the bosses, and the treachery of the Labour Party and trade union bureaucrats. Their sacking, for refusing to cross a picket line, was a deliberate attack by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) on effective trade union organisation within the Port of Liverpool.

So much is well known, and yet it is still possible for the Stalinist *Morning*

*Star* newspaper to attempt to explain their defeat through the lack of a legal ballot! This nonsense can only divert attention away from the terrible betrayal of the dockers by union leaders more concerned with their plush offices and expense accounts than the plight of their members.

At a meeting called by the dockers after the ending of the dispute, leading steward Jimmy Davies gave the reasons why the Port Shop Stewards' Committee had recommended acceptance of the company offer. First, and most importantly, there was the role of Bill Morris and the TGWU bureaucracy. TGWU executive

members, including Liverpool docker Mike Cardin, had been continually blocked in their attempts to organise meaningful support for the lock-out.

Second, there had been a fall in the effectiveness of international solidarity by other port workers around the world. An attempt to organise renewed blacking of Liverpool-bound ships from the USA had failed due to the threat of legal action against the New York-based International Longshoreman's Association, allowing the ACL shipping company to continue to sail to Liverpool.

Third, there had been a complete refusal by the newly-elected Labour government to intervene in the dispute, despite the fact that the state is a major shareholder in MDHC. The other significant factors were the lack of any solidarity action by other groups of workers in Britain and the increasing hardship of the men and their families. Over the course of the dispute, four of the dockers had died, which only added to the mounting demoralisation in a situation where the struggle appeared to have hit a dead end.

As a result, on January 26, the dockers voted by 3 to 1 in favour of accepting MDHC's pay-off, which amounted to back-dated redundancy packages of up to £28,000 per man, but provided no money whatsoever for the sacked Torside and Nelson Freight workers who were not direct employees of MDHC.

Could the outcome have been different? The starting point for answering this question is the state of the class struggle in the recent past. In Britain, there has been a low level of confidence and combativity within the working class for longer than any of us care to remember. Whilst this is perhaps about to change, the tragedy for the dockers was that it was always going to be hard to organise solidarity action. Their great achievement, however, was to set up an international network of support that did deliver significant action in many countries. This network will hopefully

## s keep on fighting

have proved a useful means of publicising the dispute and galvanising support. But when a large group like Berisford decides to take a loss, it will require more than just a consumer boycott to win reinstatement for the sacked strikers.

The anti-union laws mean that taking secondary action across the rest of the Berisford group is banned. Like the Liverpool dockers, the sacked Magnet workers and their families and communities are being held hostage by the Tory anti-union legislation, retained by New Labour. Meanwhile, the Labour government has shamefully awarded Berisford a multi-million pound contract for a construction project.

Rank-and-file activists in the unions must push for effective solidarity action in defiance of the law. It is necessary to develop a widespread understanding within the labour movement that this is the only way to change the situation and impose workers' interests against those of the bosses. Initiatives such as the Reclaim

Our Rights conference, the Free Trade Unions Campaign and others suggest that there is a renewed urgency around this question, but it is important to attempt to build a united campaign which focuses on the task of winning workers to a fightback against the anti-union laws.

The danger is that the left tends to regard paper affiliation to such campaigns as sufficient. What is needed is a commitment to fight for workers to take action. This is not an abstract issue of principle — rather, it is central to creating a more favourable political situation for the working class. It requires moving beyond single issue campaigns to the building of militant rank-and-file movements in the unions which can draw in wider sections of unorganised workers, provide an alternative leadership to the cowardly bureaucrats, and give workers the confidence to take collective action. The sacked strikers from Magnet, the Liverpool docks and Critchley Labels can play a key role in such a development.

**WA**

live on, although it always risked being compromised by union bureaucrats.

We can dismiss the SWP view that mass pickets were the key to winning the dispute. The port stretches for miles, with multiple entrances, so whilst mass pickets had an important symbolic and propaganda value, they could not have shut down the port's operations. For the same reason, occupations had only a limited success.

What was key to winning the dispute was the need to deal effectively with the union bureaucrats. The Broad Left within the TGWU was a complete failure when it came to mounting any kind of fightback against the leadership of Morris and Co. Small and with a secretive nature, the Broad Left could not even mobilise its own members to support the dockers, showing clearly that a rank-and-file based left grouping, that combines the best elements of the old Broad Left with an open democratic structure, is desperately needed in the TGWU. Whilst the winning of union positions is essential for such a body, any newly-elected left leadership must be accountable to the rank and file.

The immense moral authority of the dockers among union activists has given them a unique opportunity to spearhead the formation of a genuine rank-and-file organisation that could be the means to rid the union of the bureaucrats and return it to the members. But throughout the dispute this project was rejected by

the dockers' leaders on the grounds that it would give Morris the excuse he needed to stop all hardship payments and remove them from union premises. This view was mistaken — a political challenge to the leadership, which would expose Morris in front of those TGWU members who still view him as on the left, offered the only real hope of taking the dispute forward. Even now, dockers' leaders like Jimmy Nolan continue to reject the idea, saying only that they will offer support if others wish to call a rank-and-file conference to launch a campaign within the TGWU.

The reason for this reluctance lies in the politics of the dockers' shop stewards. Nolan is an SLP member who retains the outlook of the old Communist Party in relation to the unions. However, Nolan is also a genuinely nice person with, perhaps strangely, no apparent sectarian poison within him against, for example, Trotskyists. This may explain why he has received little criticism from large sections of the left. As others have said, we could do with more 'Stalinists' like Nolan in the unions, because in many respects he led the dispute well! But of course when it came to the task of seriously confronting the union bureaucracy Nolan had no answers.

TGWU members need to organise themselves quickly, hopefully with the support of the dockers, and lay the foundations of a new rank-and-file grouping. The betrayal of the dockers is another example of the danger the Labour Party

and union bureaucrats represent to any workers' struggle. For this reason, the dockers' fight should not be viewed as being over. We need to take it into our organisations, exposing the dirty role of the bureaucrats, so that when the class struggle intensifies the lessons of the dockers will not have been forgotten.

Even though the dockers have been defeated, in many ways they have also been liberated. This may seem a strange statement but, as Marx explained, consciousness is changed in struggle. The internationalism developed by the dockers, the immense importance of Women on the Waterfront in breaking down sexism, and the bonds that have developed with Asian women strikers at Hillingdon, and also with Kurdish and Turkish communities (it is common with dockers who have travelled all over the world to be especially appreciative of the warm welcome they received from workers on their visits to Turkey), have given a glimpse of what could happen in a period when the class struggle becomes generalised again.

The lock-out provided the time for, and indeed necessitated, political discussion. It made powerful socialist agitators out of those who never thought of themselves as anything other than 'ordinary' men and women. In fact, if the dispute proved only one thing, it is that ordinary people are more than capable of extraordinary achievements. Such is the basis of socialism, and our best hope for its victory. **WA**

# 150 Years in Struggle

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Ireland

# Reject the peace fraud!

As the Northern Ireland peace talks enter their closing stages, **Charli Langford** finds nothing at all progressive in the British government's terms of settlement

As we enter the 30th year of British military occupation of the north of Ireland we see the continuing process of the Sinn Féin leadership's sell out. When representatives leave Downing Street with words about 'getting our full rights' on their lips they have moved a long, long way from the original aim of ending partition through the 32-county republic. But this is the inevitable result of the acceptance of the unionist veto that was the precondition for Sinn Féin entering the 'peace process' over three years ago.

What is on offer in this process? Essentially, absolutely nothing. Any attempt to change the current situation is doomed by the insistence by the British government that 'the current constitutional status of Northern Ireland will not change save with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, clearly expressed'. The current constitutional status is that the six-county artificial statelet is part of the United Kingdom, and the 60 per cent to 40 per cent majority of this deeply divided people demands that it remain so. But the measures taken by the 60 per cent to maintain their majority and their relative privilege over the 40 per cent – from discrimination in housing and jobs, through denial of the right to vote, to violence and murder – were the cause of the troubles in the first place.

## Perfidious Albion

The British government has not always been so sensitive to support for majority decisions. The very setting up of the fake state in 1921 was against the majority of the people of the then united Ireland, clearly expressed, in the elections of 1918. In this election 28 of the 32 counties of Ireland returned Sinn Féin MPs, two were split between Sinn Féin and unionists, and two returned only unionists. Rather than recognise this immense majority, Britain added up the unionist vote by counties, managed to make two and two halves add up to six (by adding two counties which had returned only Sinn Féin MPs) because that gave a marginally more viable politi-

cal entity, and partitioned Ireland. Many of the nationalists in the six counties were driven out of their homes and expelled over the border into the 'Irish Free State' – as the southern 26-county entity was originally known. Hundreds who refused to go were killed. By these means those remaining were terrorised into acceptance of the *fait accompli*.

The purpose of this colonial land-grab was two-fold. Britain retained possession of the most economically developed part of Ireland, and also maintained a measure of control over the south. The state formed was originally named 'Ulster' – even though the Irish province of Ulster contained nine counties. Unfortunately the nine-county Ulster had a nationalist majority and Britain required as large an area as possible while maintaining an adequate loyalist majority.

The reason for the north-east corner of Ireland being the only area with a sizeable unionist population was that over many years people had been moving from Scotland to Ireland as economic migrants. They had a historic link to Scotland and hence Britain, and came from a slightly more industrialised society – they would be agricultural workers rather than peasants, and in later years urban workers rather than agricultural workers. They would develop their own bourgeoisie from small factory-owners rather than from farmers. They were Presbyterians, while the great majority in Ireland was Catholic. Thus there was a ready-made religious divide within the new state; rural workers and farmers tended to be Catholic and to relate to Ireland as a whole, while the urban working class and still more so the bourgeoisie would be Protestant with a link to Britain. The urban Protestantism was also reinforced by Huguenot immigrants, mainly linen workers, fleeing from persecution by Catholics in France in the early 1800's. This religious divide was immediately taken up by the bourgeoisie in the slogan of 'a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people'. The prime factor in Northern Irish history since partition has

been revolts by the nationalist minority and suppression by the majority, aided since 1968 by the presence of British troops, with the social causes of the conflict disguised as a religious difference.

## Nationalist tactics fail

The current peace process merely re-establishes the northern statelet almost exactly as it was at the start of the present 'troubles' in 1968. Of the various bodies proposed in the 1995 'Framework Document', the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA), with a Unionist majority and answerable to Westminster, is the only one of any importance. Sinn Féin is promoting the North-South Council as a path towards a united Ireland, but this body is answerable to both the NIA and the Irish government. Leaving aside the problem that the southern government is essentially Westminster's poodle, the NIA will readily exercise its veto if Unionist interests are threatened, so the North-South Council is rendered irrelevant. The Protestant parliament for the Protestant people lives on.

The only change from 1968 is that the southern government intends holding a referendum to change its constitution to recognise the northern state and to give up its historic claim to be the government of the whole of Ireland. This is an attack on the IRA, which has always drawn its legitimacy from the history of being the army of the united Irish state, of the illegal Dáil that assembled in Dublin as a result of the 1918 election (which was intended to supply MPs to a British parliament) and was the springboard of Irish independence.

The armed struggle of the IRA – which is part of the struggle of an oppressed people for self-determination and therefore must be supported by all socialists – failed to achieve its objective. It became unreasonable for anyone to believe that a guerrilla war in industrialised cities could defeat a well-equipped modern army after the taking of Free Derry by British troops early in the 1970's. But in abandoning this for the seat at the conference table Sinn Féin has swapped one

disastrous tactic for another. Certainly the IRA seems to be the only organisation to have observed any form of cease-fire at all this year as the loyalist gangs continue random vengeance attacks on Catholics.

### The orange card

The loyalist response to the situation is entirely predictable. Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble makes ritual denunciations of nationalists but he won't leave the talks – he expects to be chief minister of the NIA. He represents the unionist bourgeoisie, anxious to get on with exploiting the working class and aiming for a safe Northern Ireland that can benefit from European regional funding. The paramilitaries, who represent the loyalist working class and see themselves as having most to lose if any concessions are given to Sinn Féin, continue the politics of sectarian violence.

While only a minority of the loyalist working class supports the paramilitaries, loyalist workers remain relatively privileged compared to nationalists and a large majority feel threatened with the loss of these privileges. This has always been the stumbling block for simplistic notions of class-based politics in the six counties. The partition of Ireland, giving the minority unionists their own statelet to rule in the north, has created a siege mentality among northern loyalists which IRA military tactics have done nothing to undermine. The 'orange card' has always been played when sporadic working class unity has broken out. The persistent use of an artificially-created loyalist majority to deny the national self-determination of the majority in the island makes smashing the border inseparable from the class struggle, and any working class action has to take this into account.

### Needed - a mass movement

The nationalist military units – working-class, but by necessity secretive and elitist – have proved incapable of leading a mass movement in the working class. The Sinn Féin leadership has used class-based rhetoric in the past but has always subsumed class action to military action. The prime example of this was the hunger strikes of 1981 where a huge mass movement formed in Ireland and there were demonstrations internationally. Sinn Féin's response was to use the fact that the hunger strikers were (mainly) IRA members to declare itself the leadership with the right to guide the movement. This was only partially successful and as the hunger strikes came to a close Sinn Féin, partly in fear of an activist organisation forming which they could not control, partly through inability to understand the potential for such an organisation, put all their efforts into winding the

Hunger Strike Committees up.

What is needed is a campaign of mass action uniting nationalists and socialists. The 'republican congress' that Bernadette McAliskey was calling for last year and the 32-County Sovereignty Committee groups (whose spokesperson is Bernadette Sands-McKevitt, sister of the hunger striker Bobby Sands) could perhaps be starting points for such a campaign. This would provide the forum where nationalists and socialists can refound a movement for Irish national liberation.

We support the defence of nationalist communities under the democratic control of the communities themselves – this is particularly important in the present tense situation surrounding the peace talks, with sectarian attacks on Catholics on the increase. Because any form of working class activity

in the six counties has to take account of partition as key to the oppression of Catholic workers, socialists have to relate to the national question. The resolution of workers' oppression in Ireland can only begin to happen on an all-Ireland scale. **WA**

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# Róisín released

After 16 months' imprisonment on remand, Róisín McAliskey was freed on March 9. Home Secretary Jack Straw gave as the reason 'medical evidence in her case would make the extradition unjust and oppressive'. Her mother, Bernadette McAliskey, said that Róisín's week-long detention at Castlereagh holding centre when she was arrested in November 1996 had caused her severe psychological damage and that she plans to sue the British government and the RUC.

But even this welcome announcement is clouded by British and loyalist hatred. Róisín was held to await extradition to Germany for alleged involvement in a mortar attack on the British army barracks in Osnabruck. The evidence linking her to this attack is an identification by photograph by the landlord of a holiday home that the suspected bombers rented, and a fingerprint on the cellophane foil from a cigarette packet that German police claim matches Róisín's. The landlord has stated on German TV that he did not identify Róisín and the fingerprint – if it is Róisín's – could have been made on a shared packet many days before. Róisín also has several alibi witnesses who saw her in Ireland at the time of the bombing. The former Labour Solicitor-General Lord Archer of Sandwell reported to Straw that 'on the evidence available it is most unlikely that the Crown Prosecution Service in England would initiate a prosecution'. Despite the clear evidence of innocence Straw made the release order on medical grounds. This has left the way open for Ian Paisley to claim

that the release was a sop to the republican movement, an appeasement of Sinn Féin, and for Tory shadow Home Secretary Brian Mawhinney to expect her to recover miraculously.

All the evidence pertaining to Róisín's case has been available for well over a year. It seems likely that Ian Paisley was right, though for the wrong reasons. Róisín has been detained until a politically expedient time came for her release, which is a sop to the republicans and probably the only one they will get in the present peace process. On an honest assessment of the evidence at the time she was arrested she would have been released immediately. It was her ill fortune to be her mother's daughter, and to have had to wait 16 months before the British could make a political gain from releasing her. She has been freed on medical grounds in order to protect the British government from the ignominy of having to release yet another Irish person as innocent after a long period of incarceration. Her release on medical grounds leaves a lingering suspicion that maybe she is guilty in the minds of the uninformed, and permits Paisley and Mawhinney to slander her.

Róisín's solicitor, Gareth Peirce, is extremely concerned about her mental health. She says: 'It's chilling to have the clearest possible evidence that practices that are allegedly part of routine daily police interrogations in Northern Ireland can lead to complete mental breakdown.' Having echoed Paisley, let us now echo Mawhinney and wish her a speedy, if not miraculous, recovery. **WA**

# New inquiry into Bloody Sunday killings

The British government has announced a new inquiry into the Bloody Sunday massacre of January 30, 1972. **Charli Langford** catalogues just a few of the derelictions, distortions and demonstrable untruths of the original

The mere fact that there will be a new inquiry suggests that the original by Lord Widgery in 1972 is now so widely accepted as untrustworthy that it can no longer be presented as official truth. While there is every reason to suppose that the new inquiry will be nothing more than a damage-limitation exercise and will whitewash whoever and wherever it can, we should follow the lead of the relatives of the 14 men murdered and offer a cautious welcome.

There has been a great deal written about Bloody Sunday, several TV documentaries, and the Irish government has produced a 180-page dossier summarising the findings. The new inquiry will have to consider all these questions. Socialists should be following the inquiry and using it to expose the lies that the British government has been hiding behind for over quarter of a century.

But already among New Labour ministers there are those who would rather defend the army than see any justice. George Robertson, the Defence Secretary, flew to the six counties on the day of the announcement to reassure British troops of the government's support for them. He confirmed that he had opposed the new inquiry.

A key question for this new inquiry is immunity for witnesses. The inquiry announcement does not offer blanket immunity to the perpetrators of the killings. A number of Tory MPs and Menzies Campbell (the Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson) have asked for immunity to be given. The tribunal of inquiry will have the power to ask the Attorney General to give immunity on an individual basis. The implication is that any soldier at risk of prosecution will be given immunity. The relatives will have no power to challenge this, since the nature of the evidence will not be known to them until the immunity is given. Nor will there be a chance to challenge in the European courts since security matters

within the member states are excluded from the remit of the European courts.

Among the most damning facts that the new inquiry will have to consider is that much of the information now being presented was available to Widgery in 1972, but he chose to ignore it or wilfully misrepresent it in order to justify the actions of the troops. The notes of a meeting on January 31, 1972, between Prime Minister Edward Heath, Lord Chancellor Hailsham and Lord Widgery show Heath saying to Widgery that 'we are in Northern Ireland fighting not only a military war but a propaganda war', and Hailsham suggesting that 'the Treasury Solicitor would need to brief Counsel for the army'. The Treasury Solicitor's task was to ensure the impartiality of the inquiry; it seems a large departure from impartiality to brief the lawyer for the party being inquired into. It is difficult to come to any other conclusion than that Widgery was instructed by Heath and Hailsham to bring in a pro-army judgement irrespective of the evidence, and the impartial solicitor was instructed to help the army conceal and doctor evidence.

Widgery appears to have taken his instructions seriously. Of 500 eye-witness accounts available he read only 15. Among the allegations in the statements which he ignored were:

- That wounded victims were subsequently deliberately killed by soldiers.
- That at least one youth was shot dead while holding up his hands in an attitude of surrender. This is supported by medical evidence — one of those killed was struck in the left armpit by a bullet which exited through the right armpit without causing any damage to either arm.
- That shots were fired at those attending the wounded.
- That none of those killed possessed any weapons — a point directly at odds with army statements.
- That shots were fired from the Derry

walls (where 8 Infantry had snipers). Later forensic evidence of bullet trajectories shows three people were killed by bullets fired from 45 degrees above them.

Widgery also had evidence of the shots from Derry walls from recordings of British Army and RUC radio messages. He ruled this evidence as inadmissible since it is illegal for civilians to listen to police and army radio messages.

The firing from the Derry walls is very important. The British army has all along refused to admit to the use of snipers on Bloody Sunday. Widgery failed to obtain any statements from troops from 8 Infantry. By ignoring these shots and manifestly making an erroneous identification of the cause of death of three victims the report is rendered worthless. Furthermore, the shots from the walls suggest a degree of planning by the British army that went beyond the declared intention of the Bloody Sunday operation to make arrests. It suggests that killings were intended.

The Treasury Solicitor, the guardian of impartiality, was concealing evidence. He received at least 41 statements from soldiers that were not passed on to the counsel for the relatives. These statements were released from the Public Record Office in 1996. They contain several discrepancies and alterations which the relatives' solicitor was unable to cross examine on. There were an unspecified number of further statements made which the Public Records Office will not release until 2047, which were also held back from relatives' solicitors. In his report, Widgery said that the troops gave their evidence 'with confidence and without hesitation or prevarication and withstood a rigorous cross-examination without contradicting themselves or each other'. In the light of his knowledge of the earlier contradictory statements this is clearly a statement

intended to deceive – unless Widgery is praising the soldiers ability to lie convincingly under oath.

The Tribunal Secretary, a Mr W.J. Smith, had a large pro-army bias which was taken up by Widgery. The supposedly impartial secretary suggested pro-army comments to the supposedly impartial Tribunal Solicitor for his summing up. He spotted discrepancies in one statement and arranged for Widgery to 'deal' with them. He drafted Widgery's comments on the supposed weapons used by those killed, and also the apportionment of blame to those in Northern Ireland 'who systematically employ violence to try to make their views prevail'. He is not thought to be referring to the British army here.

Probably the most damning evidence of what happened on Bloody Sunday comes from a paratrooper identified as AA and forwarded to the Irish government in February 1997. According to AA, paratroopers engaged in the robbery, beatings, torture, mutilation and murder of civilians in Northern Ireland. He says that on Bloody Sunday

the troops had been told by their officer to make some 'kills', that they had a supply of unrecorded ammunition which they had dum-dummed, and that they shot at unarmed civilians. He says he saw paratroopers kill four unarmed men including one already wounded, that soldiers had lied to the tribunal, and that his statement to the tribunal had been altered by tribunal members. The eyewitness statements made to the tribunal of what happened in Glenfada Park match AA's statements very closely. Forensic experts say that the wound on one of the Rossville Street victims, Bernard McGuigan, suggests the use of a dum-dum bullet. AA says he was given number 027 by the Widgery tribunal for making his statement. The version of statement number 027 released by the British Public Record Office is very similar to AA's account, though it removes him from the scene of the firing.

Probably the most damning evidence of Widgery's bias towards the army is in his approach to the evidence around the killing of Gerald Donaghy. The army report on his death was that

he had four nail-bombs in his pockets. A nail-bomb 'looks very much like half a brick' (the quote is from Lord Widgery). However, Gerald was wearing very tight denim jeans at the time – clearly incapable of concealing four half-bricks. These supposed nail-bombs had been missed by his friends who took him into a house after he had been shot, the inhabitants of the house, the civilian doctor who tried to save his life, and an army doctor who examined him twice, once to confirm death and again to investigate the nature of his wounds. Widgery's conclusion on this contradictory evidence was that the balance of probabilities suggested that the bombs had been in Gerald's pockets all the time and only noticed on the sixth examination by the army. In his summary, he said: 'The alternative explanation of a plant is mere speculation.'

There is no evidence that British soldiers were fired upon on Bloody Sunday. There is no filmed evidence of possession of guns by anyone other than police or British soldiers. No guns were ever recovered. **WA**

## Asian financial crisis

# Reject IMF loan conditions!

The rapid-growth economies of East Asia have long been held up as a model by European and American capitalists, who encouraged their investment and their work practices. Now, many of these 'Tiger' economies are technically bankrupt and the International Monetary Fund has moved in to rescue them – at a price. **Jonathan Joseph reports.**

**T**he most extraordinary case is that of South Korea, the 11th largest economy in the world, which is having to be bailed out by a record IMF loan. As the country's economic growth slowed down, it became impossible to finance the vast debts built up by the big manufacturing companies (or chaebols). For years, South Korean capitalism was able to rely on cheap loans, a lax regulatory environment, and protection from foreign take-overs. The average annual growth rate of 8.6 per cent meant that there was plenty of money to lend, but this was not matched

by the development of adequate financial planning.

The rest of East Asia is no better off and the same picture of slowing growth, failing banks, contracting credit and bad loans emerges. When the crash came it left the banks hopelessly over-extended, having lent huge sums to schemes that were never likely to provide a return on investment. But the scale of the problem has been such that even productive companies have gone bankrupt, and thus defaulted on their repayments to the banks. Since loans accounted for a very large portion of

the banks' capital, they were thrown into crisis, and this in turn put the central banks under pressure.

If the problem is more exaggerated in Korea, it is because of the size of the economy and the weight that manufacturing industry occupies in it. Korean governments used the banks as tools of industrial policy and consequently the problem of bad debt seriously affects the chaebols. Because they can no longer obtain credit, the chaebols are being forced to cut back their operations drastically in order to survive.

Speculation was particularly strong in the property market, which has now collapsed leaving huge projects unfinished. Coupled with this has been a currency crisis. For years, a stable exchange rate was taken for granted, but now a wholesale currency devaluation has taken place throughout the region, making it expensive to pay off dollar-denominated loans. The Korean currency, the won, for example, lost half its value against the dollar in the course of 1997.

For the time being, the IMF has stepped in with loans of \$57 billion to South Korea, \$43 billion to Indonesia and \$17.2 billion to Thailand. But these amounts are already looking too small. It has attached stringent conditions to its loans, forcing the stricken countries to adopt the fiscal mechanisms employed in the West, to deregulate the labour market, and to open up their economies to foreign take-overs. Governments have been told that in order to avoid a serious slump, a huge restructuring of the financial sector and an overhaul of the banking and credit system is necessary.

An important question is how the crisis will be felt in Japan and China. So far, China has only been affected in a small way, mainly because of the protected nature of Chinese capitalism and the fact that the currency is not convertible. However, the Hong Kong stock market dropped dramatically and it is inevitable that there will be a growing impact on China.

The Japanese economy has stalled and there have been a large number of bankruptcies. The collapse of Yamaichi Securities, Japan's fourth largest stockbroking firm, was spectacular by any standards. It was the biggest ever bankruptcy in Japan, and was accompanied by the collapse of other large institutions like Sanyo Securities and the Hokkaido Takushoku bank. The country has been saddled with bad debts since its property and stock markets crashed in 1990. Whilst many Japanese firms have been restructured, this has not extended to the banking system, and most banks have concealed losses and debts similar to those that brought down Yamaichi.

The Japanese government has been reluctant to deal with its financial crisis – either by letting a number of companies go to the wall or by investing public funds to regulate the economy – for fear of losing public support. Eventually, however, the resignation of finance minister Hiroshi Mitsuzuka after a corruption scandal in

his ministry was used as an excuse for an 'emergency' injection of three trillion yen from public funds.

But the crisis in Japan, where the manufacturing base remains strong, is not as severe as elsewhere in East Asia. Indeed, Japan will probably suffer more as a result of the knock-on effects of the crisis in other Asian economies. Forty-four per cent of its exports go to Asian markets, as opposed to 30 per cent of the USA's, and nine per cent of the EU's.

It is predicted that the Asian crisis will reduce the US growth rate by between 0.5 and 1.0 per cent, and worsen its trade deficit as markets for US exports shrink due to the lack of credit and Asian imports become cheaper. Already, some inward investment into Britain from East Asia has been withdrawn or frozen, and jobs have been lost. Seven per cent of Britain's export trade is with the affected region and companies can now expect a decline in orders, on top of that already being felt because of the overvalued pound. There is no doubt that the crisis is having a global impact.

The crisis is also intensifying class struggles. Three thousand car workers clashed with police in Bangkok, Thailand. In Indonesia, where the mass of the people have been particularly hard hit by the financial melt-down, there have been riots over soaring food prices and large-scale mobilisations of the army. Some of the violence has been directed against the Chinese minority and there is no doubt that other governments will also attempt to whip up nationalism as a way of deflating the crisis.

In South Korea, the effects of the IMF intervention will be far more seri-

ous, and it is certain that the country will suffer a recession and negative growth this year. The ruling class has tried to turn the crisis into a display of national unity, applauding the patriotism of those handing over their savings and jewellery. At the insistence of the IMF, the new president, Kim Dae-jung has announced laws making it easier to sack workers. This, it will be recalled, was this issue at the centre of the last wave of strikes and mass demonstrations in 1996. It is predicted that unemployment will treble and wages will be cut if the government and the IMF get their way. But South Korea has the most organised working class in the region and the unions are promising action.

Those on the left who claim that we are on the verge of a world crisis are unfortunately guilty of wishful thinking and fantasy politics. The crisis is very specific to the problems of the region. A number of countries with unreformed financial sectors, and ruling classes which have thrived on nepotism, have been unable to cope with the inevitable slowing down of the East Asian boom. Other countries, which have introduced free market reforms in parallel with tighter regulation, cannot be expected to suffer a similar financial collapse, although they will certainly feel some sort of knock-on effect. The world economy is not as 'globalised' as many wish to believe. But whilst this guards us against the idea that the whole world economy might be about to contract 'Asian flu', the effects of the struggles of workers in South Korea, Indonesia and elsewhere in the region, as they fight the IMF-imposed austerity measures, are potentially significant for us all. **WA**

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Stalinist collapse continues

# The Chinese road to capitalism

**Nick Davies** assesses how far the Communist Party bureaucracy has advanced towards transforming China into a capitalist state

The 15th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held last September, decreed that 10,000 of China's 13,000 large- and medium-sized state enterprises are to be sold off. If this giant car boot sale goes ahead, it will extend deep into China the wild west capitalism already established in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the south and east.

Also in September, the World Bank published a report called *China 2020*. It paints a rosy picture of China's economic prospects, describing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth between 1978 and 1995 as 'blistering'. It predicts that by 2020 China will have the world's second largest economy after the USA, and that the Chinese, many of whom live on a dollar a day, will be lifted out of poverty. For the economic success story to continue, the report recommends a harsh regime of privatisation, involving a reorganisation of state enterprises, a 'shakedown' of labour, mergers, sales and bankruptcies, as well as a restructuring of the banking system.

## World bank gets it wrong

*China 2020* makes four assumptions. Assumption number one is that China will not be vulnerable to shifts in the world economy. That assumption is already dead in the water. *China 2020* was barely off the press when East Asia, from South Korea to Indonesia, began to drown in a sea of bad debt. If the Asian economic crisis is already making waves in the sophisticated economies of the USA and Britain, what effect will it have in Beijing?

Assumption number two is that there will be a ready market for loss-making, decaying, polluting industries, using obsolete plant, with a workforce entitled, at least in theory, to a job and basic social guarantees. Addressing the annual meeting of the World Bank and the IMF in Hong Kong last year, Prime Minister Li Peng acknowledged that

foreign-funded ventures now accounted for 20 per cent of China's GDP. However, investors from abroad will only invest on their own terms — where there is a reasonable chance of a rapid return on investment at minimal risk. Possibly significantly, the amount pledged by investors in the first half of 1997 was only half that of the corresponding period in 1996. What is more likely is that the enterprises will be taken over lock, stock and barrel, or else cannibalised by the existing managers. Many of China's 118,000 industrial concerns are degenerating into private fiefdoms. Officials are blatantly enriching themselves, reportedly paying their night-club bills with company cheques in some cases. The CCP is already expelling over 2,000 members *per month* for corruption. These, of course, are scapegoats. Corruption is so built into the system that it is hard to see privatisation as resulting in anything other than a frenzy of asset-stripping.

Assumption number three is that there need be no correlation between economics and politics; that massive economic upheaval can take place without any effect

on China's particularly monolithic and repressive brand of Stalinism. In the USSR, Gorbachev, in his linking of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, saw the connection. However, the Chinese regime and, it appears, its Western backers, deny that this connection exists, stating that there can be no democracy until everyone is fed and clothed. How long can the leadership actively encourage individualism in the economic sphere whilst making it a criminal offence in the political one? How long can it either ignore the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, or peddle the myth that the demonstrations were a counter-revolutionary plot? There may be differences in the party leadership over this question. During the Congress, Beijing was abuzz over an open letter to the party, purportedly written by Zhao Ziyang (a former leader, sacked and placed under house arrest for apparent sympathy with the demonstrators), calling for the party to re-examine the question of Tiananmen Square.

## Beware the workers

The fourth assumption is the most important. It is that the working class will put up with mass sackings, rocketing prices and the destruction of the existing basic welfare provisions without a murmur. Already, seven per cent of China's urban workforce are unemployed, or have, as the official phrase has it, 'stood down from their posts'. Confidential government figures put the figure at about 25 per cent, and in some areas such as Manchuria even higher. In theory, they receive a monthly allowance of 200 yuan (about £25), but usually it doesn't arrive and most of them rely on street trading or cottage industries to get by. In this daily struggle for existence they are competing with the huge influx of refugees from rural poverty. So far, the leadership has been able to contain this situation; so far, the workers have turned to individual solutions, rather

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than collective ones. But these individual solutions won't do in the long run, and taking the privatisation project away from the SEZs and into the heart of China could result in brutality and starvation that would be a capitalist mirror-image of Mao's Great Leap Forward. Such a catastrophe, and the workers' possible response to it, was the spectre haunting the 15th Congress.

According to the Western media, the new paramount leader, Zhaing Zemin, is burying what is left of Chinese 'socialism'. According to the Orwellian mumbo-jumbo of the Chinese leadership, free-market capitalism is in fact 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. What are we to make of this? Is China socialist, or capitalist? If it is not socialist now, was it ever? The job of revolutionary Marxists is not just to describe, but also to point a way forward, even if we cannot influence events directly. If we are to say where China should be going, we need to know where it is, and where it has come from. In the case of a society in transition, a complex and contradictory reality such as China, this need is greater, not less. Concretely, from the point of view of the Chinese working class, are they up against a capitalist system, or is their struggle in the context of a still collectivised economy?

### **Analysing the Chinese Communist Party**

The CCP which took power from the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) in 1949 was a very different party from that driven by its erstwhile KMT allies from its urban strongholds in Shanghai and Canton in the 1920s. In the course of the 'Long March' to the remote north-west and its guerrilla war against the KMT and the occupying Japanese, it developed into a largely peasant organisation in terms of its composition, and to some extent in terms of its ideology, although its relationship with Moscow meant that it maintained the corrupted and degenerated version of Marxism that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had imposed on its satellites following the rise of Stalin and the defeat of Trotsky's Left Opposition. Almost from the outset, there were two contending factions, one 'radical' and one 'cautious', who fought a decades-long struggle, by turns open and covert. The murderous lunacy of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao and a purge of his supporters by the faction of Deng Xiaoping. There was nothing to choose between these two factions. Mao's barrack-room socialism by terror was no more socialist than Deng's 'modernising' adoption of the capitalist road was democratic, as the Tiananmen Square demonstrators will confirm.

Nevertheless, the coming to power of the CCP did not simply leave things as they were. The property relations which existed in the USSR were extended into China – capitalists and landlords were expropriated, and a state monopoly of foreign trade was imposed. Capitalist economic relations, based on the production and sale of commodities, including labour power, ceased to exist in the way that they did in the West and the rest of Asia. Certain basic guarantees in terms of employment, along with free, compulsory education and free health care, were introduced. China was not 'socialist', any more than the USSR was. In each case, decision making lay not with workers and their organisations but with a vast, self-serving, unaccountable bureaucracy. The bureaucrats were prepared to defend state property not because they were socialists, but, as we have seen, because their considerable power and privileges derived from it. As we have also seen, if capitalism appeared to offer greater nest-feathering potential, then they would convert themselves into capitalists, as their partners-in-crime in the former USSR have done.

### **Characterising the state**

Because of these post-capitalist property relations presided over by a counter-revolutionary bureaucracy, revolutionary Marxists have characterised China as, for want of a better term, a deformed workers' state. We have argued for defence of the property relations against capitalist restoration, from within or without, and for the overthrow of the bureaucracy. It is now time to change our characterisation of China. In defining the class nature of a state, revolutionary Marxists should disregard the labels applied by the state apparatus, but instead ask the question: what are the property relations defended by that state apparatus? In the case of China we should qualify the question slightly: what are the property relations most energetically encouraged and fostered by the state apparatus, the pre-existing state sector or the newer, rapidly expanding, private sector? The question almost answers itself. It is not just a question of which sector is the majority in terms of volume, or output, of GDP, but of the dynamics of the economy, and the society, as a whole.

China is moving towards capitalism, although a market economy has not been completely restored. For the foreseeable future we are likely to see a deformed, semi-state-capitalism, with the bureaucracy substituting itself for the capitalist class, which, other than in the SEZs, is only starting to exist. The crucial development is not the relatively localised, and controlled, SEZs, or the dismantling of the state agri-

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cultural communes. It is the decision of the 15th Congress to extend the privatisation of the economy into China as a whole. This decision, the logic of which flows from the erosion of the gains of the 1949 revolution caused by the preceding measures, shows that the CCP bureaucracy has abandoned any defence whatsoever of post-capitalist property relations. If the decision is acted upon methodically, and there is no reason to suppose that it won't be, then we should start to characterise China as a capitalist state.

### **Workers' tasks in the transition.**

Capitalism in China will be like capitalism everywhere else. It will make some people very rich and the rest poor. The big losers will be the millions of workers – their jobs will go, and basic necessities will be beyond them. We have seen how in Russia the restoration of capitalism brought rampant inflation, the virtual collapse of health care provision, and the rise of ruthless and predatory mafia warlords. To have any chance of defending themselves the working class has to turn from individual solutions to collective ones. It has to overcome the atomisation brought about by decades of repression and the imposition of official state-controlled 'unions', to develop its own independent organisations which can start with basic workers' self-defence – for example, defending enterprises against sell-off or closure, or fighting for wages to keep up with prices. Success in workers' self-defence can make more real the prospect of genuine socialism, and spell defeat for the would-be profiteers be they in the World Bank or the Great Hall of the People. **WA**

Iraq

# US and Britain out of the Gulf! Lift the sanctions!

The immediate prospect of the bombing of Iraq has receded now that UN secretary-general Kofi Annan has returned from Baghdad with Iraqi deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz's signature on a piece of paper. The important question now is for how long will the threat will be lifted? **Charli Langford** reports.

The indications from the US are that the conflict is merely delayed. The present crisis began in September 1997, when Iraq told the UN that the presence of personnel from the US and Britain — the two states that had played the greatest role in the 1991 war — among the weapons inspection teams of the UN special commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) was tantamount to spying, and that the sites of Saddam Hussein's presidential palaces were off limits to the inspectors. The war of words continued into early 1998, when a 16-strong weapons inspection team arrived in Iraq. In a clear provocation, the team contained 14 US or British personnel. On January 13, this team was refused admission to a presidential site and the US response, immediately backed by Britain, was to threaten to bomb Iraq into compliance.

The Annan-Aziz agreement allows for 'immediate, unconditional and unrestricted' access to all suspected weapons sites to the weapons inspectors. The three Iraqi demands — that the 'presidential sites' not be inspected, that the UNSCOM inspectors be independent, and that there be a deadline for UNSCOM to finish its work — have been brushed aside. The only concession, an essentially meaningless one, is that UNSCOM teams inspecting the presidential sites will be accompanied by senior diplomats appointed by Kofi Annan. Clearly, the Iraqis have gained nothing of consequence from the agreement. Its sole function is to allow the fiction that Iraq has backed down to the UN rather than to the US.

But the US government will make the decision to bomb or not regardless of the UN. Clinton has now dropped his previous position of enforcing UN resolutions. 'It is a matter of the US national interest,' he says. It is irrelevant that this volte-face may appear crude to the rest of the world; it is

intended for internal consumption. US internal propaganda now has to acclimatise the US people to the possibility of receiving their soldiers back in body-bags.

There is now to be a permanent military presence in the Gulf. The US combat forces are two aircraft carriers and 18 other ships, 30,000 troops, and at least 160 warplanes (with another 50 based in Turkey); Britain has one carrier, 20 aircraft and 2,500 troops. At least four more carrier groups, three from the US and one from Britain, are also moving in. Smaller contingents are promised by Holland, Australia, Canada and Poland.

Notable absences from the military task force are Russia, most European states and all the Arab states. The only Arab state offering any political support is Kuwait. Saudi Arabia (providing bases for more than 100 US aircraft) has flatly refused permission for attacks on Iraq from Saudi territory or through Saudi airspace. There is no support from Bahrain, where the US Fifth Fleet is based.

## Hypocrisy

There is a stench, rather than a whiff, of hypocrisy in the US attitude. Iraq is attacked for building 'weapons of mass destruction' by the only state ever to use a nuclear weapon in anger. Iraq has anthrax (perhaps) — a poor weapon, taking far too long to work and with a huge risk of blowing back at the side using it, while the US has nerve gases capable of killing in extreme pain almost instantaneously. Saddam Hussein is a 'terrorist', but the US threatens mass destruction on the Iraqi people. What else is terrorism but an attack on non-combatants, on defenceless civilians, rather than the enemy's armed forces?

The US and Britain are also the prime suppliers to Iraq of delivery systems for

these 'weapons of mass destruction' — without which the biosubstances would be useless. The SCUD missiles fired against Tel Aviv and Haifa in the 1991 war were also the products of the allies. Britain and the US have objected strenuously to use of Iraqi weapons against other states, but have made no protest when Iraq attacked the Kurds and the Shia Muslims in Iraq. Britain and the US will gladly take Saddam's money to allow him to conduct terrorist operations in Iraq.

The sanctions against Iraq — which are having a major affect on the availability of food and medicine despite the Clinton / Blair assurances to the contrary — are a weapon designed explicitly to attack the general non-combatant population. The Iraqi government will merely arrange that its own inner circle is supplied first, before distributing the remainder to the general population. The very young and the very old, those parts of the population that are the least threat to any external power, will suffer most. Sanctions are themselves a terrorist weapon.

## War aims

Why is this happening now? The idea that it is to drive Billy's willy from the front pages is a non-starter — any threat to Clinton at home would come from the Republicans, but impeachment of Clinton would promote the squeaky clean and less right-wing Al Gore and give him time to establish himself for re-election, and Republican front-runner Newt Gingrich has his own problems on the family loyalty front.

We should also avoid the knee-jerk revolutionary view that the purpose of the military build-up is to guard against a popular uprising in any of the Gulf states. While revolutionary Marxists such as ourselves understand that the only route to the liberation of the Arab masses is to overthrow



both their own ruling classes and the global rulers as well, we have to take some account of present reality. There is no evidence that any of the Gulf states' ruling families is facing organised dissent. In fact, the Iraqi working class appear very clear that the prime cause of their impoverishment is the application of economic sanctions as a consequence of losing the 1991 war. Saddam Hussein is popular in Iraq precisely because he is opposing the US; the rulers of the nearby Arab states find it convenient to support domestic pro-Iraq public opinion.

The most probable reason is that the US ruling class feels that its position as leader of the 'new world order' needs to be restated. It is seven years since the last Gulf war and the events of ex-Yugoslavia do not carry an obvious 'Made in USA' stamp. There are also seven years' worth of new military tactics and equipment that need a live exercise. More importantly, political developments in the other capitalist blocs – the European Union and East Asia – have been in the direction of coming together, so a chance to drive wedges of difference into these blocs and re-emphasise traditional pro-US sentiment is in the US interest.

This is also the explanation of Tony Blair's actions. The Gulf war alliance has broken down but the US has tested the British poodle and it remains loyal. Caught in the contradiction of implementing Thatcherite policies from within a government that came to power on a popular revulsion against the social and economic consequences of Thatcherism, and unable to publicly articulate this political project, Blair is reduced to a series of attacks against the weakest groups in society. His reliance on the traditional British working class loyalty to Labour is now bolstered by an appeal to anti-European sentiment and to the traditional anglophone alliance. If the US need a shooting war to emphasise its domination, New Labour can use it to appeal to war-effort patriotism. Britain looks like being the number two player in the forthcoming conflict; opportunities for national and self aggrandisement are likely to be few in the next few years so this is a rare opportunity for a third-rate politician to strut the global stage.

### The Arab states

The alliance with the Arab states that offered political cover for the 1991 war has now broken up. There is no propaganda lever of Iraq having invaded any other state; the sympathy of the working classes in the Arab states is with the Iraqi people as they suffer a seventh year of economic sanctions – which of course hit the Iraqi people heavily, but the Iraqi government hardly at all. The US has failed completely to deliver on the anti-Israeli promises which played a

major role in building the previous alliance. Instead, there is massive anger against the US for initiating attacks on Libya, Iraq and Sudan for their attitude to UN resolutions, while at the same time the US is a prime supporter of Israel which is ignoring UN resolutions with regard to the Palestinians. At the height of the war drive there were daily anti-US demonstrations in Egypt, and also marches in Gaza and on the West bank.

The response of the ruling classes has been to ride working-class discontent – in addition to the Saudis and Bahrainis, the UAE has been daily denouncing the war drive and Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians have expressed massive relief at the outcome of the Annan visit. Qatar sent a plane-load of food and medicine to Baghdad in defiance of the sanctions. Many of these states have large anti-sanctions trade with Iraq; sanctions in effect limit competition for Iraqi trade to the Arab states.

### Palestine and Israel

The war drive has had particular effects in Palestine. The Oslo peace accords set up the Palestine Authority and gave it responsibility for public order in its area. Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestine Authority, now has his political base in the Fatah movement and also the forces of the Authority. As the crisis deepened and Palestinian support for Iraq became more pronounced (a poll showed 95 per cent support for 'the Iraqi people' among Palestinians, though only 45 per cent support for the policies of the Iraqi government), the Palestine Authority came to fear a possible Israeli loss of confidence in them and a reoccupation of the Palestine Authority area. This would mark definitively the collapse of the Oslo accords and the end of the existence of the Palestine Authority. To maintain itself – and, inevitably, to prove that the Oslo accords were a sell-out of the Palestinian struggle – the authority declared a ban on demonstrations and closed a number of TV stations. At the same time Fatah organised the Gaza and West Bank marches. This division in his base cannot but undermine Arafat.

However, in Israeli eyes the sell-out has been inadequate. As part of the attempt to escape from the Oslo accords it is likely that the Israelis would allow the marches to continue and use them to justify abandonment of Oslo. Certainly Netanyahu's actions in distributing gas masks and propagandising around Iraqi possession of anthrax weapons suggests an attempt to maintain and increase siege mentality among Israelis.

On the UN security council, France, China and Russia have declared opposition to the US military policy. The US needs an opportunity to reassert the 'new world or-

der' and Britain needs to demonstrate support for the US. But US dominance is not something the rest of the security want to promote. No state sees Iraq as about to launch any military offensive and the question of weapons inspection is rightly seen as a provocation to justify US military activity. For the rest of the security council an oil-rich, sanctions-free Iraq is a valuable trading partner, very beneficial to their profits.

The threat of war has not gone away for good. Learning from the Thatcher experience in the Malvinas, Clinton may well see advantages in a resumption of hostilities in the autumn when the congress elections are held. Blair, too, may need a political diversion as his honeymoon ends.

### Mobilise against the warmongers!

However, there have been good signs within the anti-war movement. Mobilisations in Britain through February were much larger than expected, and the US government's attempt to explain its view in the televised meeting in Columbus, Ohio, was a fiasco. We have been given a glimpse of the future plans of the US and we need now to prepare to fight them.

Our central demand must be 'No war, no sanctions. US / British forces out of the Gulf'. This is the demand that defends the Iraqi people.

We must avoid following the call for sanctions instead of war that was taken up by the anti-war Labour MPs, the peace movement, the Communist Party and the more right-opportunist sections of the revolutionary left. With the experience of observing the effect of seven years' sanctions we must argue first that the promised exclusion of food and medicine from sanctions has not occurred, second that sanctions on books, paper, manufactured goods and raw materials will cause devastation to education, house-building, sanitation – all of which will hit the working class rather than the ruling class in Iraq.

Equally we must avoid the 'leftier-than-thou' idiocy that led the Revolutionary Communist Party of 1991 to organise on the basis 'we support Saddam'. Saddam is a member of the Iraqi ruling class. While we may be in a bloc with him against the greater danger of the US military machine, our reason for that is to defend the Iraqi working class, not to give any support to a right-wing dictator who has attempted genocide against the Kurds. The real solution to the problems presented by Saddam Hussein and his supporters is his overthrow by the Iraqi working class and the installation of a socialist regime in Iraq and over the entire region.

# Enoch Powell – parliamentarian, scholar . . . and racist

by Richard Price

**E**nigmatic, brilliant, a warrior, a poet, a great orator – the tributes poured in from all sides for Enoch Powell, who died on February 8 at the age of 85. To the eternal shame of the Labour leadership, Tony Blair's 'inclusive' strategy of cosyng up to Tory ideas was extended as far as describing Powell as one of the 'greatest figures of 20th-century British politics, with a brilliant mind . . . However much we disagreed with many of his views, there was no doubting the strength of his convictions or their sincerity, or his tenacity in pursuing them, regardless of his own political self interest'.

Blair – a man whose own convictions can be remoulded by the latest report from a focus group or a message on his pager from a spin doctor – is in effect saying that racists have a role to play within parliamentary pluralism provided they are intelligent and sincere. Such a tribute is more generous, you suspect, than Blair would pay to many on his own party's left wing. Even former Tory leader Ted Heath could not be persuaded to say anything positive, while the Bishop of Croydon said that Powell 'gave a certificate of respectability to white racist views which otherwise decent people were ashamed to acknowledge'.

Even more repugnant in some ways than what an *Observer* columnist called the 'clammy embrace' of Blair's one-nation nonsense, was the evident esteem in which Powell was held by Labour's patrician left. Former leader and Tribune firebrand Michael Foot said regretfully that but for Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968 he could have become prime minister. (Somewhat optimistic, given that Powell only gained 15 votes in the Tory leadership contest in 1964.) Tony Benn, while distancing himself from Powell's views on race, was another old political friend who paid tribute to Powell's views on Europe and attended his funeral.

This says far more about left reformism's wilful confusion between British patriotism and socialism than it does about Powell's core values. In the gospel according to Benn, British democracy is a unique bequest to humanity as a whole and the Labour movement is its natural outcome. Therefore, any allies in

the noble cause of protecting Britain from foreign encroachments are to be welcomed. Armed with such theories, Bennites found themselves sharing platforms with Powellites in the 1975 referendum on the Common Market.

Other attempts at a reappraisal of Powell stressed that he was not *individually* antagonistic towards Black and Asian people, that he had opposed British atrocities during the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, that he had supported the National Health Service and opposed the British nuclear deterrent. Powell, ever the touchy aesthete, certainly held some quirky and contradictory views, but no more so than many other reactionaries in history. Consider perhaps those chivalrous SS officers who were moved to tears by music while herding victims into gas chambers, or the imperialist butchers with their touching regard for the noble savage.

Too aloof, too concerned to strike the classical pose, Powell was never really cut out for the role of street-fighting man. But he did play a crucial role in making racism respectable and in driving the Tory party to the right. As the post-war boom ran out of steam, so did British capitalism's need for cheap labour to perform the dirtiest and lowest-status jobs. Powell, who had visited the West Indies in the early 1950s to encourage emigration to Britain, adjusted to the new economic realities. His 1968 speech was a direct response to the vicious grassroots racism which had hitherto been cloaked by the post-war consensus. Powell's sense of timing, which on other occasions often deserted him, was for once acute. Although his reference to 'the Tiber foaming with much blood' was couched in terms of classical allusion, Powell's prediction that 'the black man' would be 'on top' within two decades was welcomed by his followers as a direct incitement to spill Black and Asian blood on the streets of Wolverhampton and elsewhere.

It was on the back of Powellism that the National Front emerged in the 1970s as a credible fascist movement, far more successful than either the post-war Mosleyites or Colin Jordan. Ever tighter restrictions on immigration became the common theme of Tory and Labour governments, while Margaret Thatcher's warning in 1978 that Britain was being 'swamped' by immigration stood directly

in the Powellite tradition.

Paradoxically, Powell was out of sync with the political establishment for much of his career because he strove to defend it so unswervingly. He had little time for manoeuvre or the business of ingratiating himself. He was right and it was up to others to recognise the fact. What mattered were constitutions and institutions: only they embodied his warped view of what was moral. Politicians were in comparison expendable. Powell was a premature monetarist at a time when most Tories accepted the welfare state consensus. Too haughty to fight for power in the Tory party, he preferred to call for a Labour vote in 1974 to pursue his campaign against British membership of the EEC. He then joined the Ulster Unionists at a time when many Tories had begun to see them as something of a political liability.

Powell described his political career as one of failure. But the reason for his failure lay not only in his personal qualities, which hampered him from positioning himself at the head of mass right-wing populist movement; it was also a tribute to the thousands of Black and Asian workers, socialists and trade unionists who demonstrated against the ugly spectre of Powellite racism. Still, it is a chastening thought that Powell might have reconsidered his self-assessment if he had heard Blair's respectful message. **WA**

**25 anti-fascists were arrested opposing the fascist demonstration against Romany asylum seekers on March 1. They are due to appear in court on April 1.**

**Demonstrate in support of the anti-fascists**

**9.30am, April 1**

**Dover Magistrates Court,  
Pencaster Rd, Dover**

# The Transitional Programme in perspective

Sixty years ago this year, the Fourth International adopted the Transitional Programme at its founding congress. Today its heritage is claimed by an array of politically disparate and mutually hostile far left groups. **Richard Price** examines its place in revolutionary history and its relevance today

The Transitional Programme (TP) was adopted by the fledgling Fourth International at its founding congress in September 1938. It was drawn up against a background of major defeats for the working class internationally at the hands of fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain and Stalinism in the Soviet Union. But it was a programme which was framed with the prognosis that revolution would arise out of the impending imperialist war. It is in this sense, as a relatively short-term perspective extending over years rather than decades, that the TP assumed that the working class stood on the eve of a 'pre-revolutionary period' – rather than as some permanent description of capitalist society in the imperialist epoch.

As against those who have turned the TP into some quasi-religious object of veneration, it is clear that its chief author, Leon Trotsky, did not consider it to be the last word on the question of programme. Some of its sections were inadequate, especially its economic aspect, and it did not deal with how the working class would hold power after a revolution at all. Although the Trotskyists had honed their understanding of programme in the 1930s, the writing of the TP itself was hurried, with the bulk of the work being carried out by Trotsky himself, although he had taken part in numerous discussions over its contents in Mexico with his co-thinkers in the Socialist Workers Party (US).

Nor did Trotsky consider that the TP stood on its own as a programmatic statement. He thought that it had to be read in conjunction with other major programmatic documents of the International Left Opposition and the Movement for the Fourth International, including the 'Programme of Action for France' of 1934, and the positions developed on the Soviet Union and imperialist war.

In some respects, the TP was novel in the manner in which it concisely summarised a broad range of revolutionary tasks, and in the way it intimately connected tactics and strategy. However, this approach

had its roots in the best aspects of the second, third and fourth congresses of the Comintern. Those wishing to look further back for antecedents could refer to the transitional slogans put forward by the Bolsheviks in 1917, which included not only the famous call for 'Peace, Bread and Land', but demands for nationalisation and the abolition of business secrets.<sup>1</sup> In their agitation among the St Petersburg unemployed in 1906, the Bolsheviks raised the slogans of workers' control and a programme of public works.<sup>2</sup> In looking back, one could also include the tactics applied by the young Marx and Engels in 1848, when they sought to push the bourgeois revolutions to their limit, in preparation for the proletarian revolution they believed was imminent.

## The role of a programme

A party without a revolutionary programme which connects the immediate tasks of the day with the strategic tasks of the epoch, is like a knife without a blade. A programme without a real revolutionary party to implement it will remain primarily an educational tool in approaching the vanguard of the working class. That, however, does not mean, even in a non-revolutionary situation, a passive, purely propaganda approach. The TP, although born out of defeat, was nonetheless the product of real experiences made in the class struggle such as the Minneapolis teamsters' rebellion, in which the Trotskyists had played a leading role.

Trotsky explained the relationship between party and programme as follows: 'Now, what is the party? In what does the cohesion consist? This cohesion is a common understanding of the events, of the tasks; and this common understanding – that is the programme of the party. Just as modern workers cannot work without tools any more than the barbarians could, so in the party the programme is the instrument. Without the programme every worker must improvise his tool, find improvised tools, and one contradicts another. Only when we

have the vanguard organised upon the basis of common conceptions can we act.'<sup>3</sup>

The dual emphasis on a common understanding of *events* as well as of *tasks* is well made since a programme, however well thought out, cannot stand higher than the perspective which informs it. An action programme which assumes that a revolutionary situation is in existence, when in reality counter-revolution is on the rise, will surely come to grief.

If the extent to which we understand the world acts as a theoretical constraint in developing the programme, then the main practical constraint is the practice required to implement it. A programme which does not genuinely serve as a *bridge* from the consciousness of workers today to the maximum programme of the socialist revolution, and which instead seeks to batter workers into submission with an endless list of demands outside of space and time, ceases to have any agitational character. Perspective, programme and practice are not the same thing; but there should not be artificial barriers between them.

## Transitional demands

Although the TP contains partial and democratic demands, its core sections are aimed at developing the struggle in such a way as to strike directly at the heart of capitalism by building up the independent power and organisation of the working class. Running through the TP is the thread of dual power at the level of the factory (factory committees, workers' control), the picket line (workers' defence), the economy (the sliding scale, public works) and the state (soviets, the workers' and farmers' government).

In this context, a quotation from the TP is useful:

'It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of

*transitional demands*, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.

'... Insofar as the old, partial, "minimal" demands of the masses clash with the destructive and degrading tendencies of decadent capitalism — and this occurs at each step — the Fourth International advances a system of *transitional demands*, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very foundations of the bourgeois regime.'<sup>4</sup>

This places the TP clearly in continuity with the direction the Comintern was taking at its second, and particularly its third and fourth congresses, in such documents as the second congress's theses on the trade union movement,<sup>5</sup> the third congress's resolution on trade union work,<sup>6</sup> and the debates on the united front and the workers' government at the fourth congress.<sup>7</sup> In such work the Comintern began to systematise its tactics and in contrast to the ultra-lefts, who counterposed maximalist propaganda to the tasks of the day, a serious attempt was made to connect partial and democratic slogans with the overall struggle for power through transitional demands. Where the founding congress, largely composed of delegates from the former Tsarist empire, confined itself largely to stirring calls to revolution, subsequent congresses, reflecting the problems of the workers' movement in the West, grappled with the problem of how to undermine the existing leaderships of the working class by calls for united action and through demands on the reformists.

There are numerous examples of how this approach was put to practical use. In Germany, the KPD's 'Open Letter' of January 1921 — which served as a model for the united front — included demands for:

'higher pensions for disabled war veterans; elimination of unemployment; the improvement of the country's finances at the expense of the monopolies; the introduction of workers' control over food supplies, raw materials, and fuel; reopening of all closed enterprises; control over sowing, harvesting and marketing of farm produce by peasants' councils and farm labourers' organisations; the immediate disarming of all bourgeois militarised organisations; the establishment of workers' self-defence; amnesty for political prisoners; and the immediate re-establishment of trade and diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia.'<sup>8</sup>

A resolution of the executive committee of the Comintern from February 1924

urged the Communist Party of Great Britain to call upon the first Labour government:

'(a) to deal with unemployment by effective taxation of the capitalists, and by taking over, under state and workers' control, enterprises shut down by the capitalists.

'(b) to take the initiative in nationalising the railways and mines; these to be administered in conjunction with the workers' organisations.

'(c) the Government must take energetic steps to liberate the peasants and workers of Ireland, India and Egypt from the yoke of English imperialism.

'(d) it must be active in fighting the war danger in Europe and conclude an alliance with the Union of Soviet Republics ...'

The resolution went on to state that 'the Communist Party must preserve its ideological, tactical and organisational independence ... It must appeal to all groups and organisations of the working class who demand of the Labour Government a resolute struggle against the bourgeoisie ...'<sup>9</sup>

This transitional approach was a radical departure from the politics of the Second International, which took as its model the programme drafted by Karl Kautsky and adopted by the SPD at its Erfurt congress in 1891. The Erfurt Programme consisted of two sections — a theoretical section putting the general case for socialism and a 'practical' section setting out the party's minimum programme of demands realisable under capitalism. Although Kautsky's extended version of the theoretical section spoke of 'the irresistible and inevitable nature of the social revolution',<sup>10</sup> the prospect of a peaceful parliamentary overturn of capitalism was implied. In the Indian summer of late nineteenth-century capitalism, the SPD, while pursuing its minimum programme, increasingly postponed the socialist revolution to the indefinite future. The clear implication, made explicit by the bolder revisionists, was that the bourgeois state would be rolled over by the sheer weight of the SPD's electoral support, its dozens of daily papers and its growing trade union strength. This division of the programme into 'minimum' and 'maximum' demands persisted with Menshevism and was criminally revived by Stalinism as early as the mid-1920s.

This development was mirrored at the opposite end of the spectrum by a range of ultra-left sectarians in the early Comintern, among them the KAPD, Gorter, Pannekoek and Bordiga. Some opposed all compromises, including participation in bourgeois elections, on principle. Others were prepared on occasion to support demands which emanated directly from the class struggle, but placed a premium on

keeping the revolutionary banner pure. Such an approach leads to a conception of the party as a conspiratorial, self-selected elite, operating behind the back of the working class, which cannot afford too much contact with workers or their organisations as they are for fear of contamination. The theoretical underpinning of much of today's ultra-leftism comes from a selective, overly literal reading of Lenin's *What is to be done?*

Equally dangerous is the liquidation of programme into militant trade union demands, in the style beloved of the British SWP. This only serves to reinforce the syndicalist error that a good dose of industrial action will rid workers of their reformist illusions — something that the left learned to its cost was not the case under the Wilson-Callaghan governments of 1974-79. In fact, the fight for any given immediate demand carries no guarantee of political advance. Indeed, following intense trade union struggles, the tendency is for the political consciousness of workers to relapse in the direction of reformism — underlining the need to link immediate demands to the wider goal of socialist transition.

## The transitional method

The method which underpinned the TP involved a larger conception of the epoch we live in — one in which there are no national roads to socialism; in which revolution is an inter-connected world process, the objective basis of which is the existence of an imperialist world market. The transitional method does not ignore the existing consciousness of the working class in any given country, but nor does it on the other hand separate national from international tasks. It aims, by acting as a bridge, to carry the consciousness of the class to a higher stage through struggle, ascending the ladder of tasks the working class faces in preparing itself for the conquest of power.

One key element in this is getting the class to confront its own mis-leaders — hence the emphasis in the TP on putting demands on the existing leaderships within the workers' movement. This had a powerful precedent in the Bolsheviks' agitation in the period immediately prior to the October revolution in 1917 for the Mensheviks and SRs to take power basing themselves on the soviets.

We have argued elsewhere<sup>11</sup> that there are limitations to this approach today. To demand, for instance, that Blair 'takes power' out of the hands of the capitalist class makes no sense in a situation in which nobody remotely expects such a thing to happen. Better to take on the illusions workers do have that a Labour government can lead to a better life by proposing a series of struggles involving those issues that Labour was previously closely identified with, no-

tably the welfare state and the trade unions.

Those sectarians opposed to the transitional method usually claim that demands placed upon treacherous social democratic leaders are clear signs of a semi-reformist programme. In the split personality world of sectarianism this usually co-exists with the view that demands on treacherous trade union leaders are entirely in order, because the trade unions are basic defensive organisations of the class — as if workers regarded their political leadership as some optional extra which can be ditched at a moment's notice.

Slightly more serious is another familiar line of attack: that some of the demands of the TP are realisable for a certain period under capitalism. Consequently some ultra-lefts are attempting to renovate the idea of minimum and maximum programmes, blissfully unaware that this leads directly to various forms of opportunism. According to such reasoning, the maximum side of the programme inoculates its bearer against the virus of reformism, while the minimum programme is 'realistic' and will be understood by workers. But this is only to say that the maximum programme is irrelevant for practical purposes, while the minimum programme avoids confronting workers' reformist consciousness. Trotsky in fact never denied that certain transitional demands were 'achievable'; it was in their totality that transitional demands irrevocably clashed with the foundations of the bourgeois order.

Dangers certainly can arise from a reformist interpretation of some demands in the TP. In some respects, the programme of the Wilson government in 1974 was a reformist parody of the TP, complete with a short-lived sliding scale of wages (threshold payments), toothless legislation on business secrets and trade union consultation, and the Bullock report on workers' participation. On the left flank of Labourism at the time stood Militant. From a dogma to be learnt by rote at educational, Militant transformed the TP over time into a programme to be implemented by a Labour government armed with an enabling act, which in turn would open the road to a peaceful transition to a Militant-led socialist Britain.

### The relevance today

The idea many Trotskyists laboured with for decades was that since the TP was drawn up for the period of decay of the imperialist epoch, it was good for as long as it took the working class to take power. Six decades on, such reasoning looks like laziness combined in equal measure with messianism. Among other things, it has condemned various Trotskyist sects to repeating like a catechism that 'mankind's productive forces stagnate',<sup>12</sup> in spite of all evidence to the contrary, and to be-

lieving that the TP's judgement that 'the historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership'<sup>13</sup> somehow justified their existence.

For the Lambertists, the TP was less a tool in the class struggle than a relic with miraculous powers. It was, they claimed, 'the highest expression of Marxism, that is, the theoretical generalisation, on the basis of the Marxist method, of the experiences, struggles and gains of the world proletariat, of the whole movement . . . the most complete expression of dialectical materialism in our epoch'.<sup>14</sup> Of course, this was somewhat less cranky than the Socialist Labour League, against whom they were polemicising, for whom the highest development of Marxism was located between the ears of Gerry Healy.

The idea of a programme being good for over half a century, as applicable in periods of class peace as in periods of mass class struggle, is frankly bizarre. There is a range of questions on which the TP has little or nothing to say, among them special oppression and racism. The issue of what kind of united fronts are permissible in non-imperialist countries is not developed. The sections dealing with political revolution in the Soviet Union and transitional demands in fascist countries have become largely redundant.

While the demands for a sliding scale of wages and the right to work are readily understood, the demand for a sliding scale of hours with no loss of pay has often had much less resonance in periods of recession, because workers see no way of imposing such a measure on employers except where a high degree of workers' control has already been established. Consequently, it can appear to cut across other anti-redundancy demands such as strike action and / or occupations.

Agitation necessarily brings to the fore certain key elements of a programme. In doing so, revolutionaries must take account of prevailing conditions. Is the

working class on the offensive or on the retreat? What is its level of consciousness? If they fail to do so, and instead throw in every demand in the book at any given situation, the programme will fail to act as a bridge of any sort, and will be unable to alter the balance of forces. It makes no sense to call for soviets in periods of relative class peace or to call for picket line defence guards when there are no strikes. Those Trotskyists who raise the same transitional demands in snowstorms as they do in heat waves are violating the very same transitional method they claim to uphold.

If the working class has been forced on to the defensive, it makes no sense to demand it seize power tomorrow. What is required is an action programme which, by enabling workers to relearn how to defend and extend old gains, enables them to move on to the offensive. Trotsky, for instance, raised the demand for a constituent assembly in China in 1928, after the catastrophic defeats suffered by the working class in 1926-27, arguing that China was passing through a 'year of '49'.<sup>15</sup> (The analogy was to the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848.)

Does the TP remain relevant today? This article has attempted to demonstrate that the answer is not a simple yes or no. Some of its sections remain fully relevant, others require considerable up-dating, some sections deal with historical conditions which have passed and are unlikely to recur in the same form, while there are many questions on which the TP is silent or inadequate. To redevelop a transitional programme for today is an international task, and one not easily accomplished by thinly spread groups of revolutionaries with little experience of leading masses in struggle, and in a non-revolutionary period. Nevertheless, to work towards such a goal is an essential part of rebuilding an international revolutionary movement. What must be defended is not the letter of the TP, but its underlying method. **WA**

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## Book Review

# Summer of love - ten years on

Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House

By Matthew Collin with contributions by John Godfrey

Serpent's Tail, 1997, £10.99

by Richard Price

The story of the left's relationship with popular culture has been sometimes tragic, sometimes farcical, but never easy. In some ways this relationship has had an uncomfortable parallel to the reaction of bourgeois society itself to successive waves of youth revolt, and it has often come up with similar knee-jerk responses.

It is something of a cliché that capitalism first denounces radical departures in culture, only to adopt, adapt and domesticate them in its own interests. The left, too, has frequently responded with horror as youth rebellions took place without its seal of approval, only to adapt to them uncritically. In the early sixties, Gerry Healy's SLL tried to build a 'mass' youth movement through none too political discos, aimed at 'uniting' mods and rockers. In the seventies, early punk swastika chic persuaded much of the left that here was a potentially fascist movement. Yet within a year or two, the Anti-Nazi League was tailending punk and giving credence to the idea that rock could defeat racism. More recently, the RCP created a temporary niche market among style-warrior design students.

Just as capitalism has seen the various phases of youth culture as out of its control and dysfunctional to the serious business of making money, the left has tended to view youth culture as a 'diversion' from the task of making revolution. Militant's attempts to organise a socialist echo of the 'just say no' to drugs campaign have only served to highlight how remote it is from this generation.

At the same time, the left has also eyed popular culture greedily as a source of potential recruits. Insofar as the left has attempted to relate to popular culture at all, it has usually been to pinch a few ideas to brighten up tired, out-of-date publications.

Should Marxists study popular culture, and if so, why? Certainly, there is no point in devoting the relatively limited space of the left press to debates on the

merits of speed garage versus big beats. But it is worth spending a little time thinking about why today the left is more isolated from popular culture and youth than it has been for decades. As we approach the tenth anniversary of acid house's 'summer of love', that in turn requires some serious thought about what has happened in the past decade, and Matthew Collin's *Altered State* at least gives us some of the raw material to do so.

Socialists do not seem to have noticed, or at least written very much about it, but we are dealing with a unique cultural phenomenon. Whereas all previous youth cultures - rock and roll, Beatlemania, mods, psychedelia, glam rock, punk and new romantics to name but a few - had a life cycle of about three years, the juggernaut of dance and ecstasy culture has rolled on unstopably. Instead of giving way to rival forms, it has drawn them into its orbit, creating new sub-genres of dance influenced by soul, hip-hop, rock, world music and jazz.

But this is far from simply a question of musical hegemony. Imagery and sounds from clubbing have permeated everything from mainstream television, advertising and fashion to literature and film. Even the most respectable broadsheets carry reviews and articles to keep the corporate clubber informed, while politicians conduct a 'war on drugs' which police chiefs admit is already lost. According to one estimate by economists in 1993, the British dance scene was worth £1.8 billion per year - a turnover comparable to that of the book or newspaper industries.

Yet despite the transition from illegal raves to legit clubs diversifying into fashion, magazines and record labels, dance music has never entirely shaken off its illegal roots, with the most obvious reason being its intimate relationship to ecstasy - the drug of choice for up to half a million, predominantly young, clubbers every week. Reports of the 'death' of house music every couple of years since 1990 have been premature to say the least.

Matthew Collin's widely acclaimed book is above all a social history of youth culture during the last decade, concentrating particularly on the years 1988-92. Often perceptive and funny, sometimes enthralling, it sets out to explain the roots of the rave scene, as well as its longevity. Tracing the eclectic sources of house music in American black gay disco, soul, sixties psychedelia and German electronic music, Collin argues it is this adaptability combined with an explosion in recreational drug use which explains its persistence: '... Ecstasy culture's prevailing ethos is inclusive. It has an open-access formula: rather than a defined ideology, it offers a series of possibilities that people can use to define their own identity, possibilities that can be adapted to each individual's background, social status and belief system. It is endlessly malleable, pragmatic to new meaning.' (p.4)

But if ecstasy culture can mean all things to all people - and to those who control the clubs-drugs axis it simply means big bucks - for many of the participants, it is the collective feeling of togetherness, solidarity and love which is valued above all. This surely cannot be solely explained by the chemical properties of MDMA. Naive and saccharine emotions, perhaps, but in the context of the 1990s, scarcely reactionary ones. Although the timing of the arrival of ecstasy in significant quantities in 1988 was accidental, its impact was not. Acid House exploded among a generation of alienated, largely working class, youth. With the defeat of the miners in 1985, Britain had seen no large-scale popular movement for three years, as the Tories had defeated one after another section of workers. Until then, much of eighties-style youth culture had mirrored ascendant Thatcherism in its celebration of money and its tribal exclusivity. A generation was growing up which had never witnessed the organised power of the working class, but which was excluded from the late-eighties Thatcherite boom.

Ecstasy offered an escape, but one very different from crying into the bottom

of a pint glass. Illegal raves in warehouses and fields offered a transcendent empathy with hundreds and thousands of other youth ranged against existing society.

This goes at least some way to explaining how such an apparently non-political movement could also take on such an anti-establishment stance. For their part, the Tories reacted hysterically, setting up special police units throughout the country to target promoters and ravers, and finally passed the draconian Criminal Justice Act in 1994, which among other things, targeted music with 'repetitive beats'. At the time, many of us on the left contented ourselves with the idea that the act was really aimed at the organised working class, and indeed many of its provisions - supported by the then Labour opposition - can be used against workers in struggle. But in doing so, we tended to underestimate just how worried the Tories were by the explosion of raves in the late eighties, not to mention their paranoid hatred for new age travellers. In fact, environmental protests, along with the anti-poll tax campaign, have been by far the largest movements involving youth in the nineties, and the Tories' fears were not so misplaced.

One angle relatively unexplored by *Altered State* is the relationship between the anti-poll tax movement, which culminated in the massive demonstration and riot in Trafalgar Square on March 31, 1990, and the huge mobilisations of ravers in the previous two years. It's probably hard to draw any direct causal connection, but both were symptomatic of an enormous alienation on the part of hundreds of thousands of young people outside the

traditional labour movement. The campaign against the poll tax certainly drew on many of the imaginative methods early rave promoters and organisers used to keep the police on the hop. Both owed much to the spontaneous organising skills of their previously unorganised supporters; both fell away due to the lack of any coherent political ideas as to what to do next.

This was in part a product of the distance between the left and the emerging youth culture. The only 'political' leadership on offer to insurgent youth came from the green anarchists, eco-warriors, assorted post-hippies and travellers around the free festival confrontations in 1992. But in many ways, although the massive police operation closed down illegal raves and festivals, the ravers came out on top. The government and the police were forced to come to terms with the new situation. Clubs were given licences, drug possession increasingly met with nothing more than a caution, and instead of driving the scene underground, the powers that be sought to bring it on board 'Cool Britannia' as part of the leisure industry.

Collin writes affectionately but not uncritically about his subject. He does not underplay the gangsterism which moved in on raves from 1989, in turf wars over drugs and venues. Nor does he overdo the multi-cultural 'peace and love' ethic of club culture, seeing jungle as a specific black response to feelings of exclusion from predominantly white clubs. (That being said, overt racism is largely unacceptable in most clubs today, which counts as something of a step forward, as does an environment in which women feel more able to go out alone or in groups than in previous periods.)

There are some down sides to the book. Some of the political judgements are shallow, the analysis of the years 1992-97 is skimpy, as if the author either got bored or wanted to get into print quick, and the overuse of the word 'narrative' gets irritating. But the extensive research based on interviews with many of the key players is impressive.

All of which brings us back to the original point of departure: has the youth culture of the last decade any significance, or has it all been a 'diversion'? If it wants to relate to youth at all, the left will have to drop its traditional puritanism on the one hand, without tailending developments uncritically either. The naive hopes for a better world in the summer of '88 are long gone, replaced by a deep-going distrust of established politics. Widespread recreational drug use is a fact, but it is not the cause of the low level of struggle, so much as an effect of it. Not surprising in a world which seems post-everything - post-communist, post-causes and post-politics.

Film, television, ballet and opera are also 'diversions' from the task of organising strikes and demonstrations, as is the left's own drug of choice, alcohol. Yet nobody in their right mind has assigned them a primary role in undermining the class struggle. The absence of many picket lines at 3.00am on a Sunday morning tends to underline this point. Socialists should stop trying to lecture youth, and instead attempt to find points of contact in the many campaigns and issues which much of the 'chemical generation' supports. They could do worse than start by reading this book.

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