

workers power

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NHS CRISIS, JOB LOSSES, SLEAZE

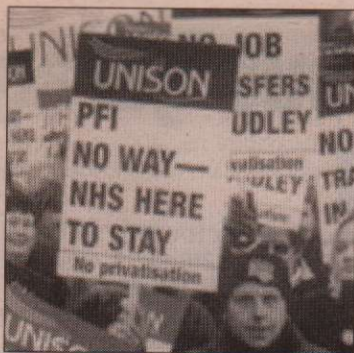
Make



wrecker

Fight New Labour's privatisations

Blair pay



Tony Blair calls trade unionists wreckers. The press are in a frenzy about left union leaders, whom they have dubbed the "awkward squad". And strikes, according to Stephen "why won't anyone believe me" Byers, are outdated. What's going on?

It's simple really. The shine has come off Tony Blair's Britain. Almost a year into the second term and workers are facing:

- low pay across the public sector
- the threat of being ripped off by PFI schemes
- cuts in jobs and services
- union-busting bosses and a government that is backing them.

It is this - not some conspiracy by a small group of union leaders or activists - that is causing growing anger among thousands of rank and file workers. It is this that is strengthening the resolve of rail workers, civil servants, teachers, local government workers, post workers and many others to take strike action.

At the same time, as the union conference season looms, many activists are questioning why the unions' political funds should be used to bankroll Blair's Labour Party. The reasoning is simple: if we are against privatisation why should we hand millions to the party that is imposing it on us?

In other words industrial anger and political

opposition to New Labour are coming together.

In the months ahead one thing is certain: the bureaucrats who sit in Millbank and Congress House, and who run the Labour Party and the unions as their own empires will go all out to curb this anger and opposition.

That is why the rank and file needs to organise. We need to build networks inside and across our unions, co-ordinate our campaigns around the political fund and deliver solidarity to the strikes that are taking place. We need to take the unions back from the time-servers and put them under democratic control.

Let's unite the "wreckers" and show the bosses and the government just how awkward we can be!

Why we need a rank and file movement - page 3

Blunkett fiddling with asylum policy as Yarl's Wood burns

Home Secretary David Blunkett made a statement last month to the House of Commons on the fire that had swept through the Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre, writes G R McColl. The fire damaged two accommodation blocks at the centre, on the outskirts of Bedford, causing an estimated £38 million in damage.

Blunkett's statement echoed the rancid editorial response of *The Sun* and was clearly crafted to fuel prejudice against asylum seekers.

He declared that he would pursue plans to double the number of asylum applicants detained in any given week to 4,000, and said: "I am not prepared to let government policy be determined by those intent on creating disorder and destruction."

He went on to boast that the government had removed all asylum seekers from prisons before adding: "We now find that our reward is that they burn down a substantial part of the facility."

Three days later, his henchman at the Home Office, Lord Rooker, bragged of the success of government policies in deterring asylum applications, while they rose in 2001 across most of the European Union.

The Home Secretary's performance in the Commons is the strongest indication yet that a cover-up may well be in progress. With little evidence, the government has branded detainees guilty before they have been charged with any offence connected with what appears to have been a spontaneous uprising, triggered by staff handling with force a 55-year-old woman detainee from Nigeria.

Emma Ginn, the Bedford resident who founded the local campaign in opposition to the detention centre, made a telling point. She said: "There was a tragic inevitability to the fire - above all

the Yarl's Wood events spell out how fundamentally wrong the whole policy of arbitrary detention has been."

Blunkett categorically rejected a call for a public inquiry into the events at Yarl's Wood, a call made by the executive of the Fire Brigades Union.

Meanwhile, at least 11 detainees are inexplicably "segregated" in their rooms denied books, pens and paper, and restricted to five minutes on the phone each day. In effect, they are being held in conditions very similar to solitary confinement.

The events at Yarl's Wood should be a huge embarrassment to New Labour. It was the government's show-piece detention centre, the largest in Europe, built, at a cost of nearly £100 million, and operated by a multinational corporation under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deal.

In a classic example of deceitful gutter journalism, the facilities were described as rivaling those of a "four-star hotel" by *The Sun*. Most media reports neglected to mention that the centre's existing security measures were akin to a Category B prison.

As of 27 February there were still at least 21 people missing, among the 385 who had been detained on the night of 14 February when the blaze erupted. Perhaps they did all escape on a cold night to run through hundreds of acres of barely lit farmland, but two weeks were allowed to pass before a thorough search had even begun.

Meanwhile, Group 4 Security, which built and operates Yarl's Wood, seems to face no compulsion to answer questions such as:

- Why did it ignore the local fire authority's repeated recommendation to install a sprinkler system in a facility due to house more than 900 people?
- Why had it failed to provide any



Fire brigade workers clear up after the fire at Yarl's Wood. Their union, the FBU, has called for a public inquiry into the fire but the call has been rejected by Blunkett

What you can do

● Get your union branch to affiliate to the Campaign to Stop Arbitrary Detention at Yarl's Wood. Send donations and messages of support to: PO Box 304, Oakley, Bedford MK43 7WB. The Yarl's Wood campaign will be one of several local groups represented at a conference on Saturday 23 March in Manchester's Cross Street Chapel. The event, called by the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers, the National Civil Rights Movement and several other groups, is set to organise national opposition to David Blunkett's latest legislative attack on refugees and improve co-ordination between existing campaigns in defence of asylum rights. For more information write to: Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers, BCM Box 4289, London WC1X 3XX or e-mail: info@defend-asylum.org

training to its employees in emergency evacuation procedures?

● Why had there been no fire drills in the three months since the first detainees arrived?

The Government has still to answer the question of how it came to award an enormous contract to Group 4, given the company's track record at the Campsfield detention centre, near Oxford. A major disturbance there in 1997 resulted in serious criminal

charges against nine West African detainees, but the Crown Prosecution Service's case collapsed as it emerged that Group 4 staff had fabricated evidence and had themselves caused extensive damage to the facility.

With consummate cheek, Group 4's insurer is now threatening to sue the Bedfordshire police under an obscure piece of Victorian legislation, the Riot Damages Act of 1886.

The answers are actually quite

simple, as the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers argued immediately after the blaze: "A growing section of the refugee population has been criminalised. The vast majority of the [Yarl's Wood] detainees have never been charged with, much less convicted of any crime, and yet they can now be held indefinitely."

In short, the Home Office is determined to keep ever more asylum seekers out of sight and out of mind, and clearly prepared to mete out treatment that is in key respects worse than that accorded to UK convicts in Her Majesty's Prisons.

The events at Yarl's Wood throw into sharp relief two of New Labour's major policy planks: immigration detention and PFI. The details that have emerged around Group 4's management of Yarl's Wood have given asylum rights campaigners an important new argument to persuade public sector and other trade unionists that private companies are profiting from an inherently racist system that shows scant regard for human life.

In turn, anti-racist activists in the unions have to convert the often progressive paper policies of their national conferences into active opposition to Blunkett's policies and the increasingly naked racist and chauvinist ideology that lurks behind them.

That means rallying support for the opponents of Yarl's Wood and other detention centres, but also having out the hard arguments against the other components of the government's asylum policies such as forced dispersal and an ever-growing number of deportations. Ultimately, however, it means having out the argument that immigration controls are themselves racist and undermine the unity of a working class which has become truly global.

Stop racist victimisations at Cricklewood bus garage

Workers Power received this letter from Gerry Downing about union victimisation

Bus worker, Gerry Downing was sacked from his job on 19 February 2002 for defending a victimised Muslim who was the first black or Asian man to be elected as a TGWU Branch Officer in Cricklewood bus garage, which has had a majority black and Asian workforce for decades.

Hash Jiwa was transferred to Harlesden garage. Three days later, and 14 days before his appeal against the transfer, a letter from Harry Foley, TGWU convenor for the five Metroline garages, appeared on the union notice board. In it he said that: "I have to advise you that the other candidate, Brother Kieran Murray, will now be taking up the position of Branch Chair by default."

Harry Foley has no authority over the branch and awarding a position to a defeated candidate is undemocratic. It gave a clear signal to management. Hash lost his appeal and Downing is now being victimised.

Union and management collusion is very evident in this case. Harry Foley was the chief witness at Downing's sacking from Willesden in 1993. In 1997, following his return to Metroline, he was again up for the sack the morning after he was nominated to stand for the union representative's position. The intervention of Brent Community Law Centre and Ken Livingstone secured his return.

This time Downing was charged with,

"misrepresentation of drivers' names on a petition with detrimental intent to another member of staff" and "participating in the compilation of an unauthorised petition regarding employment matters".

Some 20 drivers were called in by Harry Foley, the union rep Tom O'Callaghan, and at least one by garage manager Martin Laughlin. Under threat of being sued for defamation of character because the petition referred to a "fraudulent letter from Harry Foley" they were told to write occurrence reports, which most gave to their union. The union immediately handed them to management to deal with, despite the fact that this was an entirely internal union matter.

All, apart from one driver, admitted to signing the petition. Despite this, the first charge against Downing was deemed "proved beyond doubt". On the second charge John McCabe, the branch secretary, was called and gave evidence that it was union procedure to go to the committee and branch if you wanted to take a petition to your union and therefore this was an "unauthorised petition". Protests that this contravened section 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 and that it was entirely an internal union matter, that Downing was charged with taking a petition to his union and that this had nothing to do with management were brushed aside.

General Secretary Bill Morris, regional secretary Eddie McDermott, senior regional industrial organiser Ollie Jackson and local full-time official Tom Scanlon failed to intervene to prevent these actions by the local union leadership despite being fully informed of the situation at Cricklewood. Lee Jasper, adviser for race relations to the London Mayor Ken Livingstone, has said he will contact Metroline about both current cases.

Please protest against these racist victimisations to: Declan O'Farrell, chief executive, Metroline, 118-122 College Road,

Harrow, Middlesex HA1 1DB; Tel: 020 8218 8888; Fax: 020 8218 8899, e-mail Declan O'Farrell at dofarrell@metroline.co.uk

Brother O. L. Jackson, senior regional industrial organiser, 218 Green Lanes, London, N4 2HB; Tel: 020 8800 4281; Fax: 020 8802 8388, e-mail Oli Jackson at ojson@tguw.org.uk

● For further details contact: G Downing, 96 Melrose Avenue, Cricklewood, London NW2 4JT, Tel 020 8450 5161, E-mail GerDowning@aol.com

Yours fraternally
Gerry Downing

BUILD THE TRADE UNION CONFERENCE

In the light of New Labour's support for big business and its PFI policy - where private firms are involved in the running of public services - the Socialist Alliance is organising a conference to discuss trade unions' political funds. A number of trade unions such as the FBU and the CWU have already begun the process of debating the issue of trade unionists' control of their own political funds and the continuing finance of the Labour party. The Socialist Alliance wants to take this debate forward and is appealing to all trade unionists - individuals/shop stewards committees/trades councils/union branches/regions/national bodies - to support this conference, which is to be held on: Saturday 16 March 2002, 11am-4pm, Camden Centre, Bedford Way, London WC1E 6BT. Write to: Socialist Alliance, Wickham House, 10 Cleveland Way, London E1 4TR

Conference for all trade unionists
NEW LABOUR AND THE UNIONS

Join the debate:
THE POLITICAL FUND where should it go?

Stopping privatisation
Fighting job cuts

Saturday 16 March 2002
11am-4pm

NOTE: CHANGE OF VENUE
The Camden Centre,
Bedford Way, WC1E 6BT
(Near Kings Cross)

Socialist Alliance
020 7791 3138

Trade unions shift to the left

The revival of the left in the unions is to be welcomed but there is still much to do, argues *Mark Harrison*

The rise in the number of strikes, in successful votes for strike action and in militancy across a number of unions is being reflected in a shift to the left at the top of the unions. For years there has been no "left" to speak of at the general secretary level of the major unions. That left was smashed and demoralised during Thatcher's attacks on the unions and the defeats she inflicted on the miners, dockers and printers.

New realism, business and service unionism, and a TUC that no longer even discusses questions of solidarity became the order of the day. This craven abandonment of elementary trade union principles was personified by hard nosed right wingers like Sir Ken "no strikes" Jackson in the AEEU (now fused with the MSF in Amicus), and by TUC leader and career bureaucrat John Monks who eagerly echoed Blair's arguments that there must be no return to the "bad old days" of strikes.

But the bureaucrats faced a dilemma. The less bold they became so the more their organisations shrank. In turn this jeopardised the one thing these

place men valued most - their inflated incomes, their perks and their wider influence in society. They presided over the decline of British trade unionism and then tried to come up with a way of reviving it that avoided embroiling them in "outdated" practices like fighting to defend their members.

They tried organising drives, conferences and think-tanks. They employed PR firms to boost their image and they sponsored football clubs to prove how responsible they were. Labour repaid them for this by giving them an extremely weak form of legal backing to secure union recognition. This certainly helped them - and recognition deals went up dramatically last year - but it was nothing like enough. The union leaders were not doing the things that could reach out to the great mass of unorganised workers, nor were they proving to their existing members that their organisations were doing enough to defend them.

The result was that in the most recent round of elections pro-strike, left-wing union leaders have begun to win



RMT strikers against South West Trains at Waterloo station

in ballot after ballot. Billy Hayes and Mark Serwotka (in the CWU and PCS respectively) were written off as no-hopers. Yet both won elections by comfortable margins. Bob Crow in the RMT was the most recent victor, winning the general secretaryship of the RMT comfortably despite a massive press witch-hunt and, as it turns out, a covert operation by the TUC itself to under-

mine his campaign.

The British media have become obsessed with this rise of "the awkward squad" in the unions. Why have members voted overwhelmingly for people who have declared that they are socialists, opposed to privatisation and prepared to take on the bosses?

From the rants of *The Express* and *Mail* through to the more cerebral con-

siderations of *The Observer*, the press are busy denouncing the "take-over" of the unions by the "hard men of the left", with each article accompanied by the most unflattering photos of these union leaders that the picture researchers can lay their hands on.

Actually the "take-over" is a result of perfectly legitimate ballots, a point rarely mentioned in the media. But it does reflect the impatience of many union members with the pro-Blair, partnership unionism of the core leaders of the TUC and a desire by members at the front line of Blair's attacks on the "wreckers" to see leaders in place who will fight on their behalf.

The recent election results show that in the unions concerned members want fighting unions to take on the Labour government and the viciously anti-union bosses, such as those who run the train companies and now Consignia (the post office). These leaders have not caused the recent rash of strikes, but their elections symbolise the anger of the rank and file that is manifest in those strikes.

Why we need a political rank and file movement

Before militants get carried away with the belief that everything in the class struggle garden is rosy the current strike wave faces enormous dangers. The action by post workers has already been delayed. The action planned by teachers is for one day, with nothing beyond it. In the benefit offices the drawn-out character of the dispute is being used by the right-wing to grind it down - and isolate Mark Serwotka in the process.

Despite winning the leadership of the RMT, Bob Crow has called off action at SWT as the union goes into further negotiations. Anti-strike elements in the union at both local and national level have been pushing hard to call off the dispute.

In other words, the spontaneous anger of rank and file union members is in danger of being eroded by a still very powerful and well-entrenched right wing inside the trade union movement, and the left leaders are either unable or unwilling to challenge this sabotage head on.

What is the best way of avoiding a new round of defeats and of stopping the incorporation of the new left leaders into the bureaucratic machines that do so much to break the fighting spirit of union members?

The key is organising rank and file members into permanent fighting organisations. These would hold their leaders to account and replace them - even the most left-wing ones - when they either sell-out or fail to stop the right selling out, and transform the unions themselves into effective, militant and democratic organisations controlled by the members themselves.

In short, we need to build a rank and file movement within and across the unions.

Clearly, the first task of such a movement is to rebuild the traditions of solidarity lost during the years of defeat. It will also need to organise strike committees capable of controlling action and preventing it being undermined by the bureaucrats. It must fight to break the grip of the bureaucrats by winning the right to hold regular elections, recalling elected leaders and ensuring that all officials are only paid the average wage of the workers they represent.

It must breathe new life into the unions by transforming their structures into democratic, vibrant ones that can enthuse and mobilise the members. Above all, it must force the unions to reach out and organise the unorganised.

The tasks of a rank and file movement today, however, go far beyond these trade union questions. With Labour in office there is a growing mood in the unions to punish it for its policies of privatisation, of maintaining and even talking of extending the anti-union laws, and for its pro-business

agenda. Billy Hayes of the CWU has threatened to withhold money from Labour, John Edmonds has actually cut funding to the party. The firefighters' union, the FBU, agreed last year to open up its political fund to working class organisations other than the Labour Party.

This development will be discussed this month at the Socialist Alliance Trade Union conference and we encourage all our readers to attend this (see ad page 2). But the campaign raises an urgent question for any rank and file movement; namely, what should replace Labour? We are against non-political trade unionism and we are for the democratisation of the political fund. But if we win the battle to democratise it, what is the alternative to Labour?

Indeed, Andy Gilchrist, the FBU leader engaged in a campaign to try and reverse last year's decision by his union, has posed this very question - in a union policy paper and in a recent *Guardian* article - as a means of scaring his members back into the Labour fold.

Any rank and file movement today will be confronted with this question - and such a movement would have to thrash out an answer - one we believe lies in building a new party, a working class alternative to Labour. For us such an alternative must not be a re-run of Labour (100 years of trying to reform a system that puts profit before human need). It must be a total alternative to it, a revolutionary party that organises the working class to smash the capitalist system and the state that defends it.

That view may well be a minority one at the moment, but if a rank and file movement embraces politics in the fullest sense, it will soon find itself - as it should - organising international solidarity with workers in places like Argentina, who have no alternative but to revolt against the system.

It will find itself shoulder to shoulder with militant anti-capitalist youth as they brave ranks of riot cops to storm the gatherings of the global rulers and bosses whose policies and institutions govern every aspect of our lives.

In other words, the rank and file movement we need today must begin as an anti-capitalist rank and file movement as well as an anti-bureaucratic one. It must campaign against Labour and confront the question of what alternative party we need. The potential, therefore, for revolutionary ideas to spread in such a movement is enormous. All it requires is the presence of determined communists in its ranks fighting to realise that potential. And that is what Workers Power exists to do, will do and will do even quicker if more and more militant trade unionists join our ranks.



Bob Crow: new RMT leader

Blair's insults answered with strikes

"A resurgent labour movement is confronting the government of Tony Blair with the biggest threat of widespread industrial action in the two decades since Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher broke trade union power over the British economy."

This was the view of Warren Hoge writing in the *New York Times* in mid-February this year. It is an exaggeration, but it contains an important element of truth. Currently, the annual average number of strikes is around 250, compared with 2,000 in the 1970s. But the trend is at last upwards again, and in the first months of 2002 a number of major disputes have broken out.

The most significant have been on the railways and in the benefit offices, involving RMT, ASLEF and PCS members. The issues were around pay and disciplinary procedures (on the rail) and health and safety in the benefit offices. The PCS is also involved in a growing number of strikes over pay in places as diverse as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ombudsman's Office.

On the rail, the unions are confronting an unruly gang of privateers desperately trying to claw back lost profits after the post-Hatfield collapse of passenger confidence and the debacle at Railtrack that resulted in it being taken out of the hands of its shareholders if not re-nationalised.

The bosses are deliberately provoking strikes by offering derisory pay offers and victimising union activists. They hope to cut costs and break the two most powerful rail unions, the RMT and the drivers union ASLEF.

The mood for action over pay is there in other sectors too. The post workers' union, the CWU, recently held a ballot for strike action demanding a 5 per cent increase (management were offering 2 per cent). The vote for action was 63 per cent in favour, 37 per cent against, a clear mandate for a strike. Ballots are under way in the London National Union of Teachers and regions of the national Union of Teachers and Unison, both over London Weighting.

The issue of pay is at the forefront because public sector workers have gained least during the years of Brown's boom. Low pay is endemic in the sector, and workers are justifiably sick of it - they expected more from a Labour government that their votes did much to install two elections running. At the same time workers in the public sector are angry at the ever present threat of privatisation from New Labour.

When Tony Blair labelled public sector trade unionists as "wreckers" in his recent defence of his privatisation plans the mood of anger and the willingness to take action quickly spread. Strikes have already begun in both local government and the NHS.

Our friend, Warren Hoge of the *New York Times* may be guilty of exaggeration, but he is not lying. There is a real resurgence of anger, confidence and militancy inside the trade unions. Blair is confronting his most serious test on the industrial front yet.

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Tony Blair - table dancer to the rich

Frank Kellerman on why there is more behind New Labour's sleaze than just poor taste in friends

Tony Blair dismissed the Lakshmi Mittal affair as "garbagegate". The implication is that, even when the facts are clear, no dirt will stick to the government. Taking a £125,000 donation from one of the richest men in the world, then writing a letter backing his bid to buy a privatised Romanian steelworks is par for the course.

As the media rummages through New Labour's "garbage" it is guaranteed that even more muck will emerge about Labour's dealings with rich businessmen. The Mittal scandal comes on top of the "cash for passports" row over the Hinduja brothers - Indian millionaires who were implicated in the Bofors arms and corruption scandal.

This, in turn, follows revelations about Labour's links with Enron, which paid £36,000 and received a change in energy policy. In fact, the whole history of New Labour in office is one of shady dealings with big business.

And who can be surprised? Disgraced Labour minister Peter Mandelson once told a gathering of executives in Silicon Valley that New Labour is "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich". Mandelson was twice booted out of office over deals involving private money buying public influence.

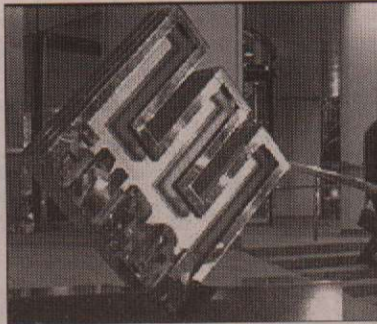
Of course, New Labour is doing no more than what every Tory government in history has done - it is in the pocket of big business and maintains a thousand ties, official and unofficial, with the boardrooms of the blue chip firms that dominate the economy. That relationship is traditionally cemented at private dinners in the gentlemen's clubs of London, or in the 100 secretive "worshipful companies" of the City of London.

But New Labour's problem is this: it has no real organic connection to the traditional establishment. Whereas the Tories have networks going back decades with deep roots in the business class, New Labour had to build its links with business from scratch. Its not so secret weapons in this endeavour were Peter Mandelson and Keith Vaz.

Mandelson wined and dined with the media bosses and the hi-tech billionaires, Vaz with the nouveau riche of the third world. Mandelson was the only member of the cabinet invited to Prince Charles' 50th birthday party. He was the vital link between Labour and millionaire novelist Robert Harris. For his efforts, his friend and onetime landlady, Tory hostess Carla Powell dubbed him "a groupie for greatness". Rupert Murdoch is reported to have said that Mandelson was "easy" and "a star fucker".

Derry Irvine, the Lord Chancellor, once described Keith Vaz as "the most incredible networker I have ever met". Vaz took charge of deals with super-rich Indian businessmen. Both the Hinduja brothers and Mittal were in Vaz's supper circle. Mittal gave a donation to Vaz's wife during her husband's 1997 election campaign.

For Vaz, selling influence for business favours is not an occasional lapse - it is a way of life. In 1997 he visited Goa, India, where he comes from. He told reporters that India should be given a permanent seat on the UN security council. He was on a delegation to



Some key players in New Labour's "networking" with business: from top left clockwise; former Home Office minister Keith Vaz; the Hinduja brothers; Lakshmi Mittal; Lord Wakeham, former tory minister and Enron executive; Enron's London offices; Peter Mandelson; and Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone, who gave New Labour £1 million in 1997

encourage India to "build business links" with Britain. He assured reporters that India will be "a dominant force in the 21st century". According to *Goa News*, Vaz then pointed out that India's business relations with the UK may help the country tremendously when Britain would be chairperson of the EU.

Whether he expected the Indian government to be so credulous as to think that he, a junior minister at the time, could get the European Union to back India's bid for security council status one can only wonder at. The fact remains Vaz is on record as linking India's place on the security council with its business ties to Britain. That this is the same India that is threatening war with Pakistan and carrying out repression in Kashmir does not matter to people like Vaz.

Labour continually gets tripped up in its relations with business because it is so new to the game. Old Labour, for certain, governed in the interests of big business. But it was at the same time a party created by the working class. Its historic function was to step in and head off industrial unrest, channelling the class struggle into the peaceful and half-hearted reform process.

But Tony Blair's project is to carve out a different function for the party. He wants New Labour to become the natural party of modern capitalism. To do this he is prepared to break all ideological links with reformist socialism. Should it prove necessary he would also be willing to break the party's organisational links with the unions. He has already dramatically reduced their role and influence in the party.

But the task Blair faces is not just to break down the old networks. It is to build new ones. New Labour's leadership is not staffed by members of the capitalist class. The nearest it has got are lawyers, journalists and business consultants - people drawn from the class of hangers-on to big business, not the big business grandees themselves.

This explains why, under Blair, Labour has assiduously courted the captains of industry: it brought David Sains-

bury, the supermarket millionaire, into the cabinet by appointing him as a Lord. Blair has brought in John Birt - job-slashing former head of the BBC - to sort out both crime and transport.

Probably the most blatant example of bridge-building to big business is Labour's relationship to BP. Blair appointed former BP chairman Lord Simon as minister for European Trade and Competition. BP has no fewer than six senior executives on government task forces. BP has paid for its own employees on "secondment" to the British Embassy in Washington, the Foreign Office's middle east section in London and in the Department of Trade and Industry. When Anji Hunter, Blair's press secretary and close confidante, was edged out by New Labour in-fighting, she moved straight to a top job at BP.

A second tier of Labour's speedily built business network is formed by the government task forces themselves. There are 320 task forces with 2,800 members. They are supposed to be drawn from the "great and the good" including charities, trade union officials and experts. In fact trade unions make up just 2 per cent of the membership. Businesspeople make up 35 per cent.

On the Treasury task forces the business bias is massive. "Business leaders" take 96 out of the 108 places on the committees advising Gordon Brown.

The Creative Industries Task Force is an example of where New Labour's links with the ruling class function somewhere like "normally". It is made up completely of business executives from the film, record and advertising industry. Most of them were either New Labour supporters or sympathetic neutrals with something to gain elsewhere such as Richard Branson, who coincidentally has been awarded the franchise on the major west coast rail route. But the creative industries are where you would expect to find new money and left-leaning capitalists.

Elsewhere New Labour, despite its efforts, is still not seen as the natural party of government. It remains an "outsider". The boardrooms of the big chem-

ical, aerospace, foodstuffs, banking and telecoms companies that dominate the FTSE 100 are still stuffed with pin-striped Tories. The City is awash with them.

That is why New Labour had to grovel at the feet of a different kind of business leader. The men with new money and a murky past. The men with business empires built on blatant skulduggery. The modern equivalent of medieval barons who pillaged and enslaved their way to riches.

To people like Mittal, the Hinduja and Enron, Labour was the honey pot - and they buzzed around it like bees. It was a neat deal. Labour had to buy big business influence; they had to buy respectability. And both had to buy it fast.

The essence of the sleaze that is now lapping around New Labour's ankles is that the deals done with this layer of capitalists were too fast, too blatant and too prone to unravel. Labour's relations with the Hinduja effectively finished the careers of Vaz and Mandelson. But they are both still working their magic behind the scenes - building a new relationship between Labour and the bosses.

Outright sleaze and corruption are not the normal method of operation for modern capitalism. Fairness needs to be upheld in this sense: that all the capitalists have an equal space in the trough for their greedy snouts. The outright selling of favours in the first Labour term must eventually give way to a more normal, quiet, genteel form of influence buying.

But for that to happen New Labour has to do something it has not yet achieved - build an organic base in the British ruling class that will allow it to leave behind the unions and their money at the same time as ceasing to rely on the largesse of tax exiles.

The seeds of a New Labour bourgeoisie are clearly there, and the issue that is fertilising the relationship is Europe. What unites Mandelson and Vaz? They are both ardent pro-Europeans. So are the leaders of the AEEU/Amicus, who

have bankrolled Mandelson's extra-curricular speechmaking exploits and seconded union officials into the pro-Euro campaign. Lord Haskins, the food and dairy magnate, and a recent recruit to the Labour task force gentry, is another Euro-enthusiast.

The pro-Euro section of the British ruling class knows that only New Labour can take Britain into the Euro and that only New Labour can persuade the sceptical working class - driven by a mixture of tabloid nationalism and genuine distrust of undemocratic neo-liberal Brussels - to vote yes. For the pro-Euro bosses the Tories are not an option.

Hence, when 58 business leaders wrote to the *Times* in May 2001 urging business to back Labour in the election, companies with a material interest in Euro entry were well represented.

But another issue is helping to crystallise a New Labour-supporting business class: public private partnership and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The biggest beneficiaries of PFI have been the construction and project management companies. They've seen their operating profits soar from between one to three per cent to double figures. They can't believe their luck. But because of the formerly ailing character of the construction industry, it tends to be managed by Tories and owned by foreign based multinationals.

Not so some of the companies that have benefited from the outsourcing boom. Alex Reed, chairperson of Reed Executive, the employment agency that is making millions from the temporary work boom in Britain's public services, was a prominent signatory to the *Times* letter. Sir John Parker, chairperson of the Lattice Group, was another. His firm owns a mobile phone mast network and Transco, the privatised gas company.

Both operations stand or fall by regulatory and DTI decisions. Allan Leighton, the man brought in to "rationalise" the ailing Royal Mail also put his name down. Chai Patel, head of the private health care company, Westminster Healthcare, signed up too. He has since been put on the government's NHS taskforce.

The list goes on but the main point to remember as one sleaze episode follows another is this: New Labour is in the process of transformation from a pro-capitalist workers' party into a fully fledged capitalist party. It hasn't got there yet - which is why it has to make do with second-tier business sharks rather than those who effectively ran the Tory Party under Thatcher.

It may not complete this process. It is Blair's project, but he is the leader of one faction in Labour. Others may organise to stop him if it suits them. But if New Labour does finish the job and end up as an out-and-out bosses' party the sleaze will assume the institutional and normalised form that inspired Lenin to describe parliamentary democracy as "a committee for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie". Till then, expect to see a few more New Labour ministers dancing at the tables of the rich and famous.

● Much of this material and much more hard to find detail about Labour's links with the capitalist class are documented on the website www.red-star-research.org.uk

In the third, and final, article in our series on Islam, *Dave Stockton* analyses the growth of political Islam in the 1990s

The failed strategies of political Islam

In the 1990s the highly variegated Islamist movement took a clear turn towards hostility to the USA. This was not because of any spontaneous or inherent anti-imperialism. It was a reaction to US policy. With the downfall of "communism" and the end of the Afghan war, the USA abruptly dropped its Cold

War strategy of promoting jihad.

The Gulf War of 1990-1 also enraged the entire Muslim world, reorienting even the most conservative sections from their concentration on "godless communism" to George Bush Senior's new "crusaders". At the same time the dogged support by most of the Arab regimes for the anti-Saddam

Hussein coalition, and their repression of the mass movement in the streets in solidarity with him, fuelled the growth and the radicalism of the Islamist groups.

However, a major division emerged between mass clerical-populist organisations, like the FIS in Algeria or the Refah (Welfare Party) in Turkey - which

adopted an electoralist-reformist approach - and the underground jihad groups, which resorted to individual terrorism, in Egypt for example. And in Algeria, the repression by the military regime turned the "reformist" FIS, into a jihad movement. Here we look at the lessons that can be drawn from these countries.

ALGERIA

Algeria, under Houari Boumedienne, was supposedly run on the principles of "Arab socialism" - a form of state capitalism. But after his death there was a period of rapid economic liberalisation from 1985 followed by punitive austerity measures under President Chadli Benjedid.

A wave of strikes led by the Algerian trade unions, the UGTA, and youth unrest in October 1988, culminated in five days of riots in Algiers, Constantine and Oran. The movement was crushed by the military. Between 200 and 500 were killed and 3,000 arrested.

But Benjedid was forced to abandon one-party rule in February 1989. The left-wing Front des Forces Socialistes and the trade unions were hampered by their continuing links with the FLN government. Afraid of the Islamists, they failed to mount intransigent, militant opposition to Chadli Benjedid.

The Islamists, on the other hand, were willing to play the role of oppositionists. In 1989 they formed an alliance, the Islamic Salvation Front (usually known by its French acronym, the FIS; Front Islamique du Salut). This was a united front of both moderate and radical Islamists. Its slogan "Islam is the solution" covered up the differences.

The leader of the FIS, Dr Abbasi Madani, a professor of psychology as well as a practising imam, was a moderate. He supported free elections, pluralism and claimed that Islam was essentially democratic.

The next most influential figure, Sheikh Ali Belhadj, regularly denounced socialism, democracy and secularism, as a western conspiracy against Islam. He called for a jihad to establish an

Islamic state founded on Sharia and played a militant inspiring role during the 1988 riots.

Basing itself on the mosques, madrasas and the network of Islamic charities, medical clinics, primary schools and so on, located in the poorest urban areas, the FIS drew in tens of thousands of the unemployed youth. Its most radical elements were some 2,000 returnees from the jihad in central Asia, the so-called "Afghans". The FIS combined a type of populism with Islamism but with a confidence that electoral means were central to its project.

However, the FIS leaders refused to give any undertaking that once they won power they would ever allow themselves to be voted out, which drew the jibe "One man one vote - once!"

On 12 June 1990, the FIS stunned everybody with a sweeping victory in the municipal elections. It gained control of 55 per cent of the municipal councils and two-thirds of the regional assemblies. It won 64 per cent in Algiers, 70 per cent in Oran and 72 per cent in Constantine.

This raised the spectre of an Islamist movement coming to power through democratic elections. Its continued refusal to commit itself to the preservation of democratic rights, the rights of women and secular law, gave the government an excuse to repress it.

The response of the FLN and the army was rapid: the arrest of the FIS leaders, Abbasi Madani and Ali Belhadj; the cutting off of state funds to Islamist municipalities; the gerrymandering of electoral districts for the parliamentary elections due in June 1991. The elections were postponed till 26 December 1991.

But despite all the repression and

gerrymandering the FIS won 180 out of the 231 seats in the first round of voting. Chadli Benjedid insisted that the second round of elections would go ahead.

The left and the trade unions called massive street demonstrations to oppose the FIS, but its victory seemed certain. The military then intervened on 12 January, forcing Chadli Benjedid's resignation, outlawing the FIS and arresting all its leaders, confiscating its funds and imprisoning more than 10,000 people in concentration camps in the desert. In the face of this repression most of the "western democracies" remained mute.

The result was an incredibly brutal and bloody civil war. Thousands of former FIS supporters flooded into 60 different armed Islamist groups. Numbers of Pakistanis and Sudanese veterans of the Afghan war came to join the new jihad. The largest jihad forces were the MIA (Armed Islamic Movement) and the GIA (Armed Islamic Group). The MIA grew to over 15,000 strong, the GIA to 2,500.

Between 1992 and 1996, 75,000 people were killed and 20,000 "disappeared" during the fighting. Secular school-teachers, doctors, lawyers, popular singers and writers were killed as well as members of the security forces and government-sponsored local militias. The original, pre-Arab conquest, population, the Berbers, were particularly targeted by both sides.

Entire village populations had their throats cut. Often it was not clear whether these horrific acts were carried out by the Islamists or by the army - probably both. Tens of thousands of members of the secular intelligentsia fled abroad.

TURKEY

In Turkey, too, a mass electoralist Islamist movement grew up.

Islamist parties in Turkey trace their origin to the National Order Party (NOP) founded in 1970 by Necmettin Erbakan. But a decade of military rule interrupted this development. With the restoration of a militarised democracy the Welfare Party (Refah in Turkish) was established in July 1983 with Erbakan as its leader.

Support for Refah increased steadily. Soon it had more than four million members. In the local elections of March 1994, Refah won control of five major cities, including Istanbul and Ankara, 28 provinces and approximately 400 towns and districts. It had a populist policy of helping the poor and gained a high reputation for rooting out corruption in towns it controlled.

In the general election of December 1995, it won 158 seats out of a total of 550. It became the largest political party in the country. It then formed a coalition government with Tamsu Çiller's neo-liberal True Path Party.

Erbakan, aware of the power of the military, pursued an extremely moderate line, cautiously trying to strengthen relations with other Muslim states, without cutting ties to the West. During his period as Prime Minister, he even abandoned opposition to Turkey's application for membership of the European Union.



Refah leader Necmettin Erbakan (left) and Recai Kutan, Virtue Party leader

The Welfare Party did support the call for lifting the ban on wearing Islamic headscarves in universities and schools. The military immediately proclaimed this an assault on the Kemalist tradition and the secular nature of the republic proved Refah's caution in vain.

In April 1997, the coalition government fell apart under the relentless hostile pressure of the military and the party was banned in January 1998 by the Constitutional Court. Erbakan, and a number of his closest associates, were banned from politics for five years and the party's assets were impounded by the state treasury. Its parliamentary deputies were, however, allowed to retain their seats as independents.

Other leaders of Refah immediately created a new party, "Fazilet", the Virtue Party. All the Refah deputies joined Fazilet. Led by Recai Kutan, it took part in the general and local elections of April and still gained 21.3 per cent of the votes and 111 seats in Parliament.

It was the third strongest political party in Turkey, behind the DSP of Bülent Ecevit and the MHP of Devlet Bahçeli.

EGYPT - THE JIHADISTS

Egypt's re-alignment towards the USA dates back to Anwar Sadat in the mid-1970s. By breaking ranks with the Arab and Muslim world in return for massive US aid the division and impotence of the Arab world were copper-fastened. Indeed, the USA's hold on the Middle East relies on the three pillars of Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Egypt, under Hosni Mubarak, received favourable rescheduling and indeed, cancellation of a large part of its enormous foreign debt during the Gulf War of 1990-1. But, as in Algeria, its policies of economic liberalisation had devastating consequences for the masses. Thus, the hatred of the Islamists both for the Egyptian regime, its US master and Israeli ally is not primarily a question of a reactionary hatred of modernism.

Elections are strictly controlled and corruption rife. The Muslim Brotherhood has been incorporated into this system, along with the arch-conservative ulema, by a creeping Islami-

sation of the state and law. Repression and preventative clericalisation enabled Mubarak to keep the radical Islamists isolated - a task in which he has been helped by the terrorist tactics of the fundamentalists.

The largest and most active of the underground jihadist groups is Jama'at Islamiyya (Islamic societies) - a coalition of largely autonomous cells of militants, based mainly in poverty-stricken Upper Egypt. Its cells were heavily engaged in attacks on the region's sizeable Coptic (Christian) minority and on the tourist trade.

Its "spiritual leader" is Sheikh Omar Abder Rahman - in jail in the United States because of his alleged role in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre. In Egypt his followers are led by Afghan veterans. The highpoint of their



Mubarak: friend of George Bush

activities came between 1993-97. Their most spectacular "success" was the slaughter of 62 tourists in Luxor in 1997. Repression led to mass arrests and executions.

Al-Jihad Al-Islami (Islamic jihad) is similar to Jama'at but much smaller. It split from Jama'at over questions of leadership and tactics.

Since 1991 well over a thousand people have died as a result of the Islamists' jihad, including police officers and government officials, Copts, secular intellectuals, leftists and foreign tourists.

Lessons

The lesson of the 1990s, is that Islamism, whether in its populist or democratic form or its jihadist form, offers no way forward for the masses against either imperialism or its local agents. It is implacably hostile to the working class and to socialism, even when it finds itself in conflict with the global or local capitalists. The tactics and strategy of individual terror embraced by the jihadists are not only useless and counter-productive but also reactionary.

The working class needs to organise independently in the Middle East. It needs to build its own organisations - unions, peasant committees, unemployed organisations and, above all, a revolutionary party capable of countering the influence of populist Islam, of combating Islamic fundamentalism and waging a struggle against imperialism and its puppets.

But in charting this course the working class and the left must learn the lesson of Algeria. Horrible and arch-reactionary as the policies of the Islamists towards women, ethnic and

religious minorities are, it is fatal to see the pro-imperialist regimes as a lesser evil. It is fatal to call on them to suppress the Islamists or in any way side with these regimes.

This lesson should be learned today by groups like the Labour Party of Pakistan, who mistakenly call on the military ruler General Musharraf to ban all the Islamic parties, close down their madrasas and forbid them to stand for elections. In Algeria this course of action led to a massive eruption of state and Islamist terrorism, which goes on to this day.

To rely on military regimes to defend secularism and democracy shows a misplaced trust in these forces. In fact across the Islamic world the official regimes have encouraged and implemented the imposition of restrictions on women, secular intellectuals etc. But far worse than this it hands to the Islamists the mantle of defending free elections.

Working class, revolutionary socialist forces must remain consistent defenders of democracy as well as intransigent opponents of political Islamism.

'This factory operates under wor

The Argentine people are resisting the worst crisis since the 1930s. In January, Michael Proebsting of the Austrian section of the LRCI visited the Zanon occupation in Neuquén



Zanon workers demonstrate



Workers' democracy at the Zanon factory

Neuquén is in the vanguard of the struggle against unemployment. It is a small city with around 200,000 people in the west of the country. The protest against the social crisis has reached a qualitatively higher level there than in the rest of Argentina. At first glance, there was nothing unconventional about the city – except the numerous placards and signs fixed on the lamp posts calling for solidarity with the strike of the ceramic workers at Zanon.

Zanon is famous for being the most modern ceramics factory in Latin America. It employs nearly 400 workers.

Zanon's fate is symbolic of the misery into which neo-liberal capitalism has plunged Argentina. Despite its modern character and its high productivity, the owner decided recently to sack all the employees and then re-employ only 60 workers at a wage 30 per cent below the present level.

Over the past years he had received considerable subsidies from the regional government and had agreed in return to preserve the jobs. But as has been experienced in Europe too, he took the money and now wants to sack all the workers.

Although this is not unusual under

capitalism the reaction of the workers in Zanon was unusual. Last year the workers had already thrown out the old bureaucratic leadership of the "Union of Ceramic Workers and Employees of Neuquén" (SOECN) and replaced them with a militant one.

Soon after this SOECN organised a strike after a colleague died because there was no doctor in the factory in violation of the law. After a nine-day strike the boss caved in and met the workers' demands.

But the threat of mass sackings was a far more serious attack. A mass meeting of workers decided to call an indef-

inite factory occupation. This has been going on for four months. But the Zanon workers did not stop at this. When we arrived at the factory gates we saw a huge Argentine flag on which was written: "This factory operates under workers control."

The workers have re-started production – even if they cannot use all the machinery because the regional government has cut off the gas supply. In front of the factory the workers sell the ceramic products for lowered prices – schools and kindergarten have already been given them free.

The general secretary of SOECN,

Raul Godoy, (who is a member of the PTS) welcomed us at the gate. Later he and some other colleagues showed us round the factory and how they are running production. After this one shift, between 150-200 workers held a meeting, which I attended. I was asked to address the meeting. I said that their experience of an occupation of where workers run production themselves for several months is something which has not been seen in Western Europe since the LIP-strike in France in 1973.

Naturally, it will be difficult to save the factory if the struggle is isolated. The perspective is rather to build for

Kirsten Paine looks at how Peronism came to dominate the Argentinian working class

Peronism: a brake on

On 17 October 1945, hundreds of thousands of workers from the districts of Buenos Aires came together in the Plaza de Mayo to demand the release of General Juan Peron. That night, Peron was released from confinement and addressed a crowd of more than 300,000 people.

He declared that Argentina was set for a new course that would deliver social justice and give a voice to working people. In 1946, with the support of the labour movement, he was elected president. During his 10 years in power – before he was overthrown by a coup and forced to flee to Spain in 1955 – he transformed the nation and the workers' movement and left behind a legacy that overshadows the labour movement even now.

So how did an army colonel from a modest, lower middle class background, win the political support of the workers of Argentina and found a political movement named after him?

Some commentators suggest that it was Peron's charisma, his ability to relate to the concerns of the workers, to speak the language of the *descamisados* (the shirtless ones) that ensured his popularity.

Others emphasise the role of his wife Eva 'Evita' Peron, whose own working class background was despised by the *gente bien* (social elite) but endeared her to the hearts of the poor and played a key role in the ensuring the popularity of Peron's regime.

While Marxists never deny the role that individuals play in history, these

observations fail to put Peron in the economic and political context of the times.

Since 1930, Argentina had been ruled by repressive military governments, desperate to keep control over a crisis-ridden system. Industrialisation had accelerated during the 1930s in response to the depression and the need to produce locally manufactured goods that had previously been imported from the imperialist nations. There was a massive expansion of industry in textiles, metal goods, meat packing plants and transport.

Yet while the industrial economy expanded, real wages declined. The 1930's brought intense hardship and state repression for the workers and poor. The new layer of workers drawn from the country's interior to the cities of Buenos Aires and Cordoba was weak in union membership and divided politically between communist, socialist and syndicalist fractions within the trade union movement. Worse, the Argentine workers had no independent political party of their own to express and fight for their interests.

In 1935, however, Socialist Party figures gained influence within the CGT (Confederacion General de Trabajo). These union leaders increasingly saw the potential in fighting for political representation and not just "bread and butter" economic demands. The development of this labourist current was influenced by what the socialist movement had achieved in Britain with the setting up of the Labour Party.

During the early 1930s the Com-

munist Party also began to win support among the workers as they led and won strikes of meat packers, tram workers and telephone workers. From 1935, the Communist Party oriented to the socialist-dominated CGT and rapidly became a growing force – leading unions in construction, meat packing, textiles and metallurgy.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 had a significant impact on the Argentine bourgeoisie. It had hoped the war would open up markets for its grain and beef in the USA. However, the US kept its markets firmly closed to Argentinean exports, which provoked increasing anti-US sentiment amongst the bourgeoisie.

After a coup in 1943, led by General Ramirez, the Argentine government refused to support the Allied side and was heavily influenced by the nationalist force within the army – the Grupo de Oficiales Unidos (Group of United Officers). Peron was a prominent member of this group.

The war also had a profound impact on the fate of the socialist and communist movement in Argentina. After the Soviet Union entered the war against Germany in 1941 on the side of Britain, Communist Parties called for support for the Allies. In Argentina this led to the disastrous policy of arguing that workers should not strike in British-owned factories and instead make "sacrifices" for the war effort.

In a country dominated by an imperialism, this policy was despised by the workers and isolated the CP from the working class and gave the oppor-

tunity for nationalists such as Peron to pose as the anti-imperialists who refused to support the Allies in the war.

This was the political context in which Peron entered the government in 1943. The military government's first task was to rapidly disarm a workers' movement that, despite brutal repression, continued to fight back.

Peron recognised one important fact: that the only way to head off the threat of revolution was to meet the demands of the workers for substantial reforms. He began to make contact with key workers' leaders. The war department became the centre of a delicate operation to woo the union leaders and convince them that Peron was committed to social justice and political reforms that would give the workers union and workplace rights.

Peron made headway in the railway engineers' union, convincing its leaders that their demands would be met if they supported his broad populist Justicialismo movement – an ideology that preached close collaboration between the unions and the state to place the control of industry in the hands of the Argentine nation.

On the surface Peronism used the rhetoric of citizenship, social justice and nationhood to argue that the interests of the workers and the nation were connected: "International capital is an instrument of exploitation, but national capital is an instrument of welfare."

But beneath the rhetoric was a political strategy engineered to put the brake on a militant workers' movement. His labour strategy was clear when he explained to nervous employers in 1944: "Do not be afraid of my trade unionism...I want to organise workers through the state... to neutralise ideological and revolutionary currents in its midst which might place our capitalist society in danger".

A turning point was the role Peron played in the meat packers strike of August 1943 in which he secured the release of their arrested leader. His aim was to win prestige among the workers and at the same time disarm the communist leadership of a key union: "When I speak with these communists, they shall cease being that or be replaced".

Peron, in fact, helped the meat packers gain concessions but at the same time got their CP leader replaced.

Peron approved the first rural legislation, the *Esatuto del Peon* (Statute of the Rural worker), that fixed minimum wages, paid holidays and free medical services.

In 1944 he set up the *Tribunales de Trabajo* (Labour tribunals) and the *National Labour Office*, of which Peron was minister, instigated a series of state interventions in collective bargaining and labour disputes.

By 1945, however, the major employers' associations, and the Argentine military were becoming increasingly restless and concerned about the direction of Peron's reforms. The army demand-

Workers' control'

two, three, many Zanons because it is not only Zanon that is close to break-down but the whole of Argentina. The only solution for this is if the working class takes over the whole country. In the subsequent discussion workers asked several questions including about our experience in the anti-capitalist movement.

Another important element of the strike is the involvement of women. The workers of Zanon are nearly all men. But the union leadership set out from the beginning to actively integrate the wives and families of the workers. In the union paper the women's commission has four out of 20 pages. And they are also playing an active role in the actions. This is also true for the unemployed movement in Neuquén where one of the three leaders is a woman.

Neuquén is also exceptional in another way. As is known there are frequent protests of workers, unemployed and the lower middle classes in the whole country. But rarely, is there a close organised co-ordination between these sectors. But in Neuquén such a unity has been formed over the past months.

I was able to observe this unity in action when I participated in a blockade of a bridge (Neuquén is an economically important province because of oil but is connected with the centre of the country via only two bridges.) First, the Zanon workers started the blockade. As agreed in advance half an hour later a demonstration of 2-300 activists of the "Movement of unemployed workers" (MTD) arrived and joined the blockade.

The goal of the blockade was not to fully close down the traffic – as they did several times in the past – but only to slow it down to make agitation and collect donations. It was remarkable that not a single driver protested and many people gave money to the Zanon workers despite their own difficult circumstances.

The demands of the MTD of Neuquén are also remarkable since they differ from most of the other unemployed organisations in the country. They do not demand short-term job schemes but 10,000 proper jobs provided by the economically potent oil company, Repsol.

Later, the comrades invited us to a meeting of the MTD youth organisation. The 30 activists are particularly interested in our experience in the anti-capitalist movement in Europe and how we responded to the police repression in Genoa.

The subject of repression is a burning one in Argentina and particularly in Neuquén because the police operate there with exceptional brutality against the activists and sometimes even use firearms.

The outcome of the workers and unemployed struggles in Neuquén are far from over. But one thing is certain: that the workers movement and left in Europe can learn a lot from the experiences of the comrades in Neuquén.

The LRCI urges all trade unionists, socialists and anti-capitalists to raise money in support of the Zanon workers and is approaching various bodies to organise this (see box on back page).

Women at the heart of rebellion

The revolutionary events in Argentina electrified workers all over the world. It inspired those fighting privatisation, rising unemployment and cuts in state welfare being forced down their throats by the International Monetary Fund and local rulers.

On International Women's Day we want particularly to celebrate the role of the women in the ongoing resistance. From the start of events last December women were running strikes, barricading streets, blockading major roads, calling for the government to be toppled and fighting the cops on the streets.

One newspaper reported that a middle-aged woman demonstrator still railed against "this government's starvation plan" despite having one of her toes hacked off by a horse's hoof.

When thousands of unemployed people broke into Wal-marts and Carrefour supermarkets around the country, women organised the redistribution of food.

Women have been on the frontline of the struggle, a struggle that didn't just begin in December but has been going on for many years. What pushes women to the forefront of rebellion during a crisis?

"We participated at highway blockades and pickets, we are struggling alongside the unemployed workers even though most of us are not unemployed, but we are state workers and teachers and are also undergoing the cutbacks," said Celina, a

woman from La Plata.

Women are disproportionately affected by economic instability because of their position in society. In employment, they are highly concentrated in the public sector, i.e. as teachers or nurses, which is the first target of a structural adjustment program.

During the latter half of last year many workers in the public sector were not paid for three or more months. Women are also employed in low paid, casual, non-unionised, insecure jobs that are the first to go when an economic crisis hits.

In addition, as the state cuts spending, all the social welfare, health and education goes and the extra burden is forced upon women. Unemployment in Argentina stands at 20 per cent, but is much higher in specific areas and 44 per cent of those in the cities are officially in poverty. There is no assistance from the state and women have to try to hold the household together.

The prolonged nature of the crisis has drawn more and more women into the political struggle. Women make up over 60 per cent of the unemployed movement which organised the highway blockades last August that were so successful in paralysing the economy, including the previously invulnerable financial sector.

And women are active in the unions, even where, as in the Zanon factory occupation in Neuquén, they aren't employed. After months of disputes at a

Zanon ceramics factory the workers decided to strike because they hadn't been paid for months. Now the factory is producing under workers' control.

The Zanon workforce is nearly all men, but leadership of the union (Union of Workers and Ceramists of Neuquén) set out from the beginning to actively integrate the wives and families of the workers, and they are playing an active role in the union.

Women have become radicalised by the events in Argentina. A prolonged social crisis is under way and women are openly debating and organising around all aspects of their oppression. More than 15,000 women marched through the streets of La Plata in August demanding legal abortion and contraception, as well as the release of the unemployed pickets that had been imprisoned during the highway blockades. As we celebrate international women's day let us echo and amplify the words of one of the protestors that day:

"From now on we employed and unemployed women, who fight for the right to decide what we do with our bodies, the students and teachers who are fighting against the cutbacks and the nurses that are struggling in the public hospitals, we who are fighting against the cutbacks and the poverty – we all must coordinate our struggles everywhere we are."

class independence



Juan Peron in presidential uniform

ed that Peron be removed from all his government posts. On 9 October, Peron resigned.

The trade union response was immediate. The CGT leaders perceived the attack on Peron as an attack on their new found rights and called a general strike to demand Peron's reinstatement. The fact is Peron's project coincided with the reformist aspirations of the trade union leaders.

The Partido Labourista (Labour Party) was formed shortly after 17 October, and the PL threw its weight behind Peron's candidacy. Peron's involvement ensured that pro-Peronist candidates such as Mercante were imposed on the Partido Labourista. But as events after 17 October revealed this was to be a tragic relationship. It marked the definitive alliance of the workers' movement to a corporatist project, led by a nationalist sector of the armed forces.

The Communist Party's response to the mass mobilisations in support of Peron was to further alienate them from the workers' movement by characterising Peron and the mass movement that had supported him as analogous with the fascist movements of Italy and Germany.

Peron was not a fascist. His aim was not to mobilise a mass movement to smash the working class but to incorporate the trade unions into the state-sponsored national industrialisation of the Argentine economy and in this way de-mobilise the revolutionary aspirations of the workers.

After being elected with more than

50 per cent of the vote his first act was to disband the Partido Labourista. Having dissolved the Labour Party, Peron carried out a similar operation in the CGT, by replacing the leadership with his supporters. Opposition unions dominated by the Socialist and Communist parties were not legally recognised and were often put under the control of government appointees.

At the same time, Peron instigated the mass expansion of the trade unions: membership grew from 877,000 in 1946 to 1.5 million in 1948 and nearly two million by 1949. Real wages increased by 53 per cent between 1946 and 1949.

After 1944, in the large factories, *cuero de delegado's* (shop steward's plenary) were formed which, in turn, elected a commission interna (factory committee) that played a major role in asserting workers' control at a factory level. However, this local control was countered by a centralised trade union movement that fell under state control.

Peron delivered reforms for the workers' movement and altered the balance of power in favour of the trade unions during his first term. However, as the economic crisis of the 1950s began to have its impact, the level of income distribution that had been achieved, thanks to substantial reserves that had been accumulated during the Second World War, came to an end. The working class bore the brunt of the crisis as inflation soared and wages declined.

In 1955 the ruling class decided to strikeback. They were no longer prepared to tolerate reforms favouring

the workers' movement. In 1955, Peron fled without a fight, despite the fact that the CGT had offered workers as volunteer reserves to help defend him.

So what was Peron's legacy? In Argentine labour history the Peronist regime is still referred to as the "golden age of labour" – a brief period when the oligarchy were on the defensive and the workers began to experience a degree of political freedom and room for manoeuvre that had been so brutally denied under the conservative military dictatorships that had preceded Peron.

But the workers' movement paid a heavy price. Not only were the revolutionary opportunities of the 1940s thwarted by the role of Peronism, but the revolutionary movements of the cordobaza in the 1960s and throughout the 1970s were deeply imbued with a bourgeois nationalist consciousness that could never provide the answers to the economic and political crises that continued to rock Argentina throughout the 20th Century.

The Argentine masses have demonstrated countless times, and most recently in the revolutionary December days, that they have the boldness and determination to resist the dictates of capital that have only brought misery and hunger to Argentina.

The key to the success of the next phase of the Argentine revolution is for the working class to build its own independent revolutionary political party that must break with the ruling class in all its forms and complete the task of "getting rid of them all".

Italy's Social Forums: building a 'movement of the multitudes'

Orsola Cassagrande is the London correspondent for *Il Manifesto*, a daily Italian newspaper of the left, formed by a journalists' co-operative. When in Italy, Orsola is an activist in the social forum of Torino. Workers Power asked Orsola about the Italian social forum movement and the recent wave of strikes.

WP: Can you tell us how the social forums started, who is involved and what sort of campaigning they do?

Orsola: The social forums started as an attempt to join together different movements and campaigns. For example, there were people coming from the social centres who had been active for several years in different campaigns like immigration and the minimum wage. But there were also people coming from completely different backgrounds: religious groups, citizens' groups – you know, local residents – teachers, doctors as well as the more traditional anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation movement

The focus for the movement was Genoa, because that was where the G8 were meeting. But in the build-up and after Genoa the social forums became more important. Obviously there were months and months of preparation for Genoa. And the result was great in terms of numbers. Thursday's demonstration for immigrant people was a huge success. On Friday there was the first attempt, you know, to violate the Red Zone, which ended tragically with the death of Carlo Giuliani. And the response to that was that on the Saturday 300,000 people marched and the movement that took to the street was even broader. These were the people of the social forums. And this was despite the fact that the constitutional left did not support the movement.

After Genoa and the raids on the two schools where the social centre was based there was a big re-thinking about strategy. On the one hand there was an awareness that what happened in Genoa was a huge movement of people, but at the same time the death of Carlo Giuliani brought people to believe even more strongly that the state – and in particular the Italian state with Berlusconi's centre-right and fascist government which had just been elected two months before – was in fact preparing for war, a real war with real weapons, not just traditional means. And there was a very strange mood in a way. This government was prepared to shoot whoever dissented.

There were several demonstrations after Genoa in support of Carlo Giuliani's family and those who had been arrested. One of the spokespersons of the social forums is Vittorio Giulietto who has been involved for several years in building up a very strong movement for people with HIV. He was one of the official spokespersons for the Genoa mobilisation. He is one of the people who has been penalised by his commitment to the social forums. He was adviser to the minister of health and after Genoa he was sacked, obviously for political reasons because there was no other reason.

WP: The next thing that happened, of course, was 11th September. Were the social forums involved in building the anti-war movement?

Orsola: Absolutely! There was the traditional Catholic peace march in Padua which was heavily influenced by



Genoa July 2001: Carlo Giuliani's death opened up a debate within the social forums on strategy

the social forums and what had happened in Genoa. And again there were 250,000-300,000 on the streets. And of course 11th September brought up a lot of different questions. The social forums, together with the social centres, together with the workers' movement – and in particular the metal workers – played a huge role in building the anti-war movement.

The big discussion which was going on was how to allow every single issue, every single campaign, every single voice to have a say in what was going to happen on the demonstrations. One slogan which I think fits this well is, "This is not a mass movement, but a movement of multitudes".

WP: Is what you're saying that through the social forums the campaigns don't lose their focus, but they amplify their voice?

Orsola: Precisely. And in fact the Tutte Bianchi, which is the White Overalls, have been transformed by their participation in the social forums themselves. The White Overalls became the Disobedients, which is quite different from the White Overalls. There is a different approach to the kind of actions. Before they focused on making big constructions but now it's more like the campaign against the detention centre [for immigrants in Bologna] which was penetrated by the demonstrators who smashed it up!

And again it was the social centres who were involved in the preparations for Porto Alegre, which again was a huge mobilisation, 3,000 in all, second only to the Brazilian delegation. There were delegations from FIOM, the metalworkers, and there were delegations from Rifondazione Comunista and even delegates from the committees of the Democratic Left of the Olive Tree Coalition – who were ousted on the steps of the Forum! This is very important. There were protests which were focused

around one simple slogan, "This forum is against the war. You voted for the war. Therefore you are not welcome."

There is an attempt by Rifondazione Comunista to get more and more involved in the movement. This attempt started in the mid-1990s when they tried to get involved in the supposedly communist social centres and is definitely continuing now with the social forums. RC is going to start a magazine which should function as a kind of space for open debate where different people from the movement and from the party can have their voice. This will run alongside their daily newspaper.

WP: Are people wary of them because of their involvement in the Olive Tree coalition government?

Orsola: RC said openly that it would try to co-operate with the Olive Tree coalition government but it also said it would withdraw its support at some point if it felt it did something or something happened which it could not support. This happened over the Kosova war and the raids on Yugoslavia, which by the way the social centres and the social forums played a huge part in opposing. Although there is always a fear of having an institutional, structured party trying to fit a cap on the movement, there is also a willingness to all get along.

WP: Can you tell us how the social forums meet up and co-ordinate for national and international events?

Orsola: There are some national and international gatherings and there are co-ordinations to get in touch and stay in touch. There are no delegate meetings as such. There are people who will travel from Padua to Torino, and from Torino to Napoli – in preparation for Porto Alegre for example – so that different forums will hear views from dif-

ferent people. Another way, during Genoa for example, was the creation of a radio network, linking up local radio stations.

WP: Is there any national assembly?

Orsola: Not exactly. There is no kind of party structure. At a local level it is important that each local forum knows what is going on in their own city. For example in Torino, there are different campaigns. One is for immigration, one is for the metal workers, another is for students – a big issue. Each campaign links to each other. For example there was a campaign to get the local hospital to allow Nigerian girls to have abortions. Although abortion is legal in Italy, they weren't allowed. And their campaign was successful because of people from the social forum going there and protesting.

WP: Can you tell us a bit more about the metal workers and the recent strikes, in particular the 15th February general strike called by Cobas?

Orsola: The strike was against the abolition of Article 18 of the Workers' Statute, which will allow the bosses to sack workers with no justification. What the government wants to do is give total freedom to the bosses so they can do whatever they like. There is a big fight going on among the three main unions. CGIL believes that Article 18 cannot be touched. The other two are more open to dialogue. But the Minister of Labour, being from the Liga Nord, is totally opposed to dialogue.

The metal workers, particularly in Torino, have been involved in many strikes – political strikes too, against the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. They've been with the students, in Porto Alegre, in Genova, they've been virtually everywhere. There have been official strikes as well as wildcats. In the work-

ers' movement they are definitely the vanguard.

WP: Would you say that the social forums have aided the political development and combativity of the metal workers and vice versa?

Orsola: One of the main tactics of the bosses to divide workers is to use younger workers against the older workers. Young workers are forced to work on lower wages and temporary contracts, which could become permanent if they behave. And the big attempt of the bosses was to show to the young workers that the older workers' way was the wrong way. Like your Ken Jackson said, "Strikes are out of date" – except the next morning all Ford workers walked out! The same thing happened in Italy.

In Torino Fiat workers said they wanted a bench by the coffee machine. You know, "I work on the line for ten hours and I should be allowed to sit down and relax." And the good thing was that the younger workers supported the others and stood together. This was unprecedented because they usually think, "I need the job and if I behave I'm gonna get a permanent contract." And this was broken and the bosses' attempt to divide the workers failed completely. This happened because some of the younger workers were coming from social centres.

WP: What do you think is going to happen on 5 April? Do you think the other two unions will be forced from below to join in the general strike?

Orsola: On 15 February some of the other trade unions sent delegations to Rome, of course not from the bureaucracy. And unofficial strikes were called by FIOM but everybody joined in. And so the workers are quite distant from the leadership. I don't know if they will officially join the general strike because there is quite a clash of personalities but a lot of their members will definitely participate.

The other thing which is interesting in Italy at the moment is that there is a middle-class movement which is quite big and finds its focus in the "clean hands" campaign by the judges against corruption. This year was the tenth anniversary of the campaign and the middle-class leftish liberals attracted 40,000 onto the streets of Milano.

WP: That's interesting. There are a lot of parallels between Italy and Argentina – not in the immediate causes of the crisis perhaps, but in the depth and breadth of the popular discontent. Do you think Italy could become the Argentina of the North?

Orsola: Half a million people turned out against Berlusconi on 25 April 1994 [the anniversary of the overthrow of Mussolini]. This showed that a wide range of Italian opinion is not ready to passively accept a far right government with fascist elements. And so not just 5 April but also 25 April and 1st May will be important dates too.

January and February have seen a wave of protests in Italy. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right government plans to suspend Article 18 of the workers' rights statute, which would make it easier for employers to sack workers and replace them with others on short-term contracts. A general strike has been called for 5 April. *Paolo Silone* reports from Milan

Strikes against 'right to sack'

Antonio D'Amato, leader of Italy's bosses' union, Confindustria, recently complained that "one of the problems with this country is that an employer can divorce his wife but can't get divorced from his employee." Until D'Amato's election as Confindustria's president, two years ago, the bosses' union was dominated by Gianni Agnelli, the head of the Fiat empire. Under Agnelli the Confindustria traditionally negotiated with trade unions in complex round-table deliberations called *concertazione*.

But, since defeating the Fiat candidate, D'Amato has made the Confindustria more representative of the 100,000 small and medium-sized businesses that are the backbone of Italian capitalism. He has abandoned *concertazione*, adopting a more openly confrontational stance with the unions. He is a fierce advocate of forcing through "structural reforms" in Italy.

The response from Italian workers to this offensive has been a militant one, despite the timidity and caution of the union leaders. There has been widespread disruption recently because of a series of airline strikes, called to demand government support for the industry following the 11 September attacks on the USA.

The campaign against the "reforms" to the labour laws and the pension system led to 600,000 people joining countrywide protests at the end of January and rail employees staged a half-day strike and were joined by ferry workers.

On February 15 the radical CoBas trade union "base committees" called a

national strike and demonstration in Rome in which more than 100,000 participated.

The pressure from below has finally had an effect on the leaders of the main trade union confederation,

the CGIL: a one-day national strike has been called for 5 April. Prior to this, a massive national demonstration has also been announced for 23 March. This is in defence of Article 18.

The 5 April strike has been called despite the fact that at a meeting of government, trade union and employers representatives on 20 February, prime minister Silvio Berlusconi backed away from an immediate confrontation with the unions. Having blustered that "the die had already been cast" and that there could be no turning back at this stage, he suddenly, "humbly" offered a two-month suspension of the impending law in the hope that unions and bosses would reach an agreement which, he says, he will then transform into law.

Much of Berlusconi's rethink has to do with the fact that divisions have emerged within his government over the implications of the proposed modifications to Article 18. On 21 February,



Roberto Maroni, the minister for welfare overseeing the "reform", sacked his under-secretary for daring to state publicly that the attack on Article 18 was never mentioned during the election campaign.

The government is also attempting to split the alliance between the unions. The CISL and the UIL have accepted Berlusconi's offer of negotiations, while insisting that if Article 18 is brought up as part of a package then they may be forced to join the national strike. What they mean is that they are prepared to discuss work "flexibility" with the bosses' federation and the government, but not the introduction of the right to sack.

In this sense, there is no difference between their position and that of CGIL leader Sergio Cofferati. Cofferati's objections to the CISL's and UIL's position is that there is no point going into negotiations with the illusion that the

bosses won't bring up the Article for discussion.

He therefore demands that it be completely removed

from the table before he sits down with Berlusconi to discuss flexibility. Since Berlusconi

has so far refused to do this, the union leader has been forced into a corner which he has been trying to avoid for months. He now has to back his way out but this not easy. given the militant sentiment of Italian workers, most recently seen in the national strike of 15 February, and by the lightning strike of railway cleaners which led to a quick victory.

This upcoming national strike is in fact long overdue, and the fact that it has been called for as far away as 5 April shows that Cofferati and the CGIL bureaucracy actually hope it will not need to materialise. The mass demonstration called for 23 March represents one last-ditch attempt by the CGIL bureaucracy to frighten the government to the negotiating table without having to resort to the strike itself.

But Italian workers have already responded to the strike announcement in a way which will please neither Berlusconi or Cofferati. Factories every-

where, from Piedmont to Campania, via Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia, stopped work in celebration on 21 February to give the government and the bosses' federation a foretaste of what is to come. On 22 February, FIAT workers in Turin downed tools, hit the streets and made the headlines of ever more concerned television news bulletins.

The 23 March demonstration in Rome isn't going to be big: it's going to be massive. And what is certain is that it will include workers from the CISL and UIL who have already declared their intention to defy their leaders.

This demonstration must be transformed into an overwhelming popular protest which will rock this government to its corrupt right-wing foundations. Workers need not only to defend Article 18, but also defend other existing rights and win new gains, including badly needed wage and pension increases and a sliding scale of hours under workers control to drastically reduce unemployment levels among southern youth in particular.

Also workers should not wait until 5 April. We need to escalate the action. We need strike committees in every factory. We need them to be co-ordinated at local level drawing in the youth of the anti-capitalist movement and the social forums. This movement can then be co-ordinated at national level by a council of recallable delegates, to lead the struggle and prevent the union leaders selling out. This is the way to beat Berlusconi and his band of clerical reactionaries, "former" fascists and corrupt business cronies.

Imperialist hypocrisy on trial at the Hague

Radovan Karadzic will not be swapping tales of Serbian atrocities against Bosnian Muslims with Slobodan Milosevic at the Hague any time soon it appears. A bungled Nato operation to snatch the "philosopher-butcher" from a Bosnian Serb mountain refuge has insured that Milosevic will continue to dine alone for the near future at least.

Nine months ago the ex-President was taken against his will from Serbia, and last month his trial opened in the full glare of the world's media at the International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) at the Hague.

The ICT has charged Milosevic and four of his cronies with 66 counts of "crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war", including genocide, in some of the bloodiest and most notorious events of the series of wars that punctuated the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s - in Croatia (1991-92), the Bosnian war (1992-95), including the vicious massacre of thousands of Muslims in Srebrenica, and in Kosovo in 1999.

By any standards, Milosevic is guilty of at least encouraging, and often directly overseeing, some of the most brutally concentrated expressions of murderous chauvinist hatred seen in the final years of the 20th century.

From the beginning of the break-up of the Yugoslav federation along national lines in the early 1990s, Milosevic

deliberately fanned chauvinist hatred, allying himself with some of the most vicious racist thugs to be found on the planet, in particular the Bosnian Serb leaders Mladic and Karadic. Without a doubt, he is an anti-working class criminal with blood on his hands.

And yet the charade in the Hague, which will probably drag on for a couple of years, does not provide any reason for rejoicing. What emerges from the courtroom is not the sweet smell of justice, but the nauseating stench of hypocrisy.

The ICT is supposedly an expression of the will of "the international community" to prosecute "crimes against humanity". Its supporters claim it stands in the moral (and even legal) tradition of the Nuremberg Trials after the second world war, set up to indict leading Nazis for their war crimes. It is no such thing.

The Nuremberg trials were convened by a small group of victors to prosecute the losers for violation of the principle of state sovereignty by attacking other countries after September 1939. No more, no less. In fact when Milosevic's supporters tried to have Nato indicted for its illegal attack on Yugoslavia in much the same way the court prosecutors simply said there was no case to answer since the ICT was not set up to try such matters!

This court's very existence is a testament to the changed logic of the new

world order. State sovereignty is not sacrosanct and US-led western imperialism will decide whose sovereignty is deemed worthy of overthrowing and when.

There is no jury, the second-rate judges and prosecutors are appointed, and accountable to nobody, and the victims of Milosevic's undoubted crimes - the masses in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo and, of course, Serbia - have had absolutely no say in how the charges were framed, nor in the way the prosecution is being carried out.

Witnesses can give anonymous testimony with no possibility of cross examination. Milosevic is guilty of terrible crimes, but virtually every step of the way he was aided and abetted by the very imperialist powers that today have the barefaced cheek to offload all the responsibility onto his shoulders.

In the wake of the collapse of Stalinism across Eastern Europe, the world's capitalists rubbed their hands with glee at their ideological and, they hoped, economic victory. Vicious demagogues like Milosevic, who had ridden to power in Serbia on a racist and chauvinist wave using quasi-fascist methods, were backed first by the Germans then by the US, as they plotted the break-up of Yugoslavia, which inevitably heralded a bloody war.

Between 1991 and the end of 1994 between 200,000 and 400,000 people were killed in Croatia and Bosnia. These

massacres, carried out primarily by Serb and Croat forces, but also by the Bosnian Muslims, were the direct consequence of imperialism's meddling in the region. The 1995 Dayton Accords signed between Nato and Milosevic placed the latter at the centre of imperialism's plans - despite his crime in Bosnia. And yet none of the west's leaders are named as accomplices in Milosevic's crimes.

Sometimes, imperialist participation was even more direct. The notorious massacre of Srebrenica, with which Milosevic is charged, and which saw the "disappearance" of around 10,000 Muslims, took place under the direct gaze of French-controlled Dutch UN soldiers.

The UN claimed they had turned Srebrenica into a "safe haven" for Muslims from the surrounding regions. Tragically, the Muslims believed them and came in their thousands. In fact, Srebrenica was turned into a killing ground for the Bosnian Serb militias. The imperialists simply looked on.

The very countries that back the ICT are also directly responsible for the deaths of thousands of Serbs, during the murderous NATO war against Serbia in 1999. In his initial comments, Milosevic has made some telling points about the vile hypocrisy of the imperialists in this respect.

The country that is most responsible for the bloody massacres in

Yugoslavia yesterday and in Afghanistan today, the US, is not represented at the Hague. The US refuses to recognise the ICT, preferring to judge and jury and dole out its own "justice" free from any interference from its "allies" and unrestricted by any international conventions.

The prisoners in Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo know that US "justice" is just as fictitious as that being supposedly meted out in the Hague. Workers and militants should not waste a moment's sleep over Milosevic's predicament. Let him rot. But they should not be taken in for one instant by the imperialist lies and hypocrisy being spouted at the ICT. The real tragedy is that the victims have been deprived of the possibility of judging the butcher of Belgrade and his whole stinking system.

Only the Balkan masses have the right to judge Milosevic and all the other war criminals - above all those in high office in the West. The people of Serbia should protest against further extraditions; the vast majority already oppose it anyway.

A reborn, independent labour movement in the Balkans should launch its own multi-ethnic war crimes tribunal. Only Balkan workers have an interest in seeing all the guilty put on trial, and rooting out the whole international system that led to such terror. True workers' justice is the last thing that will come out of the Hague.

World Social Forum: re-inventing reformism

The second World Social Forum gathered in Brazil, from 31 January to 5 February. It was certainly bigger than last year – with activists from 131 countries present – but, asks *Dave Stockton*, was it any better?



The Argentine uprising last December was barely referred to in official forums but inspired the activists in the encampment

Judged by the statistics alone the World Social Forum (WSF) was a remarkable success. Last year organisers expected 2,000-3,000 participants, but 15,000 turned up. This year there were around 60,000 participants: 15,250 of whom were delegates, from 4,909 organisations.

The World Social Forum opened with a 50,000-strong march through the city. The CUT (Central Unica dos Trabalhadores – Central Union of Workers) Brazil's largest union federation, the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – Landless Workers Movement), and the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores – Workers Party) were the main organisers.

But already a curious form of "social exclusion" had been exercised by the organisers. They prevented the attendance of the Colombian guerrilla organisation, the FARC, and Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez – despite being keen to display Che Guevara's image everywhere. Meanwhile, 11 French ministers of the government that backs George Bush's "war on terrorism" were present.

Indeed, there was a radical distinction between the VIP "delegates" – only one in twenty of those present – and "the rest". By all accounts the best discussions by far took place – as last year – in the encampments of the youth, the landless and indigenous peoples.

These included running debates on the experience of the piqueteros movement and the popular assemblies in Argentina. All the main Argentine Trotskyist groups were there: the Partido Obrero, the Partido de Trabajadores por el Socialismo, the MAS and the MST.

A demonstration led by Hebe de Bonafini, a fiery leader of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo burst into the assembly of the parliamentarians, open like so much else "to delegates only", chanting "we are ALL delegates".

The official sessions of the WSF took place at the private Catholic University of Porto Alegre and was divided into conferences and workshops. Some 26 plenary sessions over four days were structured around four themes: "the production of wealth and social reproduction," "access to wealth and sustainable development," "civil society and the public arena," and "political power and ethics in the new society."

Around this scores of seminars took place, a people's tribunal on debt sponsored by Jubilee South, and about 5,000 workshops.

High points in the official calendar were speeches by the "stars" of the anti-capitalist movement like Noam Chomsky, Walden Bello, Martin Khor, Naomi Klein. Walden Bello put forward his "Proposal for a Pluralistic System of Global Economic Governance" in the conference on "political power and ethics".

In this he outlined his oft-repeated view that the aim must be not to reform the World Trade Organisation, IMF and World Bank but either decommission them, convert them into pure research institutions, or radically reduce their powers.

This strategy would include strengthening institutions like UNCTAD, the International Labor Organisation and regional economic blocks (Mercosur, SADCC, ASEAN); and the formation of new international and regional institutions dedicated to "devolving the greater part of production, trade, and economic decision-making to the national and local level"

with multiple checks and balances, and "based on their values, their rhythms, and the strategies of their choice."

This is clearly a totally reformist project: back to the import substitution, UNCTAD strategies of the 1960s – but it was one of the most radical on offer at the official sessions.

Another was the proposal on the control of financial capital by Attac, the right-wing of the anti-capitalist movement. This utopian-reformist project aims to restore the power to impose controls over capital flows to national states, through national policy measures and international fiscal measures.

The latter includes the famous Tobin Tax – a levy on international financial transactions to discourage speculation; a tax on foreign direct investment; a tax on the profits of transnational corporations; and the reimposition of controls on stock, foreign exchange, derivative and bond markets.

Last, but not least, the elimination of tax havens, anti-money laundering laws, controls on banks and the reform of the IMF and World Bank.

Attac has clearly chosen to "Fix them not Nix Them" in Susan George's famous dictum. Indeed the vice-president of Attac made absolutely clear the reformist nature of their project when she stated: "the WSF is not building a new society of governments, nor a new society of nations, [but] . . . a new society of societies," adding that "while the road ahead toward some sort of global equity and a better humanity is long, arduous and uncertain, it is, nevertheless, the only route out of barbarity."

But it wasn't only the ideologues of the NGOs who were busy spinning and weaving new reformist clothes for their friends in the French Socialist party, several of whose ministers were present and one of whom was custard-pied. The "old reformism" was there in force.

Ignacio Lula da Silva, leader of Brazil's Workers Party and once again the PT's candidate in the upcoming presidential elections, denounced free trade at a press conference, and said that, if elected in October he would seek debt agreements that reflected "our reality."

Porto Alegre; first or third world?

Porto Alegre – a city of 1.2 million people is located in one of Brazil's more prosperous states, Rio Grande do Sul. According to Walden Bello it is "is first world when it comes to infrastructure and social services."

In 1989, the Partido dos Trabalhadores won the municipal elections, and introduced a "participatory budgeting system".

Regular citizens' assemblies meet to decide on which projects they would like to prioritise in their neighbourhood. This is supposed to decentralise the resources, and allocate funds to the needs of the people.

Visitors from Europe and North America lavish praise on Porto Alegre's transport system, the new roads in poor areas, the multitude of community projects and co-operatives.

But this dodges the question about how such a system could possibly work in the favelas of Sao Paulo and Rio without a massive increase in the money available – an increase possible not merely taxing the rich but by expropriating them.

"I think the world should be sensitive so that not one government in the world allows a child to die from hunger in order to pay debt that could be negotiated," he said. Is that naïve optimism or the worst sort of cynicism?

But even this mildest of reformist bletcher was clearly too radical. Wary of enticing Washington's intervention into Brazil's elections, Lula's economic adviser, Guido Mantega, rushed to spin Lula's words into nothing by saying the PT wanted better lending terms via swaps and other measures "within market conditions."

The comrades of the Partido de Trabajadores por el Socialismo and the Fracion Trotskista in their report on Porto Alegre rightly characterised the "positive thinking" on display at the WSF as "reformism lite". But they were right to carry the experience of the revolutionary days in Argentina into the forums.

Noam Chomsky has said that he hopes that the WSF will become "a new International" for global social justice movements. Under its present leadership it will be an unnecessary rerun of the Second International. But the young militants of the streets of Genoa and the Plaza de Mayo deserve a whole lot better than that.

We need to fight in such gatherings for an international that can co-ordinate struggles like the one under way in Argentina and steer them to revolutionary victories for the working class, and the poor and oppressed.

The best human material for this will not be found amongst those who want to discuss utopias with imperialist ministers but those who want to fight them – and with more than custard pies.

The WSF has also decided to hold a series of regional Social Forums over the coming year in Africa, Asia, Ecuador, USA, Europe and Palestine. The European Social Forum will take place in Florence sometime between mid-October and mid-November.

The revolutionary forces – indeed the mass forces of workers and peasants too – must both utilise these international gatherings and take them out of the hands of the reformist and NGO bigwigs. They must become forums of the class struggle – socialist forums for organising and debating all the options for a programme of struggle.

The Call of Social Movements

The declaration adopted at the end of the WSF – the "Call of Social Movements" – is a reformist document. It dares not identify capitalism and imperialism as the enemy, dares not call for its overthrow or say that the "other world" that is needed is based on the expropriation of the exploiters and the creation of a socially planned economy. It refuses to mention the class struggle.

But something of the pressure of the 50,000 "fringe" made its way into the document. For example, it does pledge the participants to struggle against some of the major issues facing us today. It denounces our common enemies in much sharper terms than Susan George or Lula were willing to do..

It states: "there is the beginning of a permanent global war to cement the domination of the US government and its allies. This war reveals another face of neo-liberalism, a face which is brutal and unacceptable. The opposition to the war is at the heart of our movement."

It declares its solidarity with "the force of 'cacerolazos' and 'piquetes', popular mobilisations [which] have demanded their basic rights to food, jobs and housing" in Argentina.

It denounces the G8 which in Genoa "responded with violence and repression, denouncing as criminals those who dared to protest". It stigmatises "military operations in the Plan Colombia as part of the Andes regional initiative, the Puebla Panama plan, the arms trade and higher military budgets, economic blockades against people and nations especially against Cuba and Iraq, and the growing repression against trade unions, social movements, and activists."

It goes further than Attac and says "We demand the unconditional cancellation of debt and the reparation of historical, social, and ecological debts".

But most important of all it issues a call to international actions and mobilisations in the year ahead: 8 March – International women's day; 15-16 March – Barcelona (Spain) summit of the EU; 17 April – International day of peasants' struggle; 1 May – Labour day; the "International day of action against militarism and for peace" during 22-23 June when Seville hosts the EU summit; 7 October – world day for the homeless.

Palestine: give refugees the right to return to their homeland!

Palestinians form the largest refugee population in the world. Their right to return to the homeland from which they were expelled is demanded by the PLO, recognised by the United Nations, and denied by Israel. In any renewed peace negotiations the fate of refugees will be a key issue, says *Mark Robbins*

During and after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, almost 800,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed. They were turned from citizens into refugees. These refugees and their descendants are the largest and most persistent refugee group in the world with over 3.7 million registered by the United Nations and about 2 million others not registered.

The property of the refugees was stolen from them, mostly becoming state land in the possession of kibbutzim and moshavim (collective farms), land which under Israeli law may only be used by Israel's Jewish citizens. Additionally, Israel's famous Law of Return removed any citizenship or residence rights from non-Jews expelled from its territory during the 1947-1949 war, while simultaneously granting any Jewish person in the world the right to claim automatic citizenship upon arrival in the country.

The majority of Palestine's Arab population were self-sufficient peasants or tenant farmers: consequently their expulsion from their homes and the confiscation of their property left them dependent upon charity, international aid or menial work in order to survive. More than 50 years after the Nakba (catastrophe), many still live in the dehumanising refugee camps.

Why has the refugee problem persisted? United Nations Resolution 194, passed in December 1948, made Israel's UN membership conditional on the implementation of the right of the refugees to return, stating: "...the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date... compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return."

Israel held off from reaching an agreement on the return of the refugees, insisting that it had to take place in the context of a general peace settlement in which the Arab states recognised the state of Israel. This insistence was made for two reasons: to prevent making permanent the borders that Israel acquired in 1948 (which many Israelis regarded as being unsatisfactory); and to turn the results of ethnic cleansing into a fact that would have to be accepted by the Arab states, thus "solving" the refugee problem at their expense and that of the refugees themselves. This remains the situation today.

Where did the refugees end up? Between one-half and two-thirds of Palestine's Arab population was displaced in 1948. Of the small number (less than 100,000) who remained under Israeli rule, most were granted Israeli citizenship – although expulsions continued well into the early 1950s under the guise of removing "infiltrators".

Various discriminatory land laws and the Law of Return created the legal category of "present absentee"; that is, Arabs who fled from their original homes to areas (usually only a short distance away) that subsequently became part of Israel. These laws confiscated their property, despite their possession of Israeli citizenship and their presence in the country. They and their descendants are a factor in the debate around



Fatima in a makeshift tent in Gaza: during 9 July last year, Israeli soldiers and settlers attacked the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza. In one particular area, Saladin Gate, Israel demolished 26 houses. Originally from Jaffa, Fatima first became a refugee at age 7 in 1948. "They threw us into the streets!" she said. Many elderly people now living in the tents have experienced becoming a refugee three times in their lives, the first time during the Nakba of 1948, the second during Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and now, once again, in July 2001.

the "right of return".

The largest number of refugees, about half the total, were expelled to those parts of their country which the Zionists did not occupy in 1948: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (one of the poorest and most densely populated pieces of land in the world), under Jordanian and Egyptian rule respectively. They subsequently found themselves under Israeli occupation in 1967.

During the occupation, and until Israel's recent "closure" of the Palestinian areas, which has effectively sealed them off from the outside world, the Israeli economy drew heavily on the captive labour force in the occupied territories. Many Palestinians would make a long daily journey from their refugee camp to work in the same lands from which they had been expelled – having to run a gauntlet of checkpoints and restrictive "security" and immigration measures in the process. For them, the "right of return" is not a demand to return to a country from which they have been separated for more than 50 years – it is a demand for full civil, national, political and economic rights in the country in which they still live.

A smaller number of refugees found themselves in Syria and the Jordanian East Bank, where they enjoy rights of permanent residence (and, in Jordan's case, citizenship). Additionally, economic migration between the west and east banks of the River Jordan gradually increased the number of Palestinians in Jordan proper to the point where they now constitute the majority of the population.

Outside of historic Palestine, the largest Palestinian refugee population is in Lebanon, where it now numbers over half a million. In order not to disrupt the demographic balance and Lebanon's French-imposed confessional political system, (based upon a fictitious Christian majority), the mainly Muslim Palestinians were barred from working in over 70 listed professions, denied rights of permanent residence, and subjected to

a complex regime of legal discrimination intended to encourage their migration out of the country.

Subsequent migrations and expulsions have also taken place. From the 1950s onwards, Palestinians have emigrated to other Arab states (particularly in the oil-rich Gulf and Peninsula), to North America, Europe and Australia in search of economic opportunities denied to them in their host countries. Palestinians were expelled from the West Bank following Israel's occupation in 1967; from Jordan in 1970 during King Hussein's suppression of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO); from Lebanon after Israel's invasion in 1982; from Kuwait following its "liberation" by US imperialism in 1991; and from

Libya by their supposed friend and protector, Colonel Gaddafi. Like European Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century, they are the perennial victims of pogroms and massacres, and have little security in any of their places of exile.

Astonishingly as it may seem Israel has attempted to evade responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem. One of the most prevalent myths is that the 1948 refugees "were not expelled", but left at the request of their own leaders in order to facilitate a plan to drive the Jews into the sea.

This transparent lie flies in the face of all of the recorded historic facts. There are 35 documented massacres, including the most notorious – Deir Yassin – where 250 unarmed civilians were murdered in cold blood. To deny this is historical revisionism.

A more common objection is that the absorption and reintegration of the refugees should be the responsibility of the Arab states. After all, Israel absorbed an equivalent number of Jews from the

Arab countries in the immediate aftermath of 1948, many of them forced out of their countries of origin in a similarly shocking fashion. Why can't the Arab states take responsibility for their fellow Arabs, as Israel has for its fellow Jews? Socialists should reject this principle of "population exchange" out of hand, trampling as it does on the national rights of all peoples without exception. One crime does not excuse another.

Another argument is that "return" is economically and logistically impossible. This, however, is a red herring. A study of the demography of Israel shows that 78 per cent of Israelis live in 14 per cent of pre-1967 Israel and that the remaining 86 per cent of the land in Israel, on which 22 per cent of Israelis live, is mostly land that belongs to the refugees. Of this 22 per cent of Israel's population, 91 per cent (20 per cent of the total) live in city centres which are mostly Palestinian, and the remaining 9 per cent (2 per cent of the total) live in kibbutzim and moshavim – the vast majority existing on refugee land.

Of the 530 locations "depopulated" in 1948, the majority are still unoccupied or lie in areas with very low population density. Contrast this to the overcrowded and inhumane conditions in the camps. Consequently, a large portion of the refugees could, almost literally, return to their towns and villages of origin without displacing a single Jew. As Salman Abu Sitta, president of the Palestine Land Society and former member of the Palestine National Council states: "the return of 5 million refugees and the end of the historic conflict is weighed against the livelihood of 8,600 kibbutzim, an economically bankrupt movement now largely abandoned by the Israelis themselves".

Moreover, Israel's history as a state built on immigration demonstrates that there is no question of its economic ability to absorb newcomers – if the political will is there. The total number of

find expression in national hatreds.

Besides which, if Israel's character as a Jewish state can be maintained only by denying the rights of another nationality, then this is not a national character that socialists should defend.

Socialists should support the right of return for Palestinians. The passage of time does not remove this right: it merely underlines its seriousness. But more importantly, the refugees' right of return is a national right that is a key component of the exercise of the entire Palestinian people's right to self-determination. The Palestinian people are oppressed as a nation not merely because they suffer Israeli occupation – their national oppression, and their national struggle against it, pre-dates 1967 by twenty years.

They are oppressed as a nation because they are denied their right to self-determination within their historic homeland by a state founded on exclusivist principles. This refers not just to the apartheid-style exclusion of those under occupation or inside Israel itself, but to the physical exclusion of the Palestinian diaspora.

Proposed "solutions" to the refugee problem which reject the right of return and refer only to financial compensation, economic integration and resettlement recognise one aspect of their individual rights, but ignore their national rights. They may alleviate the economic situation of the refugees, but will not solve the problem of their national oppression. Nor will they eliminate their own self-identification as members of the Palestinian nation, as the existence of economically integrated Palestinian communities in Jordan and Syria demonstrates.

Take the example of Gaza. Its refugee residents have no intention of leaving Gaza en masse to anywhere outside of historic Palestine – ruling out resettlement. A solution which offered them financial compensation as a substitute for their return (in the context of a two-state solution) would amount to little more than an insulting drip-feed of international aid to a neo-colonial slum still vastly dependent upon the Israeli economy. It would not eliminate their just national grievances, and would therefore not solve the national conflict.

A "solution" based upon a combination of compensation and resettlement, however, would necessarily have to resettle the refugees in lands further away from their historic homeland than where they now live, if it was to have any purpose whatsoever.

It can be quite safely assumed that the refugees would oppose this tooth and nail, and would resist its implementation. "Resettlement", therefore, would amount to little more than a state-sponsored pogrom supported by the guarantees of the "international community", that is, world imperialism.

Not all of the refugees would choose to return to their lands in the event of a settlement that recognised their unfettered right to return. That, however, is their choice. The principle at stake is not merely the individual rights of a large number of displaced persons, but the national rights of an oppressed nation to determine its own national future.

One of the most prevalent Israeli myths is that the 1948 refugees "were not expelled", but left at the request of their own leaders

refugees from Gaza and Lebanon equals the number of Russian immigrants who came to live in Israel during the 1990s.

The real objection to the return of the refugees, which all other objections are intended to obscure, is that it would undermine Israel's character as a Jewish state. It is certainly indisputable that the mass return of the refugees to their former lands would undermine the current Jewish majority within Israel's pre-1967 borders. An argument is even made that the returning refugees would inevitably "take revenge" upon the current Jewish residents, or would otherwise oppress the Jewish minority or attempt to "drive them into the sea".

This argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy that evades the question of national oppression, the responsibility of the oppressor nation (Israel) for its consequences, and the possibility of its eradication. The longer that a people is nationally oppressed, the more likely it is that their just national grievances will

Washington-London: the real axis of evil

A State Department official in the USA has said that even if Iraq agrees to UN demands on weapons inspection: "we won't take yes for an answer". And Tony Blair won't say no to Bush when a war is launched

The plans were signed off it seems at the end of January by President Bush. A force of 200,000 US troops to invade Iraq from Kuwait, to be preceded by ferocious and sustained aerial bombardment and arming of opposition Kurds. All this possibly as soon as June, after the UN sanctions against Iraq have come up for assessment and the USA's demands for complete opening up of Iraq to their inspectors have inevitably and justifiably been turned down.

Of course, no evidence exists that Iraq was in any way linked with the September 11 attack on New York and Washington or that Baghdad has ties with al-Qaida. So the "war against terrorism" has been broadened to a "war against those who hold weapons of mass destruction" (other than those the US approves of).

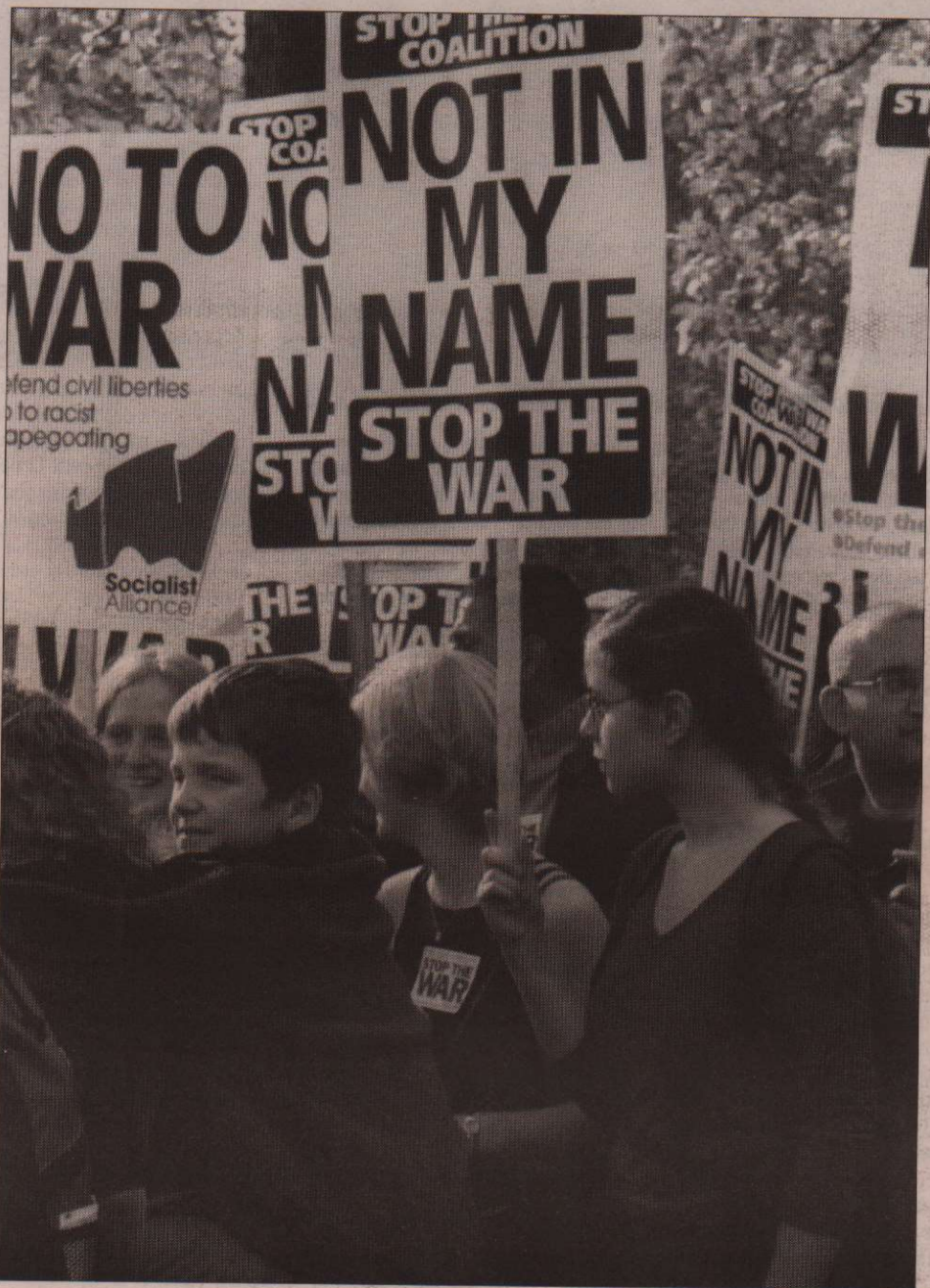
Bush has made it clear that they do not appeal to international law or the "international community" (i.e. the United Nations) to legitimise such a war, nor will they seek prior political approval from European, Russian or Middle Eastern members of the imperialist-led coalition against Afghanistan before they bomb Iraq flat.

The US imperial power looks only to its "national interest" in launching such an attack; that is the interests of US big business that own the politicians who run the government and seek to make the world a safer place to make profits, buy up firms, access raw materials and prop up pliant regional governments.

Iraq is not one of the latter; it is an enemy of Israel, it backs the Palestinians - even if for Saddam's own narrow reasons. Iraq refuses to accept US leadership in running the world. So it must be brought to heel. Saddam must be overthrown.

The USA has overtly rejected the idea of the sovereignty of nations and rejection of outside aggression, which underpinned the creation of the UN and post-war post-Nazi world bourgeois imperialist order. In is the idea that the United States reserves to itself the right to determine which states, which governments serve its global ambitions. The US reserves the right to unseat leaders and uproot governments.

Bush's new military budget is \$396 billion, an increase of \$48 billion over the already unexpectedly high 2001 budget. The increase alone is larger than any other nation on earth's total



military budget. The total is higher than the next 19 nations' defence budgets put together.

This symbolises the overwhelming military might and superiority of US imperialism, and underpins the arrogance and unilateralism of its actions.

The "opposition" of the EU powers and the Arab world to the USA's unilateral imposition of its law on Afghanistan proved so feeble or non-existent that this has encouraged the hawks to press for action against Iraq. Bush's state of the union speech has forced the architects of European Union foreign policy - France, Patten and Solana - to condemn Bush for his "simplistic approach" and especially for his aggression towards Iran. Putin and the Arab states have made it clear that they cannot support the idea of an attack on Iraq.

The European imperialist powers are increasingly aware of the fact that the US offensive also challenges their sphere of influence in the semi-colonial world. While the US has ceded the Balkans to the EU there are growing conflicts over Israel. Given the USA's hegemony these can only be articulated to a limited extent and the fact that there remains no unified EU foreign policy (thanks above all to Britain's slavishness towards the USA) inhibits the effectiveness of any European challenge to the US.

In these circumstances the US can and does dismiss the objections of "its allies" knowing they have neither the military might or political unity to do anything to stop the US.

The axis of evil is now clear; it is found in Washington and runs from the Pentagon through the White House and Congress and across the Atlantic to Downing Street.

Only mass, united resistance from the world's workers, urban poor and small farmers, from those denied national self-determination and struggling to achieve it, can stop the US in its tracks.

Only mass demonstrations crucially in the Gulf states, Pakistan and Turkey can knock these plans off course, and make the US administration realise the overhead costs of war against Iraq will be civil wars and revolutionary uprisings in the region and mass anti-war movements in the US and Europe.

- Stop Bush and Blair's war drive!
- Hands off Iraq!

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Workers Power is the British Section of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International

Mail to: Workers Power, BCM Box 7750, London WC1N 3XX

Tel: 020 7820 1363

Email: paper@workerspower.com

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Speaking tour a great success!

There was a joke circulating among those involved in Martin Ogando's European speaking tour on the revolutionary uprising in Argentina: what do Yasser Arafat and Martin have in common? Neither sleeps in the same house two nights running!

In three weeks Martin spoke at 17 meetings in Sweden, Slovakia, Britain, the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany and France.

Hundreds of anti-capitalist activists and Latin American exiles, members of left groups, trade unionists all heard Martin bring the events of last December alive and update us on the key developments of the last weeks. In Coventry, Martin was able to talk with Marconi shop stewards (see www.workerspower.com/wpglobal/ptstour for reports on some of the meetings).

Martin is a member of the Partido de Trabajadores por el Socialismo in Buenos Aires and returns to play his part in the next round of struggles that will open up as the IMF and Duhalde government try to steer a package of cuts through.

But we aim to bring a Neuquén striker over (see page 6) to build solidarity with their occupation. But to do so we urgently need your money! We must raise £2,000 for this work in the next two months. Please make cheques payable to Workers Power and send to the address on this page.