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The tasks of trade unionists today - pgs 8-9



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LABOUR REBELS CAVE IN, HUTTON BACKS BLAIR

WORKING CLASS ACTION CAN DEFEAT BLAIR

over his critics. The BBC would never again dare to question whether the government was lying to the public over weapons of mass destruction. His position of dominance in the country and Labour Party seemed unchallengeable.

But it has not turned out this way. The people weren't fooled.

They listened to Hutton, the high court judge, and did not believe him. They knew Blair had taken them to war on a lie – they too had listened to the evidence. Every day they saw the failure to discover the Weapons of Mass Destruction that Blair and his security services said were ready to launch death and destruction in 45 minutes – the excuse for war.

The opinion polls and TV phone-ins said it all – the overwhelming majority of ordinary people were outraged that Blair had been vindicated while the BBC and its reporters were vilified.

So Blair has not come out of the David Kelly affair and the Iraq war vindicated and all powerful. The mass movement that opposed the war, the majority of the population that believed Blair lied on behalf of George Bush have not had the wool pulled over their eyes. Blair is a deeply damaged and distrusted man.

So how can we get rid of him? And what can we put in his place?

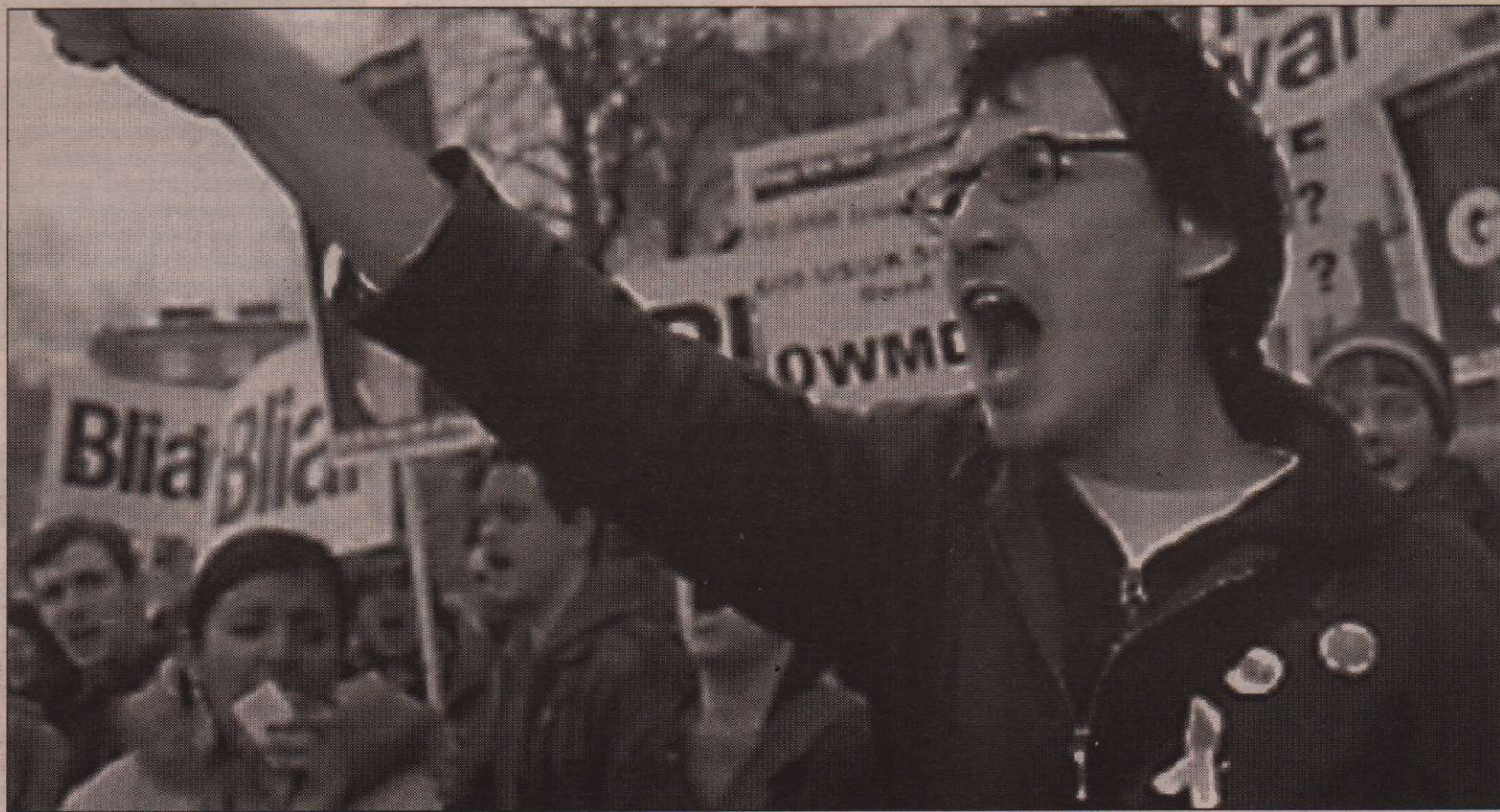
Some have argued that what is needed is to "Reclaim the Labour Party". Leading trade unionists, former cabinet ministers like Clare Short, even New Labour cheerleaders now disillusioned with the increasing conservatism of Blair suggest it is time to make a change. It is time, they say, to reassert old Labour values, maybe even to change the leader, to put someone like Gordon Brown in charge.

Yet, true to form, it was this very Gordon Brown, who sent out the signal to his supporters in the parliamentary Labour Party not to defeat the government on tuition fees, who saved Blair's skin. Just as on the Iraq war and Foundation Hospitals, Labour MPs sided with the government, and against the majority of the electorate. If they cannot stand up to Blair in these circumstances they never will. That is the truth of the matter.

There is growing disenchantment with Labour and with Blair. The problem is that there is no channel that can direct it into a positive and socialist alternative. The workers, students and anti-war activists disillusioned with Labour can be won to a new party – a new workers party – that offers a real alternative. A party that fights not just against war but against the system that breeds war – global capitalism.

The lessons of the Socialist Alliance, now replaced by the explicitly non-socialist Respect Unity Coalition, is that the organised base of Labour and those workers that vote for the party to keep out the Tories will only join a serious alternative. Not a front or coalition that appears asking for their votes only at elections, but a party that roots itself in the communities and unions, that shows itself intransigent at fighting their corner against Blairism, against racism and against the relentless drive for profits and the market.

Blair can be knocked off his perch but only if we construct a real fighting and revolutionary alternative – a new workers party.



Demonstrators gather outside Downing Street to demand an independent inquiry into why Britain went to war

Harold Wilson, a previous Labour Prime Minister, once said that "a week is a long time in politics". Tony Blair must have been thinking this when he looked back on the last week of January. At the beginning of that week, facing a major revolt in his own party on university top-up

fees and the Hutton Inquiry report, the media painted him as a man on the ropes. He could be facing a double whammy, they said, defeat on a key Bill and the following day a damning report on his role in taking the country to war with Iraq.

By the end of the week Blair and his friends were cock a hoop. Yes, he had only narrowly

carried the higher education measures, but a win is a win. The Hutton whitewash, with no criticism of the government over Iraq and the "dodgy dossiers", had Alastair Campbell strutting the TV studios demanding that heads should roll at the BBC. Sure enough they did.

Blair seemed to have won a complete victory

BUILD A NEW WORKERS PARTY

Civil servants strike but leaders undermine action

By a PCS member

Some 20,000 civil servants across the country have taken two days of strike action against low pay. The effectiveness of the largest industrial dispute in the Civil Service in many years, however, was undermined by a last minute decision by the union leaders in the Department of Work and Pensions to suspend action, following an 11th hour revised offer from management. This meant that the largest, best organised and most militant section, with 80,000 members, did not join their colleagues on the freezing cold picket lines.

The action was suspended because management upped their offer by a meagre 5 per cent and promised "talks" on the hated appraisal system, on which bonuses depend.

The decision was met with anger by DWP union activists, as well as those in the Home Office, Treasury Solicitors and Department of Constitutional Affairs, who accused the DWP group executive committee (GEC) of a "sell out". At a rally on the first day of action, Christine Hulme, a DWP activist, criticised the decision of her own GEC: "This is a tactical error. The revised offer should have been given to the membership to decide

democratically before action was called off".

The chairperson of the Office of National Statistics group in the PCS – reporting that his members were to join the fray, having just rejected their pay offer by nine to one – said: "If you have your boot on someone's throat, you don't take it off till you have finished negotiating".

General secretary Mark Serwotka was challenged to publicly criticise the decision, but refused, saying only that he "understood it was a difficult decision".

A member of the DWP GEC defended the decision to jeers claiming that the DWP dispute was "different" as it was not just about pay but also the appraisal system.

Nevertheless, the strike had success in disrupting parts of the Immigration Service, prisons and courts. Heathrow's Terminal One, Waterloo International and some ports experienced problems. Some immigration centres were completely closed or operated with a skeleton staff. Private security staff were bussed in from London to Liverpool to keep one centre open.

The Court Service was disrupted, with the processing and transfer of prisoners delayed and court cases rescheduled. All PCS members at Shoreditch County Court observed the strike and Royal Mail van dri-

WHAT THE STRIKE IS ABOUT



POVERTY PAY

- 25 per cent of PCS members earn less than £13,750 a year.
- 81 per cent of PCS members earn less than the average UK non-manual workers wage.
- Starting salaries in the DWP are £10,000 a year.
- WHAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS OFFERED**
- Treasury Solicitors - 0.5 per cent
- Dept of Constitutional Affairs - 2.8 per cent
- Prison Service - 1 per cent
- Home Office - 1.3 per cent
- All below the rate of inflation - a pay cut in real terms**

vers refused to cross the picket line there and at the Home Office. The Old Bailey was disrupted and there were long queues at the Royal Courts of Justice.

There were even reports of judges showing solidarity with the strikers! One judge at Reading County Court bought coffee for the picket line while one in Leeds handed over a bottle of port.

Prisons were also affected. Some 20 per cent of staff at Sudbury Prison in Derbyshire went on strike, joining colleagues at Hull, Everthorpe, Belmarsh and others.

Encouraging though these actions were, and notable for the involvement of many first time strikers, the action would have had a much bigger impact had the DWP been involved. The decision to suspend action was, at the very least, a tactical error which has sown the seeds of resentment among rank and file DWP members as well as those who did take action. It's like going into battle with 100 guns but deciding only to use 20 of them.

Mark Serwotka should have used his authority to intervene and argue against this decision. A militant trade union leader with a good track record of industrial

action should know better. This does not augur well for co-ordinated action in the future. This situation underlines the need for a vibrant rank and file movement in the union. A union, with strong involvement at the grassroots, which ensures all decisions are taken democratically at mass meetings, would have prevented this. If you can only call a strike with a ballot of members, then the same should apply for calling one off.

Management will not give in after just two days of action – although they are worried enough to now offer talks. There will be a need for further action and colleagues in other parts of the Civil Service, like the Office of National Statistics, should join the strike. Not a single minister has been prepared to go on record to defend these derisory pay offers. But they have informally told journalists that they will treat the PCS "like the firefighters".

PCS members must now organise to put pressure on the union leaders in the DWP with a lobby of the next meeting. In the face of government intransigence, we should argue for escalation of the action – up to and including an indefinite strike.

WHAT THE STRIKERS SAY

● ON WHY WE'RE ON STRIKE

- "I started on £900 a month after tax. After London rent and travel, there is nothing left for food, bills and other essentials" - Jack, HO
- "We're fighting for a decent pay deal and don't do these things lightly" - Jon, HO
- "Workers feel undervalued...this action is unprecedented" - Tim, DCA

● ON THE DWP'S SUSPENDED ACTION

- "The DWP were wrong to call off strike - it's a management tactic of divide and conquer" - Jack, HO
- "It's disappointing that the DWP called off the strike 24 hours before" - Jon, HO

● ON LABOUR PARTY

- "The Labour Government sees us just as workers, the same way as any other political party or private company would see us" - Jack, HO
- "Labour is no longer a socialist party - I'm not surprised at all" - Naz, HO
- "I thought there would be a different relationship with workers in 1997 when Labour were elected. But they're not looking after workers" - Jon, HO

German unions turn ESF call into strikes

A rising tide of militancy has led trade unionists and anticapitalists to call a one-day strike, *Martin Suchanek* reports

An important conference of the German trade union and anticapitalist movement took place over the weekend of 17-18 January in Berlin. About 500 delegates gathered to hammer out a strategy for defeating the government's pro-business "Agenda 2010".

In the end it proved a big step forward. The conference achieved many of its aims and helped unify and extend the struggle against Chancellor Schröder's agenda. The more militant sectors ensured this against the manoeuvres and even histrionics of the right wing around Attac.

Last December, the red-green government pushed through the first part of its strategic attack on the German working class and on the unemployed in particular:

- Cuts in social provision, pension rights and unemployment benefits.
- An extension of the low wage sector.
- The 1 November demonstration which

saw 100,000 march through Berlin was a turning point. It was a mass protest organised by rank and file committees of shop stewards and trade union officials, in alliance with the left, anticapitalists, college and school students and immigrant organisations. A mass movement with roots in the rank and file of the working class was born.

This event was followed by a number of workplace and community actions including unofficial strikes and mass demonstrations in some towns. The biggest demonstrations were in November (Wiesbaden, capital of Hessen with 50,000) and the 13 December saw 35,000 strike in Berlin.

Also a student strike wave erupted in November with up to 40 universities being occupied at one time, some continuing during Christmas.

The 1 November demonstration was not only a warning to the government, it was a shock to the trade union leaders, forcing

them to turn to the European Social Forum and call for a European day of action on 2 and 3 April.

But what do they call for and what do they want?

They don't want strike action on 2 April (and certainly will not organise it). They don't want a national demonstration on 3 April, which could attract one million if properly organised. They prefer three "local" demos instead.

And finally, they don't call for the repeal of the government and capitalist attack as whole. They argue that the unions' demands would benefit German exports – and do not even oppose the call for "elite universities" in Germany, since, according to the DGB (the German TUC), it raises the "question of education".

The conference discussed the importance of local action committees (alliances against social cuts and, in some towns, social forums)

and the need for national co-ordination.

But the call for strike action at the conference was sharply disputed.

Why? Because the unions and workers believed this was impossible? No. Shop stewards and union militants on the working group set up to formulate the conference call had a majority for strike action on 2 April. However, they did not have a "consensus", that is, Attac leaders made it clear they would drop out, if such a decision were taken.

Attac distorted the result of the working group and presented a "consensus" – that is, Attac's position. This lie, however, was denounced by a series of speakers from the working group. The conference presidium, which was more positive towards Attac than the floor, was forced to do what any reasonable person would do: put the question of strike action to a vote.

The Attac leaders were almost hysterical, arguing that a vote was undemocratic.

Car workers fight back

Up to 8,000 Land Rover workers in Solihull came out on a 24-hour strike on Monday, 26 January, writes *Bernie McDaid*. Hundreds of pickets gathered outside the Lode Lane plant and also at the Gaydon site. Although pickets faced high fencing, which they dubbed the "Camp X-Ray" treatment, only management and white-collar staff crossed picket lines. Car production at Lode Lane was completely halted!

Car workers in the T&G, GMB and Amicus engineering section were incensed at Land Rover's offer of a two-year, 6.5 per cent pay rise, with a looming shake-up of working practices attached. Although management are claiming pay is the only negotiating point, strikers believe otherwise.

One striker said: "The pay offer is bad enough but it's not the only issue. Flexibility in their book is shoving us around the place like a pack of animals, moving you around as they choose. We've had enough!"

But even on pay, Land Rover workers lag £20 a week behind Jaguar workers – part of the same Ford-owned company. Indeed, this is a company that boasts of extremely healthy profits. Management made veiled threats that "industrial action will put at risk the long term future of Solihull" and has made threatening noises about moving production to China. But this has cut no ice with Land Rover workers mounting the first strike against the employer in 16 years.

More strikes are set to follow. The next 24-hour stoppage is on Monday, 9 February. This will surely be as well supported as the last one, as private sector workers in Britain now start to enter the fray and vent their anger over pay and conditions amid an economic upturn. Indeed, Nissan workers in Sunderland have also voted for their first-ever strike, as management threatens to shift production to France.

Meanwhile, the overtime ban at Solihull, which has been attracting mass pickets of up to a thousand over the recent weekends, continues. However, if the dispute enters into a long, drawn-out guerilla campaign, then victory is by no means assured. Better to halt car production indefinitely until all the workers' demands are met, hitting the bosses where it hurts – in their pockets!

Hutton's whitewash cannot cover up the secret nature of the British state

We should have known it would be bad: when Lord Hutton began to talk about weapons of mass destruction, rhyming "mass" with "arse", it was clear that the interests of the upper classes would prevail. Hutton's Report has delivered a crushing blow to press freedom – and at least as far as the establishment is concerned – thrown Tony Blair a political lifeline.

Hutton learned his trade in Northern Ireland's no-jury Diplock Courts. For years he banged away young Irish republicans on the say-so of the RUC. Versed in the long tradition of judicial cover-up – Bloody Sunday among them – he knows how to be selective in dealing with the evidence to arrive at a foregone conclusion. Labour ministers from Blair down were saying how "unimpeachable" the great and learned judge was. As Ricky Tomlinson might say "unimpeachable, my arse!"

Hutton's Report has delivered the government a vicious weapon with which to attack press freedom and thrown Tony Blair a political lifeline.

You could hear the desperation in the BBC presenters' voices as they realised that Hutton had totally cleared Blair while rubbishing Andrew Gilligan's report. It was almost as if, while knowing it was a travesty of logic and justice, they were obliged to submit to it: the judiciary has spoken and, as we all know, it is unimpeachable by definition.

Yet within 24 hours – as the BBC's top men fell on their swords – a group of secretaries, admin workers and technicians spoke for millions. It's a whitewash! BBC workers at its Television Centre HQ organised a spontaneous walkout in protest at the resignation of Greg Dyke. Minutes later, journalists all over the country walked out too.

Prominent in the walkouts were hundreds of young workers sickened at the sheer injustice of it. Blair the biggest liar and unctuous hypocrite cleared and the journalist who exposed him pilloried. And of course opinion polls revealed that the majority of people clearly saw this was a whitewash. No wonder car drivers sounded their horns in solidarity with the pickets.

The action symbolised an effect of the Hutton Report that the establishment, and the politicians, so wrapped up in their own turmoil, have yet to understand. The majority of the population, right across the political spectrum, knows Blair deceived the country over weapons of mass destruction.

People were convinced of this by the damning evidence submitted to Hutton last summer and by the failure since then to find any WMDs in Iraq. Hutton's report has increased – not lessened – public mistrust of Tony Blair. In the hearings Alistair Campbell, Blair and co were seen to be plotting to fix the major news organisation that had got nearest to the truth about WMD. The Inquiry also inadvertently exposed how Britain is run.

Parliament, even the cabinet, is an increasing irrelevance for the unelected "administration" around Tony Blair that runs Britain. Its corrosive effect on the time honoured institutions of the British state has come as a shock to the Tories and the Tory press.

Blair's coterie of advisers, drawn from former Stalinist student union hacks, seem to derive an almost sexual frisson from



being allowed to plot in secret with the Intelligence chiefs, generals and Old Etonian civil servants. When the Tories are in power they act for their class – on the basis of unwritten understandings made in the boardrooms and gentlemen's clubs of the upper bourgeoisie. The civil service mandarins are bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh.

New Labour rules for the capitalists too – but has almost no organic roots among them. But these former Stalinists (Mandelson, Reid, Clarke and Straw) know their Marx and Lenin from their period of "youthful folly". They know that, in reality, parliament is a facade for hiding the fact that the executive is "but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie".

Since they have chosen to run capitalism for the capitalists, they feel no shame at running it like this: unaccountable, autocratic, secretive – all hidden behind the pantomime that is the Commons.

That is why there were no notes taken at the crucial meetings that decided to join the war against Iraq. That is why those who attended those inner cabals were not mainly untrustworthy ministers but the unelected and unaccountable: Campbell the press chief, Jonathan Powell the political chief of staff, pliable head spook John Scarlett, and Lord Goldsmith the unelected Attorney General.

Thanks to the public inquiry process – though not to Hutton – millions of ordinary people found out about the existence of these shady committees and bodies for the first time. They are not described in the "citizenship" textbooks at secondary school. Yet they really run Britain and in similar structures are central to every capitalist democracy.

Why do we know all about Blair and Campbell's secret trysts with the spooks? Why do we know Britain went to war on a lie? Because a section of the capitalist media for once did its job half decently and rummaged out the truth.

That is why this government has come to hate those parts of the media not suborned by its pact with the likes of Rupert Murdoch and Richard Desmond.

So how did the BBC end up being accused of having an "anti-war agenda"? Certainly not because it is staffed by left wingers or antiwar activists. Andrew Gilligan himself is a product of right-wing mid-

dle class tabloid journalism; those who have swarmed to posh dinner parties in support of him include the main figures of right wing journalism in Britain.

The BBC clashed with the government because Blair's tissue of outrageous lies could not stand up to even normal BBC "balanced" reporting. The BBC bosses could not be unaware that a large majority opposed this war before and after it. Only those journalists totally in the pocket of government – like the coterie at *The Times* and *The Sun* who have become Alistair Campbell's mouthpieces – could stomach churning out nothing but government propaganda.

The BBC bosses were well aware that Blair's castle of cards would come tumbling down in the not too distant future. If they wished to preserve their reputation for objectivity, then better to serve the ruling class as a whole, and expose Blair's more outrageous lies.

George Bush's case for war did not rest wholly or mainly on WMD. His policy was the naked pre-emptive re-conquest of the Middle East for US imperialism. All he needed the WMD lies for was to give his ally, Tony, an alibi for the slaughter. It was the British government that needed it so badly it forced its intelligence services to fabricate the evidence.

It is all there in the Hutton evidence. How Campbell forced changes to the dossier; how a press officer from No 10 helped draft it; how the utterly pro-imperialist scientists of the Defence Intelligence Service realised it was being faked; how they complained; how that was suppressed.

David Kelly, a loyal servant of the ruling class, was shocked and dismayed at all this fraud and deception and blurted it out to Gilligan. If he did really commit suicide perhaps it was because he realised that he would be publicly cross examined in detail on all of this and would be forced to lie like a trooper to save Blair. If he had decided not to lie then his death is suspicious to put it mildly.

But without Andrew Gilligan or the BBC all this might have remained under wraps. All the spook-watching journalists of Fleet Street, quietly crowing now, did not manage to "stand up" the story: only Gilligan found the evidence, from the mouth of Dr Kelly.

Apart from this the BBC should not be allowed to don the mantle of courageous

and objective journalism for its entire war coverage. It failed to cover the true mass character of the opposition to the war – by far the biggest this country has ever seen. Its journalists were "embedded" (in bed) with the US and UK forces in such a way as to misrepresent the character of the war and ignore the devastation caused to Iraq's cities and civilian population. It celebrated the days of Saddam's fall with total imperialist euphoria.

This was what made the attempts of a handful of BBC journalists who tried to report the truth – and explain it – all the more prominent. Quietly the sinister Campbell took their names down. At the top of the list was Andrew Gilligan. He had reported from Baghdad, not in the gushing tones of the Rageh Omars of this world, but with cynicism. That marked him down for destruction – and the *Today* programme too. Hutton struck the final blow, eager as ever to serve the interests of his class.

So what do we do now? We defend press freedom – even alongside the capitalist jour-

nalists who will use it tomorrow to slander and rubbish the workers' movement and the left. It is in our interest to do so. We must resist the purge of independent minded journalists. And we must renew the fight for an independent working class press and media.

There is not a newspaper, radio station or TV channel in this country that even gives adequate space to the views of the workers' movement – let alone represents it. The seven-million strong union movement struggles to produce anything better than a press release. The unions should fund an independent daily working class newspaper that reports and supports our struggles, opposes war, privatisation and corporate plunder.

Last but not least we keep up the call for a public inquiry, independent of the government and the judiciary. The unions, including the NUJ, the families of soldiers killed and maimed in Iraq, should all be represented. Its sittings should be televised.

The labour movement should defend the BBC's independence from government control and the plans to marketise or privatise it that Blair and Tessa Jowell are secretly drawing up. A BBC broken up into profitable sections and sold off will eventually fall into the hands of the press lords. Forced to tout for shareholders it will lose any elements of criticism of the system.

The BBC today is certainly the Bourgeois Broadcasting Corporation and its governors are a gang of ruling class trustees. But its pretence of being a national institution means that its doings are open to limited public scrutiny and some democratic pressure. If it becomes the Blair Broadcasting Corporation (and Brown's or Howard's after him) then we will soon be in a similar situation to the Italian workers under Silvio Berlusconi – one of Blair's pro-war, pro-Bush buddies.

Today the Beeb's more independent bosses have been purged by governors making deep obeisances to Lord Hutton. Its management jobsworths are cowering in their offices. Only its younger workers saw the danger and resisted: the entire working class must be prepared to support them and do the same.

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SWP ensures Respect fails to be socialist alternative

Mark Hoskisson and Stuart King report on the missed opportunity at the "Convention" that founded Respect

“What you want: baby we've got it." This was George Galloway's embarrassing pitch in *The Guardian* for his new organisation, Respect: The Unity Coalition. It is planning to challenge Labour in the June Euro elections in England and Wales – and “play Aretha Franklin all day long”.

All things to all people, but with a touch of soul. He has said on more than one occasion that he wants it to be a home for Greens, Liberals, Conservatives, “faith groups” of whatever persuasion – oh, and socialists.

Galloway's crooning went down well with the massed ranks of Socialist Worker Party hand-raisers who made up the majority of the 1,400 strong audience at Respect's founding convention on 25 January. They were tireless in clapping, cheering or giving standing ovations to their own speakers; and booing, jeering and slow hand-clapping anyone who had the temerity to criticise them.

The SWP leadership and George Galloway had decided the outcome of this “Convention” long before it was convened. A series of stage managed meetings up and down the country preceded the conference. A declaration for the new coalition had been drawn up by a small self-selected group. An incoming leadership had been decided upon.

A few amendments, drafted by the SWP of course, were accepted into the manifesto. Breathy speeches from SWP members proposing policies that nobody in the hall opposed were aimed at making it look democratic. Likewise, a couple of people were added to the executive to make it look like an election was taking place. But the strings and the puppeteers were all too visible to anyone who was not gullible.

The result is that the fight to build a working class party as a socialist alternative to Blair and New Labour has taken a major step backwards.

It means that neither Blair, nor the BNP, will face a working class challenge come June. They will be facing yet another SWP front organisation. Its banner and logo are the rainbow coalition colours fittingly stolen from US-style populism or Italian pacifism. Despite the SWP's electoralist illusions this will not rally the millions who opposed the war to its ranks. It will actively repel them.

All the major allies of the SWP in Stop the War have rejected this manoeuvre. The Communist Party of Britain and Reclaim Labour (left MPs and union leaders) have rejected it. They regard Respect as a diversion from replacing the Blairite clique with an Old Labour leadership. This project – a forlorn one without an electoral catastrophe for Blair – is the declared goal of most of the new-left general secretaries.

But where was the most awkward of the awkward squad, Bob Crow of the RMT? Where too was George Monbiot? Words like “rats” and “sinking ship” come to mind.

Another major ally, the Muslim Association of Britain, only said they would encourage members to consider participating but, as a policy, they do not join political organisations. In any case, we know from the Brent East by-election that MAB favours a more powerful contender, the Lib Dems. No, Respect is an SWP front and nothing else.

Sure, George Galloway is at its head and



Respect squanders the potential of the antiwar movement to build a socialist alternative to Blair and new Labour

that gives it a degree of glamour that other SWP fronts have lacked. But it is a front; here today, gone tomorrow. This is not what working class people need. They need a fighting organisation with deep roots in their workplaces and communities that holds out the prospect of a totally different society to that based on capitalism. They need a party that fights on all fronts, not just a vote gatherer.

Galloway is not the main culprit here. He took a courageous stand against Blair's imperialist invasion of Iraq and paid the price. But he has never been a member of the organised Labour left (he never joined the Campaign group and he has a poor record of opposition to many of the Labour right's policies).

He is a lifelong reformist and the furthest he was ever likely to go was to push for the formation of a new, Old Labour Party. Galloway was temporarily politically homeless. Being offered a rent-free home by the SWP and eager to kick Blair in the polls, it is no surprise that he has chosen to give this new front a go.

The only price for the SWP was opposing an amendment calling for all Respect candidates to pledge themselves to live on a workers wage. Lesley Mahmood, who won thousands of votes in a by-election in Liverpool with this very demand as part of her platform, argued for this. “But this would lose us figures like George Galloway” gasped the SWP. He needs £100,000 a year. We can lose our principles but not our George. Too right.

But the most striking thing about the convention was its similarity to conferences organised by Stalinism. The constant hammering on about unity at all costs, the slan-

dering of left critics, the make believe world where their own play acting was claimed to be bigger than anything anyone had ever done before. These themes were reinforced by a huge video screen that constantly interspersed pictures of the speakers in mid-flow with slogans of “unity” and “alternative”.

The SWP ran the convention along these lines. The sympathetic media celebrities, the gullible union leaders all aimed to give the impression of a mass movement. In fact the cast list was a bit short: one film director, one national union leader, one visiting fraternal party leader, one Black community preacher, one Muslim activist to move the amended manifesto.

The opening speakers, Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the civil service union PCS (speaking in a personal capacity), Tommy Sheridan, leader of the Scottish Socialist Party, both opened with the theme of unity. To be fair, both said that dissent should be tolerated, nurtured even. Both were loudly applauded by SWP members who then went on to jeer every dissenting voice.

Ken Loach and George Galloway repeated the theme. Everything had to be sacrificed in the name of unity, otherwise we would be letting Blair off the hook.

Now, unity in action is a good thing. You cannot win without it. But in elections the strength of your unity depends on what policies you are united upon. If your candidates are divided on fundamental issues you will split the moment hard questions are put or when your representatives face their first serious test.

It is no good saying we want people of faith, monarchists (sic), people who believe in the need for immigration controls, peo-

ple who believe in the eternity of capitalism – and hope that life does not pose these issues after or even during the elections. What about money for “faith schools”? What about lesbian and gay rights? What about asylum seekers’ “right” to enter this country? Of course we know what SWP members will say or will want to say. But what about their “monarchist” or “faith-based” allies? What about the voters they ditched these principled positions to attract?

To gamble on getting away with it, to gain such people's votes under false pretences, with anti-Blair emotional rhetoric, has a name in the dictionary of political terms. It is called opportunism. Opportunism sacrifices the real and permanent interests of the working class – a solid party based on an anticapitalist programme – to boosting the prestige of George Galloway and the SWP and by getting “a million votes”.

In order to do this a manifesto is needed which represents a headlong retreat from socialism – even from the non-revolutionary socialism which the SWP kept the Socialist Alliance tied to in the belief that this would attract disillusioned Labour lefts. This failed too but the SWP draw exactly the opposite reasons for this. Lindsey German, defending the organisers' draft, said the SWP did not want a “repeat of the Socialist Alliance programme”. They were looking for something “broader, wider, less explicitly socialist”. Well this was it with a vengeance.

What is a broad, not explicitly socialist or working class, manifesto. It is a populist one. It is long on values and aspirations, says little about what Respect is for and nothing about how to achieve it. Why? Because if this coalition advanced clear and unambiguous answers it

would fall apart before it got going.

Two alternatives to this populist draft were moved at the convention. One from the Revolutionary Democratic Group placed at its centre the demand for a “democratic republic”. This bourgeois democratic programme is totally useless – indeed laughable in the oldest capitalist state in the world.

Only Workers Power argued the need for a socialist programme to rally workers against New Labour. Our platform linked the struggles – against privatisation, against poverty, for decent pensions and housing, against imperialist wars – to their root cause, capitalism, and the need to overthrow it in a socialist revolution.

The SWP dealt with all alternatives by block voting through the organisers' declaration, thus disposing of the alternatives without debate. In the afternoon, several amendments were easily disposed of, including ones on combating the rise of the BNP fascists and selecting candidates in a democratic fashion. They were ruled out of order on the basis that such resolutions had not been asked for!

Two amendments not so easily disposed of were the one making sure any elected Respect candidates would only receive a worker's wage and an amendment on immigration controls. These split the SWP ranks and were only narrowly disposed of. But the most shameful episode was the “debate” on the latter.

At the founding conference of the Socialist Alliance, the SWP fought with others to oppose the Socialist Party's attempt to eliminate “opposition to all immigration controls” from the platform. How times have changed. A leading SWP member argued that, while they “are in abstract and principle in favour of this, it is too advanced for the ordinary people we are trying to win, they would not understand it”. Instead Respect had to concretely defend refugees from deportation on a case-by-case basis. To the SWP's shame this wretched “argument” won the day.

Galloway ended the convention in barnstorming style by calling for “a million votes”, a million pounds, a campaign that would “rock New Labour out of their seats at Westminster”. He sternly warned Ken Livingstone that Respect might even stand against him if he continued to “dis” the coalition by suing it for taking the name of the London mayor's multicultural jamboree. Lindsey German then told the SWP members to go back to their localities and “do what George has told you to do!” It brought the house down.

But in the cold world outside, on the streets and in the workplaces, this hot air will not last for long. Be sure of it, SWP comrades, Respect will fail – whatever results it may get in June. It does not offer a coherent political alternative to Blair: a socialist programme. It does not offer a coherent organisational alternative to Blair: a revolutionary working class party. It suffers from the very democratic deficit it claims to address: everything is decided by the SWP behind the scenes.

Instead of 10 June being a referendum on Blair's illegal war, on his hated pro-big business policies and on his racism it will represent a huge missed opportunity. For bringing this about the SWP leadership should be treated not with respect, but with contempt.

SWP abandon 'No Platform' for fascists

Dear Comrades

A well attended Manchester launch rally of United Against Racism on 15 January showed that large numbers of people are ready to fight against the BNP and their message of race hate. Over 450 people attended and £1,413 was raised. This is a good base for building a vibrant anti-fascist campaign, to drive the fascists off the streets and to counter the racist lies that divide us.

However, there was also a clear warning when around 15-20 fascist BNP turned up to try to intimidate and heckle. A small stewarding committee of around 15, mainly Workers Power members, defended the meeting, watched the fascists and ensured that no one was attacked. However, we were prevented from organising to drive this rabble away as earlier a member of the SWP had called the police!

Leading members of the Socialist Workers Party told us that we mustn't worry about the presence of the BNP outside the rally and shook their heads vigorously when Workers Power criticised the decision to call the racist police, who in effect provided a protective cordon for the BNP to disrupt the rally. Instead we were told, "We shouldn't waste another moment talking about the BNP as this allows them to detract from our success!" To allow the fascists to organise on the streets, to terrorise the minority communities, the left and the workers movement, would be a disaster. In rejecting the essential position of "No platform for fascists" and relying on the police the SWP is in practice playing into the BNP's hands.

Several members of the audience agreed with us but the SWP and Socialist Action put up so many speakers that there was no time to have a proper debate. Even a Labour councillor from Oldham, no doubt with an ear to his predominantly Asian constituents, agreed with us in calling for "a twin strategy to drive the fascists from our streets as well as an electoral campaign."

Above all we must organise to physically defend ourselves against fascist attack. When the BNP organise, racist attacks follow. Dependence on the police is totally counter-productive. When fascists bricked a pregnant woman during the BNP's election campaign in Oldham 2001 who did the police arrest? The fascists or the Asian youth defending themselves? The Asian youth of course.

The SWP may think that by keeping silent on issues such as the class role of the police or the fascists, in cosyng up to celebrities and police rather than calling for widespread militant action, they are building a bigger movement. But in truth they are building an ineffective movement, a house of cards.

At the organising meeting after the rally, another weakness of the leadership of the campaign was apparent. We can only combat the fascists' arguments, about immigrants causing the housing shortage, taking our jobs and so on, if we make clear political arguments as to what is really responsible for poverty and bad housing in the inner cities. We need clear socialist and anti-capitalist arguments that explain how the banks drain away interest payments from the local authorities, how Blair and Brown would rather spend money on a war for the oil multi-nationals in Iraq than on housing and schools. How the root causes of poverty lie in capitalism not in immigration. Most important of all we need a new fighting Workers Party that takes up these demands and struggles for them; a party that provides an alternative to voting for the BNP for those disillusioned with Labour.

But at the post rally organising meeting we were repeatedly told, "It doesn't matter who you vote for as long as you vote for anyone except the BNP", "The message must always be use your vote to stop the BNP" The only action proposed was to leaflet homes arguing for people to "use your vote against the BNP". The problem is that one or two leaflets through your letterbox that don't even begin to relate to burning issues in your area, that maybe the BNP is campaigning around, will not convince the large numbers who are fooled into thinking the BNP is offering a radical alternative to the establishment parties.

And if alongside this we allow the fascist gangs roam the streets with impunity, relying on the same police who attacked Asian youth in the uprisings of 2001, who smashed miners' pickets in 1984 and murdered Blair Peach, antifascist trade unionist in 1979 to protect us, then we really are in trouble.

Workers Power will continue to organise for No Platform and for a vibrant united working class response to the attacks of the bosses and their stooges the fascists and the police.

Jason Travis, Bolton NUT

Leeds GR

Dear Workers Power

I was a member of Leeds Globalise Resistance but found myself increasingly at odds with national GR policy over social forums. It seems strange that GR supports the international social forum movement but is so opposed to local ones. I believe that having local social forums is the way forward in bringing together the left and other groups that want change.

The next European Social Forum is being held in London in November 2004 and I believe that setting up local social forums will help to bring more people to London and increase its awareness in the fight against capitalism. I feel that GR cannot simply absorb those that want to get organised in the anti-capitalist movement.

In the last couple of Leeds GR meetings the people that came were interested in building a local social forum here in Leeds this is why we are moving away from GR and building for a Leeds social forum.

Rebs Allen

Justice for Mikey Powell

Dear Workers Power

Six police officers have been suspended as part of an inquiry into the death of Mikey Powell. Mikey, a factory worker from Birmingham, is the latest in a long line of black people that have died in police custody in Britain.

Mikey had been arrested outside his mother's house when relatives had asked for assistance after Mikey became distressed.

He was in collision with a patrol car during the struggle to detain him on 7 September 2003. A pathologist said the blow caused only minor injuries and was unlikely to have been the cause of death.

Relatives and friends are now demanding justice for Mikey Powell. A campaign has already been launched to highlight the case. In November a march of over 500 culminated in a protest outside Thornhill Road police station in Handsworth.

Campaigners have been calling for a full and independent inquiry. This is not what the Police Complaints Authority have in mind. Calling in the Northamptonshire Police to investigate, which is what they have

done, is a sick joke.

We need a genuinely independent inquiry representative of the local community and the labour movement. It should look at the whole nature of policing in the area.

● Campaign address: Friends of Mikey Powell Campaign for Justice, c/o ACHO, 104 Heathfield Rd, Handsworth, Birmingham B19 1HJ
● Website: http://mysite.freemove.com/mikeypowell_friends

Police frame-up exposed

Dear Workers Power,

I thought I would share with readers some good news. I have just been acquitted of assaulting a police officer on June 7th last year, after the first Manchester People's Assembly. It was variously alleged that I had kicked, kneed, and/or punched an officer. However, none of the six police officers who gave evidence agreed on the details - the magistrate stating that they were honest but "confused"! Photographs presented by the defence showed the police as snarling, and aggressive, but the public as peaceful, although very concerned.

The court heard that the incident started when PC Jason Hanvy lost his temper and attacked a member of the public, Dr Gary Daniels. (PC Hanvy continues to serve in the Manchester Police, despite having a criminal conviction for assaulting a prisoner in police custody). I was part of a group that gathered to witness Dr Daniels being brutally pinned on the floor, and to assist him if possible. Meanwhile, police reinforcements were on their way. Officers rushed up behind us, and I was tackled instantly to the floor, then dragged away to the police station. Imagine my dismay when soon after, I, the victim of an attack, was charged with assault!

These were clearly not personal attacks on Dr Daniels and me, but on the participants in the People's Assembly as a whole. Everyone present realised it could have happened to any one of us. As a result there has been tremendous

support, with 10 witnesses appearing in my defence, and 25 supporters in court to hear the verdict. I think we were all glad to have had our day in court - where it sometimes felt like the police were in the dock - and to raise our glasses afterwards, to "Solidarity!"

James Thorne
Manchester

Hands off Iraqi trade unions!

Dear comrades

On 6 December 2003 American occupation forces in ten armoured cars raided the headquarters of the Iraqi Federation of Workers Trade Unions (IFTU).

US soldiers ransacked the building, destroyed IFTU documents and arrested eight IFTU leaders who were taken to the US military central command at Muthan airbase. The local military commander told those detained: "Iraq has no sovereignty and no political parties or trade unions. We do not want you to organise in either the north or south transport stations." He threatened them with detention for up to six months.

He accused the union of being "unhelpful in the re-organisation of the private transport sector." The IFTU believes the raid was instigated by Abdullah Murad Ghny, general manager of the main private transport company, who greatly benefited from Saddam's rule.

Eventually the eight were released but the HQ is still closed and no explanation or apology has been made by the IGA or CPA. In the UK the RMT has given their solidarity and helped organise a tour of the UK for IFTU representatives last month.

The IFTU is an attempt to establish a free and independent trade union in Iraq, free of ties with the old Saddam Hussein trade unions and with the occupying forces. Messages of support should be sent to abdullahmuhsin@iraqitradeunions.org
● For more information see: www.iraqitradeunions.org
Pauline Goulding

RMT debates political future

A relationship nearly a century old looks set to come to an acrimonious end in early February. The Labour Party's national executive was primed to terminate the Rail, Maritime and Transport union's affiliation to the party on 7 February unless the RMT overturns a decision by four of its branches to the affiliate to the Scottish Socialist Party. The union's Council of Executives has already endorsed the decisions of the local branches.

The RMT's forerunner was one of the very first components of the original Labour Representation Committee in the early 20th century. Last July, at its annual conference in Glasgow, delegates voted overwhelmingly to support proposals to allow the union to lend financial support to parties other than Labour, so long as they pursued policies broadly in line with the RMT's own. The union also slashed its affiliation fee to Labour to £12,500 a year or less than 20 pence for each union member.

In response to the threat to disaffiliate the union, the RMT is holding an extraordinary delegates' conference on 6 February, once more in Glasgow. While the outcome of that debate is by no means a foregone conclusion, London-based RMT activists believe that the special conference will uphold the position adopted last summer.

If that occurs, the Labour Party's national executive has authorised the disaffiliation of the RMT from the party the following day. A report in the Morning Star has indicated that general secretary Bob Crow has sought legal advice about a court challenge to this ruling, but we would urge delegates to reject the use of the bosses' courts to resolve this argument.

There is certainly a "reclaim Labour" element in the union's leadership, which may argue for delegates to reverse their position and cancel the affiliations to the SSP. On the other side of the argument, there may be those

who will argue for immediate disaffiliation from Labour. Both these options should be rejected. Delegates should instead leave it to Labour's Chair, Ian McCartney, and the party's apparatus to expose themselves as the real wreckers and splitters of the movement.

In the meantime, the conference should seriously consider a membership-wide ballot over the issue of the RMT's political fund since an issue of such magnitude should not simply rest with a handful of activists and full-time officials.

Depending on the outcome of such a vote, the RMT should launch a call for a conference across the movement for the launch of a new workers' party as opposed to still another "electoral coalition" or, worse, leave the door open for branches to affiliate to non-working class parties like Plaid Cymru or the Greens. Such a call would undoubtedly be taken up by large sections of the trade union and wider anti-capitalist movement.

NEW L5I WEBSITE TO BE LAUNCHED 1 MARCH www.fifthinternational.org

At the end of this month the League for the Fifth International gets a new website. Reflecting the decision taken last year at our Congress to rename our international tendency, the new website will be found at:

www.fifthinternational.org

It will continue to carry weekly updates on the key international political events, first posted by our weekly newswire. It will also give a central focus to the debates and mobilisations of the global anti-capitalist movement (including the ESF and WSF), the resistance to the US-led "war against terror", especially in the Middle East.

It will draw together resources on the history of the international workers' movement - including the L5I - allowing visitors to access more easily the arguments that press the case for building a new, Fifth International. You will also be able to access the websites of the sections of the L5I from the home page.

You will be able to make online purchases of our current publications, download out-of-print ones, make a financial donation and join an online web forum with other visitors. A new site map will make navigation easier and clearer.

It will replace www.workerspower.com as the L5I's main international internet portal and that site will be transformed into the website of the British section of the L5I.



League for the Fifth International

In time much of the archive material of workerspower.com will migrate to the new L5I site, leaving Workers Power Britain to revamp the site to carry more on campaigns, more downloadable resources (e.g. leaflets, stickers) and access to the full monthly paper.



League for the Fifth International

Top Up fees - Blair can still be beaten

The Labour government delivered another blow to students and to a free education system at the end of January. Despite a wafer thin majority of five, enough spineless Labour MPs trooped through the lobbies to give Blair his victory.

While this vote itself does not mark the same strategic defeat students witnessed in 1998 with the introduction of the tuition fees and the attack on the principle of free education for all. It is nevertheless another significant step along the neoliberal road to a market-driven higher education system.

It was therefore disappointing to see how few students mobilised on the streets outside parliament on the day the bill was being pushed through. Perhaps a few hundred gathered with a militant core blocking one of the roads for a time. But this poor turnout reflected the failure to build a militant campaign over the previous six months in the universities.

Indeed the contrast with the struggle in 1998 when a large and radical movement emerged is stark. Then a number of universities went into occupation across the country and 10 per cent of students refused to pay their fees in the first nine months of university, leaving a black hole of £15 million pounds in university accounts. Predictably the then Labour leadership of the NUS not only refused to lead this militant campaign but condemned and attacked it describing it as a dangerous "breakaway faction" in the union.

The current NUS leadership have once again proved themselves incapable of leading a militant and effective campaign against Blair's new attack on students. Under pressure from the left in the union they called a demonstration in late October. Called on a Sunday morning (hardly the best time for a student protest!) the union barely built for it, leaving the organisation to a broad stratum of rank and file activists. Despite this 15,000 students took to the streets in opposition to the government's plans for higher education.

Here was what could have been the nucleus of a mass and militant campaign. With a militant leadership students could have been rallied to the fight against fees and for free education as a right. Yet once again the NUS refused to call for the militant measures that could have stopped the governments in its tracks: the shut-down and occupation of universities in the run up to the vote, the linking up with workers on campuses who are also fighting their own battles against pay cuts and privatisation, the drawing in of school students who have shown their willingness to take action against the war and who will be the ones affected when Blair's measures come into force in 2006. This could have culminated in a mass blockade of Parliament on the day of the vote.

But these are not the sort of methods the NUS bureaucrats like. They prefer pressure behind the scenes and in this case relying on Gordon Brown's followers in the parliamentary Labour Party. From the outset this was a bankrupt strategy. Were those 160 Labour MPs who originally signed the petition urging the Prime Minister not to introduce top up fees ever the firm allies that the NUS leadership would have us believe? Obviously not.

It was Nick Brown, one of Gordon Brown's key allies in the House of Commons, who performed a U-turn on the day of the vote, signalling to other Brown supporters that the threatened revolt had gone far enough.

Gordon Brown had been reported to be against the top up fees policy in the initial cabinet discussions, favouring instead some form of graduate tax (which could have been progressively linked to earnings). The message he wants to send out is, "wait till I get the PM's job and I will



Do we need the NUS?

The leadership of the NUS is bankrupt. We desperately need a fighting rank and file movement to challenge the Labourite bureaucracy. There is already a movement amongst some universities to disaffiliate completely from the NUS. Sunderland University has already disaffiliated. And the University of Sussex student union is debating disaffiliation at the end of January.

The arguments being put forward are mainly round the cost of affiliation. The NUS is certainly one of the richest student unions in Europe and does not need to take the huge amounts it does out of the pockets of local unions to run its national bureaucracy.

It is not surprising that such demands arise when the NUS is shown to be so useless at defending students' interests. But the root cause of this lies in the student union's dependence on government. How can organisations that are paid by the government, whose officials draw their salaries courtesy of the treasury, really

lead a militant fight against it?

We should demand that the NUS breaks all links with the government including the receiving of funding. Any decent fighting student union would raise its own funds from its members. Let the government fund the social and welfare aspects of student associations, student unions should be independent fighting organisations, not paid lap dogs of the government. The NUS is currently even "overseeing" parts of the government's white paper on higher education - the legislation that will see the introduction of tuition fees. This is cross-class collaboration at its most despicable.

It is because we need to transform the NUS that socialists should argue against disaffiliation. This is a fight that needs to be engaged inside, if we can, and outside the NUS structures. In this way we can build a fighting rank and file movement that can take the struggle for completely free education by the scruff of the neck and draw in school students, workers and trade unionists into this struggle with us.

introduce a fairer system". We must put no trust in this lie.

Brown is a neoliberal and architect of New Labour. He has spoken on numerous platforms of the need for "prudence and discipline" that is the need for cuts and pro business measures. This won him the praise of Digby Jones, CBI director general as recently as December 2003. Not only did Brown support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he siphoned off the billions necessary to fund them from the Treasury; billions that could have easily been used to fund the black hole in university education. That the NUS leadership could have placed their trust in this opposition to Blair shows just how wrong and right-wing they are.

Now the government has got through the second reading they are spinning to claim this bill is a progressive measure, that it will benefit financially students from working class backgrounds while only making those who earn more contribute more.

For example, Blair points out that students from the very poorest homes will get £3,000 per year worth of aid from the government. But £1,200 of this is just deducted from the new tuition fee (of up to £3,000) that they will still have to pay. And they will be given a paltry £1,800 grant - hardly enough to live on. Don't forget it was Blair who abolished the grant in the first place - take away with one hand and then declare a great concession when you give some of it back! All other students will have to pay fees of up to £3,000 per year, re-payable when they earn £15,000. Factor into this the costs of living and the average student debt will rise to £21,000 by 2010. Not too much to pay back for workers earning £15,000 a year then!

But these few concessions, dragged out of a government trying to save its skin, can quickly be abolished or eroded a few years down the line. Remember when the Blair government promised that the one off fee of £1,100 per year would be it? Its 2001 election manifesto commitment that there would be no top up fees?

The real prize for the New Labour marketeers is that they have won the principle of variable fees. This is the one thing they would not budge on. Why? Because it allows the introduction of a two tier university system, with an elite set of universities able to charge "what the market can afford". Within a few years the Oxforwards and Cambridges will become even more like the Ivy League US universities. Only the very wealthy will be able to afford the £10,000 to £20,000 fees being threatened. Only those from middle class backgrounds will be able to get the backing for the massive loans needed. The rest will go to the cheap and cheerful ex-polytechnics and inner city universities.

This is the real meaning of Blair's promise to put 50 per cent of the age group through university. Labour has no intention of raising funds through taxation to provide a decent degree course for every student - to do so he would have to raise taxes on the very bosses who are demanding a better educated and skilled workforce. Instead of having degrees classified as firsts, seconds and thirds, we will have "working class degrees" and "upper class degrees" depending on how much money you have and which university you went to.

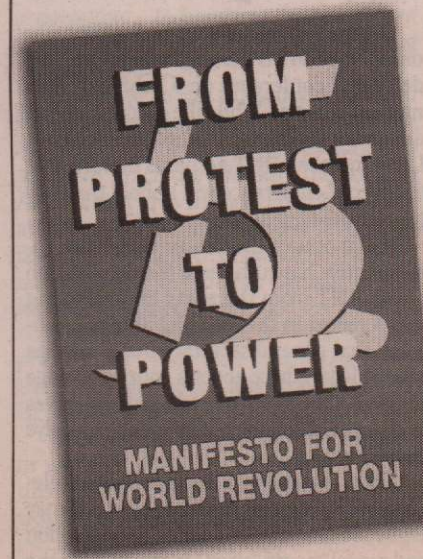
Blair has not won the arguments - opinion polls showed that more than 60 per cent disagreed with Labour's plans. People are questioning why students should be asked to pay for their education, knowing too well that the next step will be paying for our health service. Blair has only jumped the first hurdle, the bill has yet to pass and then be implemented. We need a fight not just against fees but a fight for a free education, with a living grant, all financed by taxing the corporations. Our aim should be to shut down every campus in Britain to get it.

To achieve this we need to reach out beyond university. We should seek to draw school students into the struggle too. They are the ones who will feel the brunt of the new measures when they are introduced in 2006. We must also link up with the workers and trade unions on each campus. They too are fighting their own battles on a number of fronts against the government and the vice chancellors.

But, we should not stop with just the workers in the university sector. All over the public sector, workers are fighting back against the privatisation agenda of the Blair government. The introduction of fees is part of Blair's plan to privatise large parts of the education system and create a two-tier system. He has exactly the same plan for the health system. We need to raise the call for a unified fight back against the Blair government and its neoliberal agenda.

Mandy Telford, president of NUS, responded to the vote by saying "This fight is not over - we will take it to Committee Stage, to amendments and to the Lords." Enough of this parliamentary cretinism! We put no faith in the un-elected big wigs of the House of Lords. We must take action. Under pressure from the left within the union the NUS has promised a belated shut down of campuses on 25 February. Good. But, we must not wait for the union to lead the action - they won't. We must organise on campuses now to build a militant and organised movement that can prevent the bill passing and the leadership of the NUS squandering the opposition.

Programme of the League for the Fifth International - Out Now - £1.50 €2.50



All history proves that the capitalists will never relinquish their property peacefully - to claim otherwise in the age of 'Shock and Awe' is either hopeless naivety or wilful deception. There is only one way: their apparatus of state repression must be overthrown by force. The capitalists' monopoly of military power - armies, police and security forces, prison systems, civil servants, judiciaries - must be smashed to pieces and replaced with the rule of the working people themselves.

This can be done - the majority of humanity can cast off the tiny minority of parasites. It will take mass organisation, an unambiguous strategy and, when the hour strikes, courageous and ruthless action.

Some may balk at this, but the alternative to revolution is not decades of undisturbed peace. Basing a global civilisation on the empowerment of a few thousand and the impoverishment of six billion is like lodging depth charges in the planetary core. If the logic of capitalism is left to unfold, our world will be torn apart by starvation, disease, poverty, environmental catastrophe, and war.

In the struggle against capitalism, greater energy is equivalent to greater humanity. For with the suppression of our exploiters and an end to the tyranny of profit, human history can truly begin.

Two steps forward, one step back

The European Social Forum looks set to come to London this year. But, everything comes at a price, writes *Jeremy Dewar*

The prospects for the European Social Forum actually taking place in London, in autumn 2004, look more secure after last month's UK ESF Assembly. At least six national trade unions and a number of regional union bodies have already agreed to support it: among them, Amicus, RMT, CWU, NUJ, Natfhe, Unison northern region, and Sertuc, the south-east England regional trades union body. With the support of the London mayoral administration, this should be able to raise the money to get things moving.

But, of course, everything comes at a price. It could well mean bureaucratic control over the organising process and a massive increase in the weight of reformism within it. Anyone who expects the SWP to act as a counterweight, let alone an opponent to the union officialdom, are bound to be disappointed.

Over two hundred representatives and individuals gathered in London's City Hall last weekend to try and rescue the London ESF. The atmosphere was as frosty as the weather outside. Only eight days' notice of the meeting had been given, and just 48 hours for the circulation of the main document of the day – a proposal put forward by Alex Gordon of the RMT, but already signed up to by half a dozen trade union bodies. Suspicion – from the labour movement that the anarchists would disrupt the meeting, from the libertarians that the reformists would stage a takeover – was rife.

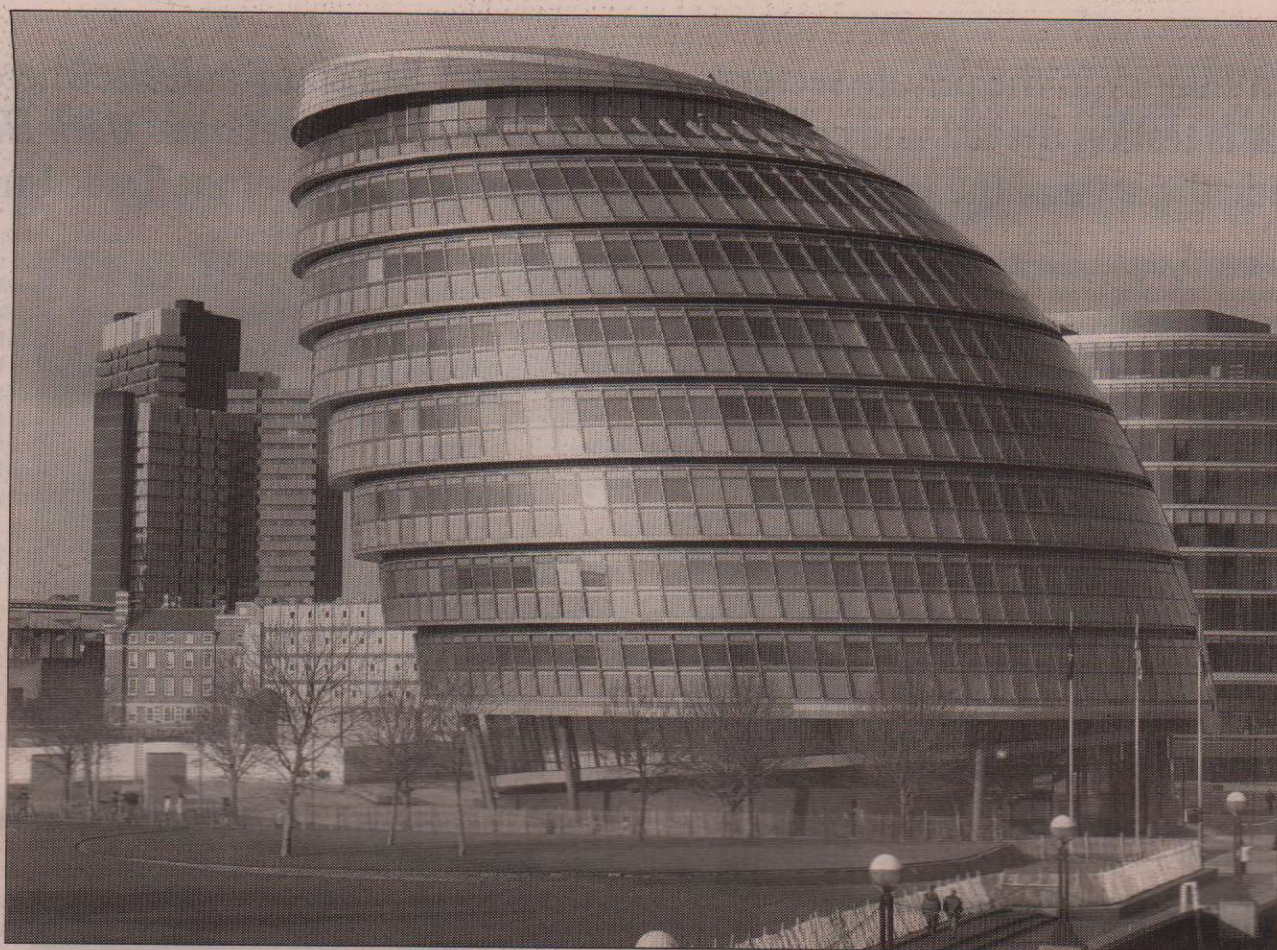
The ESF European Preparatory Assembly, also held in the London City Hall in December, ended with a number of unions complaining about the "tyranny of structurelessness" which pervaded the ESF process. How could they invest their workers' hard earned cash in a process where a single individual held as much weight as a mass trade union, where proposals were not written down and decisions not clearly made or recorded? They certainly had a point, though in some cases the total impatience was clearly disdain for democratic debate and disagreement.

Clearly something had to be done – to enable unions to affiliate and either contribute or raise money in a way which met their rules and legal framework. Alex Gordon's proposed structure replaces the UK Assemblies based on individual participation with an Organising Committee based on organisations affiliating for the UK mobilisation at set rates. These are:

Local organisations	£50-250
Regional organisations	£100-500
National organisations	£250-1,500

These organisations will then have a representative each. The OC will be empowered to raise money, hire the venues, negotiate spaces for sleeping accommodation, etc. The OC meetings will be notified by open e-group, with circulated minutes, will be open to observers, etc. The difference to the previous system was that the UK Assembly was not a body made up of representatives (of unions, NGOs, campaigns, political organisations) but of individuals. Thus it was open to all participants to block a consensus (if consensus is interpreted to mean unanimity).

The problem with this seemingly democratic structure for the OC is that some of the committee members will inevitably be more equal than others. This became clear in the debate as a regional official from Unison commented that, "There is only one organisational proposal on the table and, if people don't accept it, there won't be an ESF." In other words, the reformist leaderships of the mass organisations – and their foot soldiers in the SWP and Socialist Action – will use ultimatums to ensure their pro-



The European Social Forum to be run out of City Hall?

Greater London Authority takeover

The first meeting of the new Organising Committee attracted about 50 representatives to City Hall at the end of January. Many of the delegates – especially those who have been involved in the movement for some time – were left gobsmacked at the blatant takeover by Greater London Authority official, Redmond O'Neill.

O'Neill, a political adviser to Mayor Ken Livingstone and a member of the secretive neo-Stalinist sect, Socialist Action, demanded to be the first to speak on every agenda item, impatiently upbraided the chair Alex Gordon and told him how to proceed and eventually started threatening delegates' credentials. From consensus to dictatorship within a week!

Of course, O'Neill showed himself to be

a "benign" dictator, having booked Alexandra Palace for the main event, produced a budget and prepared for a professional website to be set up. But, in doing so, he had trampled over the work done in the small working groups, authorised to work on these topics back in December but ignored by the GLA.

As the meeting grew more fractious, some Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Action supporters attempted to shame the democratic oppositionists into accepting the imposed regime change, pointing to the need to professionalise the work if things were to get done. But, for most, the last straw was when O'Neill proposed meeting every week in the daytime – which would exclude those organisations without a full-time apparatus. He was defeated – for the time being.

Clearly, the working groups will have to be set up again, and they will again become the space where grassroots activists – from the social movements, the unions and political organisations – work together and network. These bodies must design the ESF so that the event itself is open and democratically-run from below.

The proposed "marquee ESF village" around Alexandra Palace should become a patchwork of self-organised spaces for the different strands of the movement – youth, workers, anti-racism, women, ecology, etc. This way, the ESF can become a working event, where contacts are made, actions co-ordinated and policies hammered out. If we achieve that, Redmond O'Neill and co. will sink back into the woodwork as quickly as they have emerged.

posals are carried. The "small", local, insignificant organisations will not be able to hold up a "consensus" of the big hitters, arrived at behind the scenes and in advance.

This, alas, is the really existing organisational method of the ESF. A façade of libertarian openness and individualism disguising a system of bureaucratic and academic/journalistic notables who decide everything. The SWP in Britain (disguised as Globalise Resistance and the exotic Project K) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire in France (within Attac) go along with these rotten Porto Alegre principles, which ban parties, ban votes, etc, in the broad mass assemblies.

So the mass of participants are tied up in impotent talking shops whilst the élite get on with the real decision making. Anarchist individualism, refusing to create representative bodies or pay an affiliation fee on principle, fetishising consensus and disrupting proceedings whenever they feel like it, simply cannot fight this secret bureaucraticism. Instead it plays right into its hands.

Thus one of the anarchists tried to stop the meeting from even starting by grabbing the microphone and demanding the right to sit at the "top table". Eventually, he was given a seat next to the top table, from where he conducted the anarchists' impotent heckles for the rest of the day by hand signals.

However, what the anarchists cannot admit is that this bureaucratic "takeover" is the inevitable price to pay for failing to build an anti-capitalist movement in the UK. For this they must take equal responsibility with the SWP. Both have for three years sabotaged this vital task. Without real social forums in every major town and city, drawing in local, rank and file trade unionists and other activists, the trade union and City Hall bureaucracy is bound to win set-piece battles. Only when we have built such a movement, drawn in the rank and file and local bodies of the unions will we successfully challenge the reformist misleaders.

Indeed, when a Workers Power representative put forward an amendment calling on the Organising Committee to pro-

mote and support such local social forums, he drew applause from a good number of both trade unionists and libertarians who sincerely want such democratic and fighting bodies. However Alex Callinicos of the SWP – sorry Project K – shouted, "Go and sit with your anarchist friends". In truth, the SWP have always tried to organisationally monopolise the anti-capitalist movement.

They are happy to boost "big names", who stand well to their right, like Susan George or George Monbiot. But they fear left critics like the plague, especially since these people have been in the anti-capitalist movement long before the SWP woke up to it after Seattle. They would like the UK movement (which they have started to rename the "Global Justice Movement") to remain without any organised mass base.

Why? So that the SWP can concentrate on its populist electoral adventure up until June and rely on the unions' and NGOs' bureaucratic structures to build for the ESF. They would obviously be delighted to see

ESF action against racist Europe

The last week of January saw a flurry of activity in support of refugee and migrant rights in several European states, including Britain. The Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers – working in conjunction with other campaigns such as Barbed Wire Britain, the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism and the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns – was involved in protests outside the offices of the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*, two of the tabloids that have plumbed new depths in racist and xenophobic campaigns against immigrants generally and asylum seekers in particular.

On 31 January CDAS supporters were also involved in a lively and creative protest at Waterloo station, site of a small immigration detention centre. We distributed more than 2,500 leaflets and collected dozens of signatures, while a banner drop highlighted the reality of the current regime of border controls within the European Union.

These protests and others at Dungavel, Scotland, in Liverpool and at the Lindholme detention centre near Doncaster were the British contribution to actions across the European Union that had developed in response to a call emerging from last November's European Social Forum.

There were actions in at least 11 countries and 50 cities and towns. The task of dismantling "Fortress Europe" is an enormous one, but the January protests are an encouraging start and a valuable illustration of the potential for the ESF to provide a focus for organising and mobilising.

Finally, my thanks to Workers Power comrades who assisted in building the activities in London.

By George Binette
Secretary, Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers (personal capacity).

The tasks of trad

A renewal of trade union militancy in the private sector – at Land Rover, Sainsbury and elsewhere – is joining a public sector revival. Already, this is testing the left and centre-left group of general secretaries. *Mark Hoskisson, GR McColl and Jeremy Dewar* examine the state of the unions on the eve of the Convention of the Trade Union Left

Last October, we witnessed the biggest and most militant wave of wildcat action for many years. It resulted in a major climbdown by Royal Mail management. This was a real victory for all-out, unofficial action, which defied the Thatcher and Blair anti-union laws. Both management and the government were caught unprepared for a national dispute, following the narrow rejection of action in the official national ballot. The outcome of the postal strike immediately encouraged the firefighters to launch a work to rule over the management's refusal to pay the full wage increase on time. The action was ultimately not successful in reversing the bosses' stance on the implementation of the pay deal. But the refusal to sanction an immediate strike ballot by the Gilchrist-led majority on the national executive crystallised a much stiffer opposition to them – as reflected in the victory for the "hard left" candidate Paul Woolstenholmes in the late 2003 election for national officer.

Strike figures for 2002 (the last year currently available) show that 1.32 million strike days were lost to the bosses, the highest figure since 1990. More importantly, perhaps, nearly a million workers were involved in these stoppages, the highest number since the miners' strike of 1984-85. This suggests, as does anecdotal evidence, that many recent strikers are taking their first ever action. A new generation of union activists is coming of age.

The continuing economic recovery, meanwhile, has seen unemployment fall to its lowest rate (officially 3 per cent) since July 1975, while share prices and profit margins have rebounded sharply. Private sector workers who have been bullied and

threatened by macho management for years are now beginning to see their chance to regain lost ground and settle old scores. While such strikes remain few in number, they have crossed old (Land Rover) and new (Sainsbury) industries. Significantly, Amicus will this month hold its first ever strike at Sunderland's Nissan plant, which for many years was considered the model for "sweetheart" deals and "partnership" with the employers.

However, these strike figures are still low, especially when compared with the 1970s. They reveal the impact the anti-union laws have had on industrial action, the lingering effects of the miners' bitter defeat, and the destruction of rank and file organisation wrought by these laws and by the right-wing "new realist" leaderships of the late 1980s and 1990s. The lost CWU, FBU and NUT (SATs) ballots, the narrow margin for RMT strike action (55 per cent) on the tube, and the ease with which Bob Crow called it off with only minor concessions, all indicate the danger of overestimating the support the militants can mobilise as yet.

The postal wildcat disputes, however, saved something substantial in the wake of the CWU's lost strike ballot. While the FBU action was too short-lived to achieve a similar impact (Gilchrist also worked overtime to ensure that his decision to avoid a further fight at all costs was carried in the subsequent ballot), nevertheless, the resistance raised morale among activists in the wake of the defeat suffered as a result of the national leadership's gross capitulation.

The new left wing general secretaries (Billy Hayes, CWU; and Andy Gilchrist, FBU) had shown their weakness and, in the latter case, outright treachery.



There are also significant tensions between the Crow leadership of the RMT and its London District Committee (essentially the Underground) – particularly over the stop-start nature of his strike calls. Seasoned militants know that if you keep marching your troops up to the top of the hill only to march them back down again, then, like the grand ol' Duke of York, you will wear them out, not the opposition.

The new leaders

The past two or three years have witnessed a substantial changeover at the top of the British trade unions. Obviously the growth in militancy over the past few years is both a cause of the election of a series of left-wing union leaders and in turn the latter fact is now encouraging more widespread or national industrial action.

The centre-left general secretaries dominate the biggest general unions: Tony Woodley, the new leader of the Transport and General, Kevin Curran, the new general secretary of the GMB, are generally classed in the centre-left camp. The left – the "awkward squad" proper – includes Bob Crow (RMT), Mark Serwotka (PCS), Billy Hayes (CWU), Jeremy Dear (NUJ), Andy Gilchrist (FBU) and Paul Mackney (Natfhe).

At present, it is not surprising to see the strong support that T&G general secretary Tony Woodley enjoys among strikers on the 1,000-strong picket lines at Land Rover. The current crop of left and centre-left leaders are still very popular with many rank and file trade unionists. Unless, like Andy Gilchrist, these leaders are put to the very sharpest of tests in struggle and are

Convention of the Trade Union Left

Workers Power urges readers to support the following two resolutions at the Convention of the Trade Union Left on Saturday, 7th February – and to pass them in their own union branches.

Resolution on Rank and File Movement

1. This ... notes the success of unofficial strike action organised by rank and file workers in the post. It further notes that the CWU executive would not back those strikes officially.
2. This ... also notes that because of their campaigning for rank and file democracy inside the FBU, London activists of the union found themselves being slandered and attacked by their own executive committee.
3. This ... believes that these two examples demonstrate the real conflict inside our organisations between the grass roots membership of our unions and the overpaid officials who preside over them.
4. This ... therefore calls on this Convention of the Trade Union Left to launch a campaign to build rank and file organisations in every union represented, based on the principles of:
 - real democracy through mass and workplace meetings to take all decisions on action; democratic annual conferences with all decisions being binding on all officials and leading committees; all leading committees (nationally and regionally) to be made up of elected lay delegates with no special voting privileges for officials;
 - all officials to be regularly elected (at least every two years) and to be recallable by the membership at any stage during their term of office and to be paid only the average wage of the workers they represent
5. The purpose of fighting for such elementary democracy in our unions is to stop the repeated selling out or selling short of our strikes, campaigns and other struggles by an unaccountable officialdom that treats our unions as their property. Only when we really control our own unions will we be able to use them effectively to defend ourselves against the attacks of both the government and the employers.

Resolution on Workers' Party

1. This ... notes with disgust that after almost seven years in power the Labour Government has acted systematically in the interests of big business and against those of the working class in Britain and internationally by, for example, waging an illegal war on the people of Iraq, scapegoating asylum seekers, trying to break a bona fide trade union pursuing a legitimate dispute (the FBU) and pushing ahead with privatisation, foundation hospitals and top up tuition fees in clear breach of the expressed will of the organised labour movement.
2. This ... believes that there is now a real crisis of political representation for the working class in British politics, reflected in the refusal of many workers to vote for Labour and in the decisions of some unions to begin to cut their traditional links with the Labour Party.
3. This ... calls on the Convention of the Trade Union Left to address this crisis urgently by agreeing to launch a campaign for the creation a new workers' party based on the unions. Such a party is urgent to challenge New Labour not just at elections, but in every campaign to defeat the Labour Government's attacks and in every attack launched by the bosses against our wages, jobs, conditions and rights. Such a party must be fully democratic, including in the discussion and formulation of policy and programme.
4. To further this objective this Convention calls on all trade unionists present to launch the campaign for such a party locally. We will establish a fully representative steering committee to oversee this campaign. This committee is charged with organising workers' conventions, with delegates from unions and working class community organisations, in every town and city to plan the development and activities, as well as to discuss the policies, of such a workers' party.

e unionists today

clearly seen to betray the rank and file, they will retain a large measure of support among those members who voted them into office.

Obviously such short-hand labels as "centre-left" and "awkward squad" do not predict what any given leader's actions will be in a strike or on the question of trade union affiliation to Labour. On different issues, industrial, political and international (for example the war), they have taken different positions – more or less strongly opposed to Blair and the right.

The acid test of action is what counts. Despite windy rhetoric, none of the leaders dared to even try to initiate strike action against the war. From June to September a number of the left leaders (nearly all of them apart from Serwotka and Crow) proved how foolish it would be to rely on them either in terms of industrial disputes (Andy Gilchrist, Billy Hayes) or in terms of fighting Blair within the Labour Party.

At the Labour Party Conference the centre-left – and some "awkward" lefts too – cravenly decided not to force the issue of the Iraq war onto the conference agenda in order, so they said, to "defeat" Blair on the issue of foundation hospitals. In fact, a defeat on the war was the real issue that could have made Blair totter at that moment. They let him off the hook and now his position is much stronger (on foundation hospitals too he has got his way and shrugged off his paper "defeat"). The Labour conference proved once more how weak, tactically inept or downright treacherous many of these leaders are.

It also shows how wrong it is to shield them from criticism at decisive moments in the struggle for fear of lowering the confidence of those in struggle or causing "disunity" – as if the disunity and loss of confidence were not in fact the fault of the leaders' wavering, retreats and betrayals. Unfortunately, this is what the Socialist Workers Party's "united front of a special kind" (in fact, the united front from above) amounted to during the crucial weeks and days leading up to the war on Iraq

Public sector: hesitant revival

The early part of the decade, and especially 2002 with its giant one-day strike across local government, heralded a comeback for public sector trade unionism.

This revival has, however, not been uniform. In the NUT it appears that the employers have successfully imposed a sub-inflation pay "rise" while the ballot to boycott the SATs tests was a fiasco, whether by accident or bureaucratic design. The "left", as embodied by the Socialist Teachers Alliance, appears to be in disarray and will not even contest the forthcoming election for general secretary.

Meanwhile, in Unison, Britain's biggest union, membership nationally is at best static. It is likely that the long-running London Weighting dispute is going to end in a humiliating whimper at Acas. The situation in the health service group of Unison is especially bad, with membership declining – partly as result of the bureaucracy's acceptance of the "Agenda for Change" modernisation package and its attacks on left activists at UCLH.

This decline has only slightly been offset by the mini-strike wave of ancillary and domestic staff working for private companies at abysmal pay rates at hospitals in East London and Lincolnshire. While the United Left succeeded in doubling its base on the Unison national executive, the pro-Brown bureaucrats who control the union apparatus easily won the vote to maintain and effectively reinforce the Labour link at the June 2003 conference.

Mark Serwotka's leadership of the PCS is currently facing its most important test to date. The outcome of the pay disputes in the Job Centres, Benefits Offices, and Home Office could well set the tenor for public sector pay battles through 2004.

The fact that the PCS leadership in the Department of Works and Pensions called off last month's two-day strike

does not augur well. This took the best-trained and most numerous battalion out of action on the first day of battle – ostensibly because the employer put an extra £6 million on the table, that is a less than 5 per cent increase to their miserly offer, and offered "talks" on the appraisal system.

Serwotka has failed to fight against this breaking of ranks. Of course, he shouldn't have simply overturned the group leadership, but he could and should have used his authority as the general secretary to guard the interests of all the union's members, and stressed the importance of closing ranks in a united front against the bosses.

Finally there is the unprecedented questioning of the unions' affiliation to New Labour, and an exploration of alternative methods of working class political representation. True, both these trends affect "only" a vanguard of workers, mainly in the public or ex-public sector. But this vanguard is substantial, growing in size, influence, militancy and political consciousness. If it succeeds in breaking from Labour in a large-scale, organic fashion – and not just as an electoral one-off – then this will impact on the mass of trade unionists still tied to Labour.

These are grounds for optimism about the prospects for trade union revival in the months ahead – albeit with important qualifications. Not only is the level of industrial militancy still far below that of earlier periods such as the 1970s, but union density continues to fall even in the context of a significant job growth.

Nevertheless, a new generation of workers has come into activity for the first time. It does so without the terrible burdens of the defeats inflicted in the Thatcher years and with the inspirations to be drawn from the movements against global capital and war. But the relationship between this new layer and the union bureaucracies will be crucial to shaping the terrain of class struggle for the period ahead.

Revolutionaries and the rank and file movement

In the post office and the fire service there are signs of the development of embryonic rank and file movements. The question of how to pressurise, control and even replace the general secretaries and their bureaucratic coteries is being posed again for the first time in 20 years. The time is approaching to fight once again for rank and file movements that can assemble a militant alternative leadership to the entire union bureaucracy.

This time, rank and file movements must avoid the twin pitfalls of the early and mid-twentieth century when they were either training grounds for an alternative "left bureaucracy" or an economic, syndicalist complement to this bureaucracy.

The twin goals of the rank and file movements must be nothing short of the liquidation of the trade union bureaucracy: that is for a democratically centralised union under the control of its own members; and to make the unions a key part of the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

Thus, a rank and file movement must be created both to wage ongoing struggles more effectively and at the same time develop a series of long-term revolutionary policies, focused around workers' control and expropriation without compensation of major industries, to be placed under workers' management and planning.

Of course, revolutionaries will not be able to win this approach from the beginning, nor can they create tiny "revolutionary imitations of rank and file movements". The rank and file movement is a variant of the united front and thus its initial policies and tactics will reflect the politics of the majority of militants in them. But caucuses of revolutionaries must fight for clear revolutionary policies from the beginning.

Building real rank and file movements today will be difficult. But what is certain is that the objective opportunities will grow during the year ahead. Moreover, the need to organise the rank and file is being posed in the context of the debate over the need for a new workers' party and the

mass anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements. Socialist agitation and propaganda must play to the strong political, internationalist and direct action ethos of the wider movement and relate it to the success of "wildcat" action.

This does not mean socialists put down resolutions encompassing the entire revolutionary programme in every local rank and file initiative. It does mean advancing concrete revolutionary answers at each stage and seeking to persuade militants of their value and relevance.

The possibility for doing this has been greatly enhanced precisely by the discussions of the need for a new party and the internationalism that has come about as a result of union participation in the European Social Forum. In building for the ESF in London, initiatives to create local social forums will multiply. These social forums – and the event itself in London – will provide valuable opportunities to create cross-union links and rank and file initiatives.

But, when a rank and file movement is created – a real movement of militants on a national basis in either one or a group of unions – then revolutionaries should argue for highly focused action programmes. Even if we cannot win them in their entirety at that point the likelihood is that we will be able to push such movements much further to the left and create the conditions for winning more and more workers over to the revolutionary fraction.

The Awkward Squad: New Labour and the rank and file

By Martin Smith, SWP, November 2003. 36 pages, £1

The Socialist Workers Party is the largest far-left organisation in Britain and has been influential in recent disputes. So this pamphlet gives an important insight into its views.

The SWP criticises the dominant view among British trade union militants that the main problem is the corrupt and pro-capitalist right wing; and that the task is to replace these careerists with class fighters.

This "Broad Leftism" fails to recognise that the key to transforming the unions is to mobilise the rank and file, noting that, during strikes: "activists become more radical, yet trade union leaders tend to become more timid. This is because it is precisely during struggles that union leaders come under most pressure from conservative elements in society, the government, bosses and the state." (p27)

While left officials are far preferable to right-wing ones, only a rank and file movement can hold them to account and transform the unions.

But what role should left union leaders play and how should rank and file activists relate to them?

Smith only answers this question in the negative: "Replacing [left officials who betray] with 'even more' left wing leaders or passing more left wing motions on the executive will not solve any of the problems activists face. That is in no way meant to be an excuse for betrayals and sell outs – workers are right to demand the best from their leaders. But ultimately what is required is a strong, well organised rank and file able to deliver the kind of action that can win." (p25)

The problem with this is that it leaves the unions' bureaucratic structures intact. Indeed, why would a rank and file-controlled union need a general secretary with special powers over delegate conferences and executive committees?

A general secretary elected on a rank and file ticket should take concrete and decisive steps to dissolve the bureaucratic caste that leeches off the union. She or he should fight for all important decisions to be taken by an executive of lay delegates, for all full-time union officials to be paid their members' average wage, for mass meetings and elected strike committees to control all disputes. Last but not least they should be open about what political strategy the union and the working class as a whole should pursue.

Unless this is done, lefts like Mick Rix will continue to fall prey to right-wing coups, and leaders like Mark Serwotka will forever be undermined by timid bureaucrats misleading disputes.

To put the responsibility of transforming the union onto the rank and file lets the left officials off the hook.

Martin also outlines the history of the

Clydeside shop stewards committee, the Communist Party's rank and file papers of the 1930s and the International Socialists' (forerunner to the SWP) rank and file movement of the 1970s.

He praises the shop stewards' slogan: "We will support the officials, just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act immediately they misrepresent them." But he criticises their failure to fight for industrial and protest action on key political issues like the first world war. Smith is more enthusiastic about the CP's strategy in the 1930s. The *Busman's Punch* was a CP-controlled paper on the London buses, with a minimal fighting programme: for "a seven-hour day, no spreadovers and no standing passengers".

Crucially, the *Busman's Punch* – and other similar initiatives – organised workers for political action, for example, to confront the fascists.

The SWP sees its current "rank and file" papers, like *Post Worker*, as following what's the best from these two traditions, which it identifies as:

- For the annual election and immediate recallability of all officials, who should receive a worker's wage.

- For political campaigns and a minimum fighting economic programme in the unions.
- For the election of left officials and unofficial action whenever necessary.
- For a party-run paper, which other militants can join, to organise the rank and file.

This is fine, as far as it goes. But there is another tradition, that of the National Minority Movement of the 1920s. While the NMM was initiated by the Communist Party (before it became Stalinised) it organised democratically tens of thousands of militant workers. Its programme was a transitional one that linked the trade disputes of the day to the strategic goal of overthrowing capitalism, through the key slogan of "workers' control". Its aim was the complete and utter transformation of the trade unions.

This tactic, which had the backing of the Communist International, solved the problem of the division between politics and economics within the workers' movement, on a revolutionary basis. Smith only offers a more radical division: "At best trade unions can limit the rate of exploitation workers suffer at the hands of the bosses, but even the best rank and file organisations cannot escape the booms and slumps of the capitalist economy. For that you need a revolutionary party..." (p36).

Yes, but a revolutionary party will only succeed if it can win the leadership of the unions and transform them into fighting, anti-capitalist organisations, freed of the bureaucracy altogether.



Strikers add to Berlusconi's woes

Berlusconi, the media and his corruption

Berlusconi has always ruled under the shadow of a dark and evil-smelling cloud of corruption, but he has always managed to escape from these charges using novel and varied measures that accurately reflect the hopeless, undemocratic nature of the modern Italian constitution and the whole parliamentary and judicial system.

Most recently, lawyers in Milan successfully prosecuted Berlusconi's ex-lawyer and defence minister Cesare Previti on a series of bribery and corruption charges. Previti was to become justice minister before his arrest. Berlusconi decided it was time to resurrect Italy's immunity law to protect himself from prosecution.

On 17 June last year, he appeared in court on bribery and tax fraud charges but the issue was allowed to go no further as two days later government deputies in the Lower House forced through a law giving immunity to Italy's top five public officials. The Prime Minister shrugged off the ensuing furore by saying: "One citizen is equal to another [in the eyes of the law] but perhaps this one is slightly more equal than the rest, given [he has] the responsibility of governing the country."

However, in recent weeks Berlusconi has found that in his hurried attempts to push through the law, he overlooked key legal and constitutional questions that could cost him dearly. The immunity law was abolished in the 1990s to, publicly at least, "purge" the Italian establishment of corrupt politicians and businessmen. Since it is a constitutional issue, its reintroduction requires it to pass through both houses with a larger than normal majority. Therefore on 13 January, the Constitutional Court ruled that the law was unconstitutional and, as a result, the trial against Berlusconi could be reopened.

Berlusconi reacted predictably, calling the repealing of the act a "savagely aggression on the constitutional rules of our democracy" and repeating his supporters' claims that he is the victim of a plot by communist judges.

Unfortunately, in what will undoubtedly become another Hutton-style parliamentary pantomime, it seems that he will be absolved of all charges. There is little hope, therefore, that judicial manoeuvres will break Berlusconi's grip on the Italian establishment, especially since his domination of the media allows for unimpeded access of his propaganda to 90 per cent of Italians. This has enabled him to get away with measures that benefit him personally. The abolition of inheritance tax, one of his first measures on coming to office, was a case in point. It pleased all those who voted for him but, with Berlusconi being the richest man in Italy, it pleased his family best of all. He has also passed laws that have given his own companies huge tax write-offs and got his cabinet to issue a decree providing Mediaset channel Rete 4 with the cover required to continue operating.

As for the controversial media bill, known as Legge Gasparri, that would allow Berlusconi not only to consolidate his TV interests but expand his interests in print, the president will be obliged to sign it if the Italian parliament approves it a second time.

Even his notorious gaffes, which are seen to entertain the general public, are often done to divert attention from unpopular issues or decrees that his government wants to introduce.

With his friends being locked up and prosecution against him for corruption coming closer, Berlusconi is facing even more difficulties with a growing strike movement, writes *Pablo Rodriguez*

Transport workers struck across Italy at the end of last month in support of better pay. Naples and Venice were brought to a standstill and the strikes also affected services in Rome, Genoa and Milan.

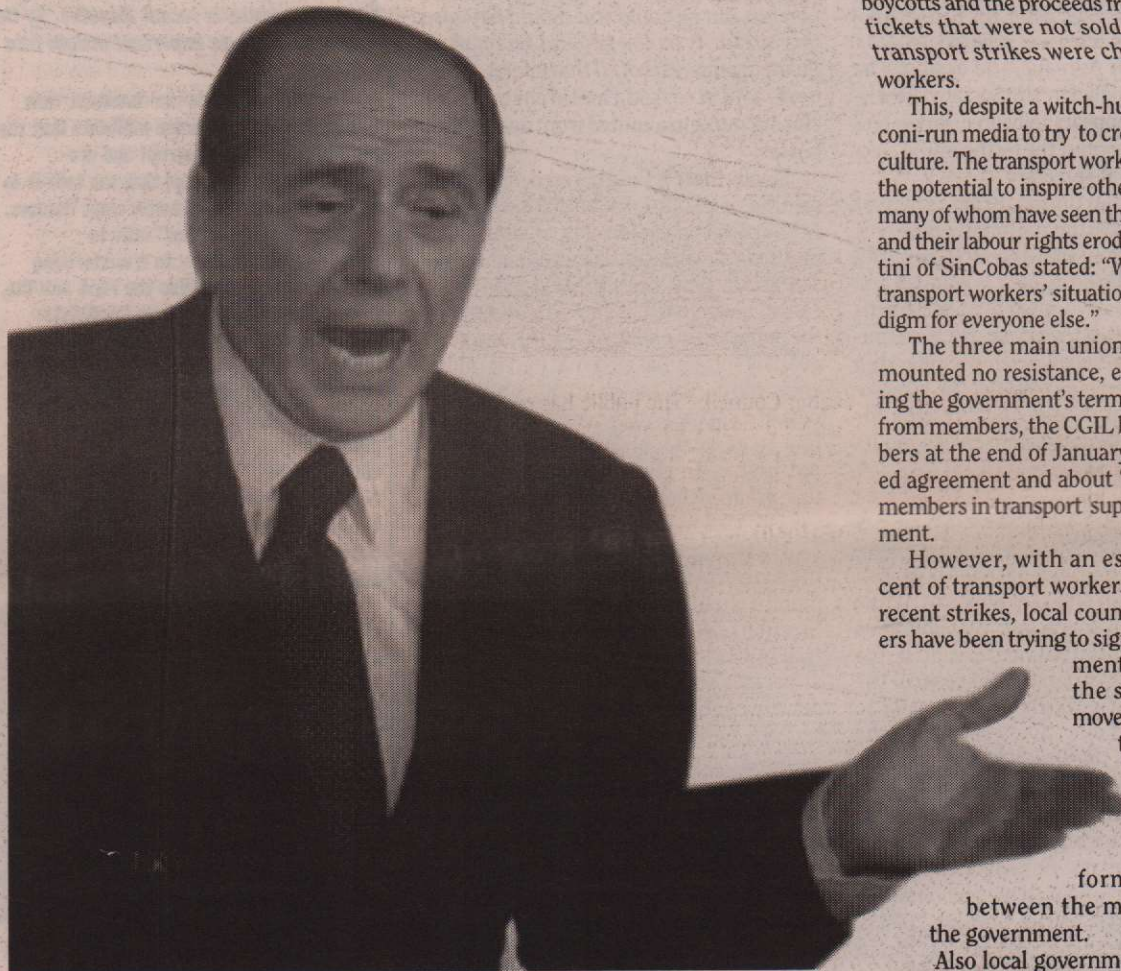
The strike called by smaller unions, such as Cobas and CUB, was in support of a claim of 106 euros a month and a one-off payment of 3,000 euros. The government offered the transport workers 86 euros in December.

The latest strikes only add to Silvio Berlusconi's troubles. As he settled down to his Christmas panettone and vin santo in his Sardinian villa, even the man who has described himself as "the best political leader in Europe and in the world" must have wondered if his luck was about to turn. Rumblings of discontent were audible from all sections of Italian society but especially the working class.

Workers the whole length of Italy started organising protests and strikes against insulting pay offers and widespread job losses. Along with continuing union opposition to privatisation, President Ciampi's refusal to sign a bill which would have entrenched and extended Berlusconi's control of the media, and the reopening of a corruption case against him may give the Prime Minister wrinkles that even his plastic surgeon will have difficulty in removing (see box).

Opposition in Italy is growing and recent months have seen Berlusconi faced with waves of strikes and actions by workers in many industries. Most recently, a series of wildcat strikes by transport workers and airport staff have led to many urban centres being paralysed following the rejection of a below inflation-related pay offer by workers, which the three largest union confederations - CGIL (General Confederation of Italian Labour), CISL (Confederation of Italian Labour Unions) and UIL (Italian Union of Labour) - accepted on 20 December 2003.

Four other smaller unions (Cobas, CUB, RdB and Sult, which are syndicalist) have



supported the strikes and called a one-day walk out on the 9 January. Workers have forced their way into locked-out transport depots in order to hold mass assemblies and reject the employers' demands that wages would only be met if the unions agreed to "increased productivity, less breaks and more obedience by workers."

Italy has a series of laws designed to prevent strike action by public sector workers, since they are deemed to be essential ser-

VICES at peak times. Nevertheless, the transport workers decided that the situation was serious enough to ignore the "fasce orarie protette" (protected time bands) and effectively bring the country to a standstill. They launched a series of co-ordinated strikes. The government did not immediately invoke the law, waiting for the expected passenger backlash to give them a better pretext. They were bitterly disappointed when several local social forums organised consumer

boycotts and the proceeds from rail and bus tickets that were not sold because of the transport strikes were channelled to the workers.

This, despite a witch-hunt by the Berlusconi-run media to try to create an anti-strike culture. The transport workers strike has also the potential to inspire other Italian workers, many of whom have seen their salaries frozen and their labour rights eroded. As Paolo Sabatini of SinCobas stated: "We don't want the transport workers' situation to act as a paradigm for everyone else."

The three main union federations had mounted no resistance, effectively accepting the government's terms. Under pressure from members, the CGIL balloted its members at the end of January on the contested agreement and about 70 per cent of its members in transport supported the agreement.

However, with an estimated 85 per cent of transport workers supporting the recent strikes, local councils and employers have been trying to sign localised agreements to undermine the strikers. Such a move would also signal the end of the National Contract pay structure that sees a uniform salary agreed between the main unions and the government.

Also local government officials have begun to urge police to take the names of the strikers in a scare-mongering tactic that is designed to remind them of the repressive 1970s.

The transport strike comes after a whole period of protests by Italian workers. From the Fiat strike in late 2002 to the series of one-day "general strikes" last autumn on the back of Berlusconi's pension reforms. A national strike by workers would cripple the Berlusconi administration and inspire unions and activists all over Europe.

Rifondazione's bad strategies

These strikes coupled with the collapse of Parmalat and the IT group Finmatica (two directors have been questioned regarding over 300 million euros debt, which is about £220 million) shows the Italian state to be in serious crisis, and presents the opportunity for protests and the formation of a true workers' party that can seize the initiative.

However, as the moment for decisive action comes, Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), led by Fausto Bertinotti, is failing to take up the challenge once again. As ever, he refuses to give any lead to the Italian masses to generalise the sectional conflict of trade unionists. Last year he talked about the tactic of the general strike. But when spontaneous, repeated mass strikes posed the tactic in the concrete, Bertinotti sent the working class off on the wild goose chase of a referendum, so demobilising the strikes just when they should have escalated.

In fact, despite his left rhetoric, Bertinotti is

always on the look-out for an electoral or parliamentary way out of any serious crisis. This is because he subscribes to the post-war Communist Party (PCI) strategy, developed by Palmiro Togliatti. Recently Bertinotti has described it as aimed at achieving "a state [within which] you can produce a series of modifications, even small ones, but ones that have a direct impact on the nature of power and its [current] lack of neutrality".

The "lack of neutrality" of the present state is because it is a capitalist state - serving the bosses against the workers. That a man who calls himself a Marxist and a Leninist "forgets" this little matter is incredible. This state cannot be "modified" away: it must be smashed by the working class.

Bertinotti zig-zags backwards and forwards between post-modernist Zapatista nonsense about mass mobilisations to build up workers' and popular power, rather than striving for state power. He gingerly floats the re-formation of the Olive

Tree coalition as a "realistic" alternative to Berlusconi's neo-liberal domination. This popular frontist strategy will lead to nothing more than the strengthening of the bosses' grip on Italy, the further erosion of the workers' social and democratic gains and the fragmentation and defeat of the workers' struggles.

It demonstrates a total refusal to learn the lessons of history: most recently those of the late 1990s, but also those of the 1970s and of course 1919-20, the biennio rosso. The Italian workers - the most militant and best organised at workplace and local community level in Europe - need a radically different strategy. It is to develop a counter-offensive against Berlusconi via an all out indefinite general strike. This can drive from power not only Berlusconi but the whole vicious and corrupt ruling class. It can install an anticapitalist workers' government and ignite a European revolution.

High stakes in US supermarket strike

By GR McColl

For nearly four months, 70,000 workers employed by four major supermarket chains across southern and central California have been engaged in a battle that will shape the terrain of struggle between US unions and corporate bosses for the course of the next decade.

The immediate issue at the heart of this increasingly bitter battle is health insurance provision by big employers. Health insurance provision by employers is a vital issue in a country where there is no national health service and illness which needs hospital treatment can be a financial disaster for working people. Already an estimated 43 million people are without any medical coverage at all.

According to left-leaning academic Ruth Milkman the strike "has huge national implications... it is a test of the waters ahead for concession bargaining nationwide in the 'new' economy".

Most of those in the California conflict – almost all members of the 1.4 million-strong United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union – have been on strike against Vons and Pavilions supermarkets (owned by Safeway Inc.) since early October 2003. Thousands of others remain locked out by Ralphs and Albertson's, subsidiaries of the Kroger corporation. These workers embody the multi-ethnic diversity of the contemporary US working class, with more than a third being either Latino, African-American or East Asian and strikers wielding multi-lingual placards.

On 13 January to mark the 100th day and commemorating Martin Luther King day thousands of workers, local residents and religious figures joined together in the notoriously conservative Orange County. They formed a human chain around a Vons/Safeway store demonstrating their solidarity to save affordable health care. More than a dozen striking and locked-out workers along with some union officials, local politicians

and religious leaders were arrested amid the potent display of civil disobedience.

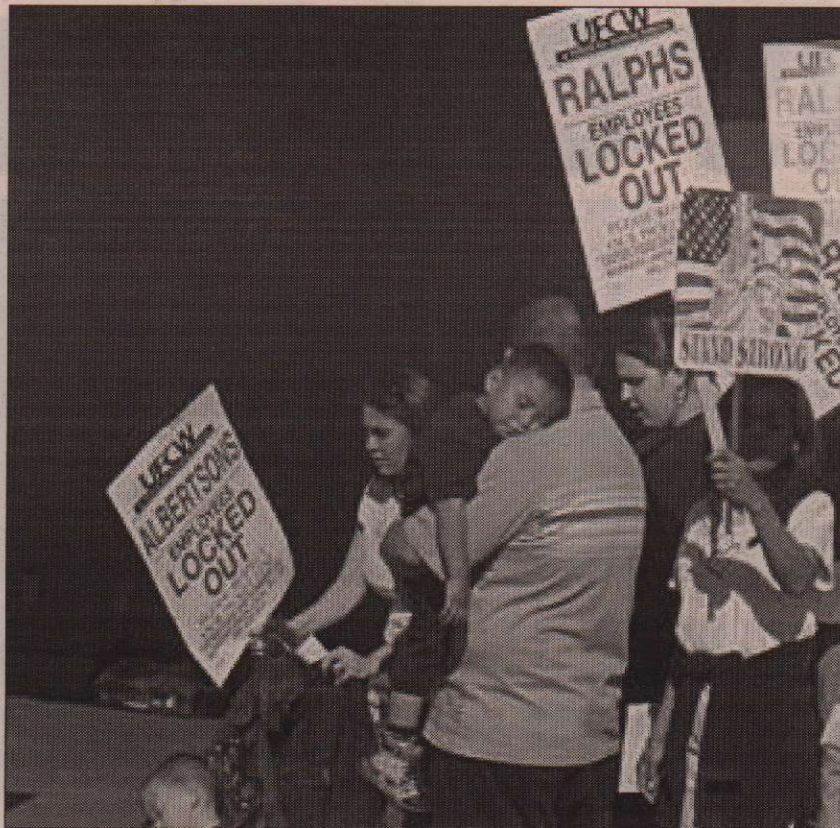
The strike started after bosses at Vons and Pavilion refused to drop demands for workers to shell out more for healthcare insurance. If the bosses get their way employees would be paying \$95, or the equivalent of eight hours of their weekly pay, on health insurance at the end of a three-year contract. The attack on health and pension benefits is hardly unique to the supermarket sector in the US. But managements have claimed that they must extract concessions from the unions to remain competitive with the likes of Wal-Mart and Costco. Wal-Mart has become the symbol of a new style of capitalism in the retail sector. A

"The public has resonated with this strike because these are people they see day to day but it is also a fight about what kind of society we all want to live in"

Miguel Contreras, president of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council

viciously anti-union employer, its workers make a third less an hour than their sisters and brothers in the strikebound California supermarkets. Wal-Mart staff also pay significantly higher health insurance payments.

The UFCW has garnered substantial support from supermarket shoppers, many of whom are boycotting the stores that remain open with skeleton crews of scab labour. Aside from an immediate identification with friends and neighbours, many workers and middle class people are angered by the attacks on workplace benefits in a country where the upward redistribution of wealth has again gathered pace under the Bush presidency. In the words of Miguel Contreras, president of the Los Angeles Central



Labor Council: "The public has resonated with this strike because these are people they see day to day [but] it's also a fight about what kind of society we all want to live in."

The dispute has even attracted support from the more radical elements of the music industry with members of bands such as Audioslave, Slipknot and the Red Hot Chili Peppers performing a benefit gig in Los Angeles on 20 December.

Crucially, there has been the support from other sections of organised workers, including the still powerful Teamsters. Though the call came late in the day, the character of the dispute changed dramatically when on 24 November Teamster officials instructed members to honour UFCW picket lines. Initially, this move effectively reduced the delivery of supplies to the scab stores to a comparative trickle. All told, some 8,000 lorry drivers are refusing to deliver to distribution warehouses and 860 stores.

In addition, the historically militant International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) mobilised 3,000 members for impromptu mass meetings outside Kroger supermarkets in Los Angeles and San Pedro that had locked out UFCW members. ILWU locals have donated \$155,000 (about £90,000) to support the striking and locked-out workers. Meanwhile, in San Francisco the city's Labor Council has organised fundraising and demonstrations outside local Safeway's outlets where UFCW members are

ultimately, this brave industrial struggle must be transformed into a political one that sees the US trade unions pressed to fight for universal healthcare, free of charge and at the point of need. This should be a key plank in the programme of a real workers party that demands a once and for all break from the capitalist duopoly of the Republicans and Democrats.

employed under a different contract.

Estimates have suggested that the supermarket chains are enduring losses equivalent to £23 million a week, though top management appears to think it a price worth paying if the eventual outcome breaks the UFCW's strength in the industry as a whole.

This is a dispute that can certainly be won. Predictably there has been a widening gap between the speeches of union officials stressing the historic importance of this battle and their practice on the ground. The UFCW topped a deal with Kroger bosses that ended a separate dispute involving 3,300 members employed in other Kroger-controlled chains in West Virginia, Ohio and Kentucky. As in California, the key issue in that strike, which began on 13 October, was health insurance. The failure to link these struggles has relieved the pressure on one set of supermarket bosses. Worse still was the decision (since reversed) to remove pickets when negotiations restarted at the beginning of 2004.

As January drew to a close there was still no sign of a climbdown by bosses in California but the workers' resolve also remains strong. Given the level of mass activism selling a shoddy deal will prove a difficult task for UFCW full-timers.

Ultimately, this brave industrial struggle must be transformed into a political one that sees the US trade unions pressed to fight for universal healthcare, free of charge and at the point of need. This should be a key plank in the programme of a real workers party that demands a once and for all break from the capitalist duopoly of the Republicans and Democrats.

After all, one can find many an endorsement for John Kerry from UFCW officials on his campaign's website, but not a word about the California strikes.

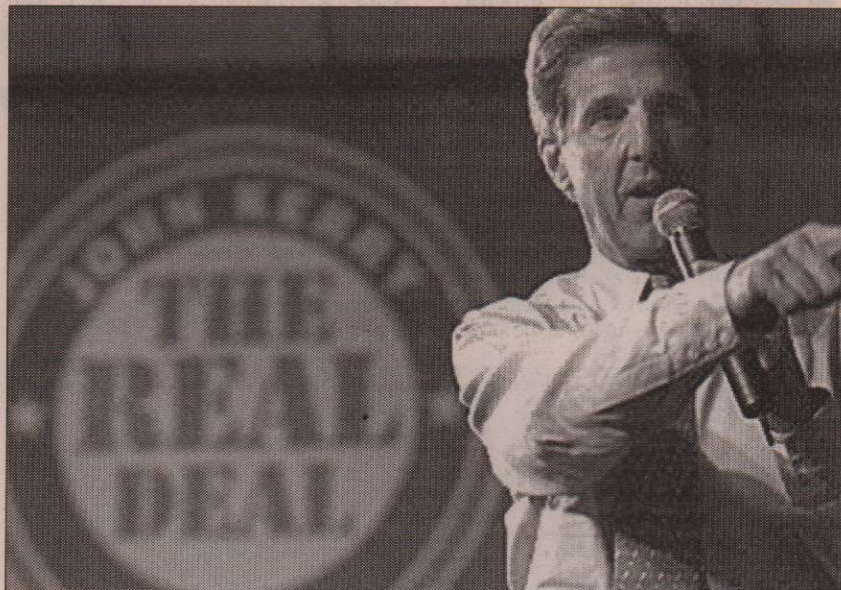
● Donations to: UFCW Strike Hardship Fund, secretary-treasurer Joe Hansen, 1775 K St. NW, Washington, D.C., 20006, USA. Alternatively, the AFL-CIO has set up an online donation account - go to <https://secure.ga3.org/08/holdtheline/>

Democrats are no alternative to Bush

The long-running melodrama of who is to become the Democratic party nominee for November's US presidential election did not go according to script in January. Media pundits on both sides of the Atlantic had anointed Vermont governor Howard Dean as the front-runner and all but written off the once-fancied Massachusetts senator John Kerry.

Dean, after all, had paraded his opposition to the war against Iraq and his "outsider" status to potent advantage, taking a commanding lead in opinion polls among likely Democratic voters. He had also raised far more in campaign contributions than most of the other Democratic contenders combined, largely through relatively small individual donations. Major public sector unions such as the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees had thrown their weight behind Dean's drive for the White House. Dean had managed to mobilise a small army of enthusiastic students and anti-war activists to get out the vote, dynamising an otherwise lacklustre Democratic Party campaign.

But something went seriously wrong for the Dean campaign in the relatively rural, mid-western state of Iowa where Democratic caucuses in village and church halls, and the front rooms of people's houses awarded the largest share of their votes to John Kerry, with Dean left limping behind in third. His New Hampshire opinion poll lead evaporated, with Kerry claiming a com-



fortable victory in the small New England's state primary.

So weeks after columnists had begun John Kerry's obituary, the junior senator from Massachusetts is suddenly back as the front-runner, with his campaign gaining momentum and money. Whether Kerry can gain the votes of Democrats in the southern states will become evident in the first week of February, which will prove crunch time for the campaigns of the silver-tongued North Carolina senator John Edwards and the born-again Democrat, former Nato

commander, Wesley Clark. His campaign has garnered the endorsement of the populist film-maker and comic Michael Moore but flagged in the New Hampshire snows.

Both the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary saw record turnouts, with the poll in the latter exceeding 200,000 votes – an increase of nearly 25 per cent from the previous high in 1992. There is a very substantial minority of the electorate that would like to see almost anyone but "Dubya" in the White House. In Iowa an overwhelming majority of Democratic voters

were against the Iraq war. But what would they be getting in John Kerry?

By current US standards, Kerry is a relatively liberal member of the US senate, who became a politician after a decorated tour of duty in Vietnam, followed by a stint in Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Born into an affluent family, Kerry married into the upper ranks of the US bourgeoisie when he wed Teresa Heinz, heiress to a fortune estimated at \$600 million (about £400 million), based on 57 varieties of exploitation.

On social issues, he is "pro-choice" on abortion and supports the Massachusetts court ruling in favour civil marriage for lesbian and gay couples, which Bush publicly opposed in his State of the Union address. He fits the fair weather "friend of labor" mould for US Democrats from the north east, but until recently had only attracted the firefighters' union endorsement at a national level. While opposed to most of the Bush tax cuts, his own prescriptions for the economy are extremely vague.

But Kerry left himself wide open to attack by Dean over his eventual vote in support of the Iraq war, having nominally opposed the 1991 attack on the country. The Kerry who would be president dared not break from the Democratic consensus in Congress not just for fear of alienating the electorate but because he would have been counted as an opponent of a much more brazen imperialist policy that has had the support of key sections of US

capital. To a degree he is running to catch up with a shift in public opinion about the war.

Bush's opinion poll ratings have stabilised since a sharp plunge in the summer months, but given the possibility of things turning still worse for US forces occupying Iraq and the extremely uneven character of the economic recovery he is certainly not invincible at the polls. Kerry may well attract the support of many sincere opponents of the war, the Bush gang's assault on civil liberties and the overall combination of tax cuts for the rich and attacks on social welfare for the poor.

The tragedy is that the anger of those who had opposed the war, who were outraged at the tax cuts for the rich and the slashing of social welfare, are now being corralled once again to vote for the Democrats, a party as committed to defending big businesses interests as the Republicans.

Socialists should have no truck with Kerry or the Democratic Party. In the coming months it will be crucial to find ways of relating to the anger and frustration directed against Bush. The immediate prospect for a break from the endless domination of politics by the two bourgeois parties is not encouraging, but the base for such a break within sections of the working class, among radicalised students and elements of the African-American and Latino populations is certain to continue to grow whatever the outcome of November's race for the White House.

By Kuldip Bajwa

Anybody who doubted the wisdom of holding the fourth World Social Forum (WSF) in India must have abandoned those doubts if they went there. Well over 100,000 people gathered in Mumbai between 16 and 21 January for this annual event.

People travelled from all over the world to protest and participate in over 1,200 meetings, panel discussions and giant rallies. Representation was strong from all over Asia with South Korean trade unionists jostling for space on the crowded walkways alongside Bhutanese refugees and Tibetan monks. But undoubtedly the participation of a vast array of Indian movements contributed greatly to the forum's success.

Mumbai (formerly Bombay) is a city of huge contrasts – a city where capitalist globalisation meets the reality of superexploitation and “underdevelopment”. It is India's richest city, with more millionaires than other cities combined and it serves as the vast country's commercial and financial centre. Real estate prices in some parts of Mumbai are as high as in New York or Tokyo. Yet nearly 8 million of Mumbai's inhabitants are homeless or live in makeshift homes in one of its numerous slum districts. Over 100,000 prostitutes work the streets of the city, with more than 12 per cent thought to be children and more than 30,000 infected with HIV/Aids.

It is growing inequality like this and the desperation of the poor – greatly increased by corporate globalisation – which gave rise to the anticapitalist movement. The WSF's central slogan “Another World Is Possible” in Mumbai should be rewritten as “Another World is a Burning Necessity”.

The people who need that other world and the forces who could achieve it and build it were both in evidence in Mumbai.

Outside the meeting rooms and conference halls activists filled the pathways with noise and colour under banners proclaiming “Debt Domination is Human Rights Violation”, “No war in South Asia”, “Dalit Rights” and “Stop Privatisation”.

Many of the Indian participants were from Dalit (untouchables) communities, protesting against caste discrimination. At one stage sex workers and campaigners on sexual rights from “Rainbow Planet” stickered a passing demonstration of railworkers, metal workers and seamen.

One of the most impressive aspects of the WSF was the level of participation of women's groups and organisations. Shiri Ebadi from Iran, 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, winner accused governments of using religion to justify discrimination and terrible cruelty against women.

In a huge outdoor meeting entitled Wars Against Women, Women Against Wars, Arundhati Roy invited a woman from Madhya Pradesh onto the stage to tell how she had been raped and tortured by police. She appealed to the crowd to help her get justice.

Disability groups protested at the hypocrisy of Non-Governmental Organisations who fail to promote equal opportunities in their own workplaces.

Many meetings offered an opportunity to find out more about issues in Asia, such as tribal land rights or Indian communalism. But many of the panels were made up of the same reformist speakers who dominate the movement in Europe.

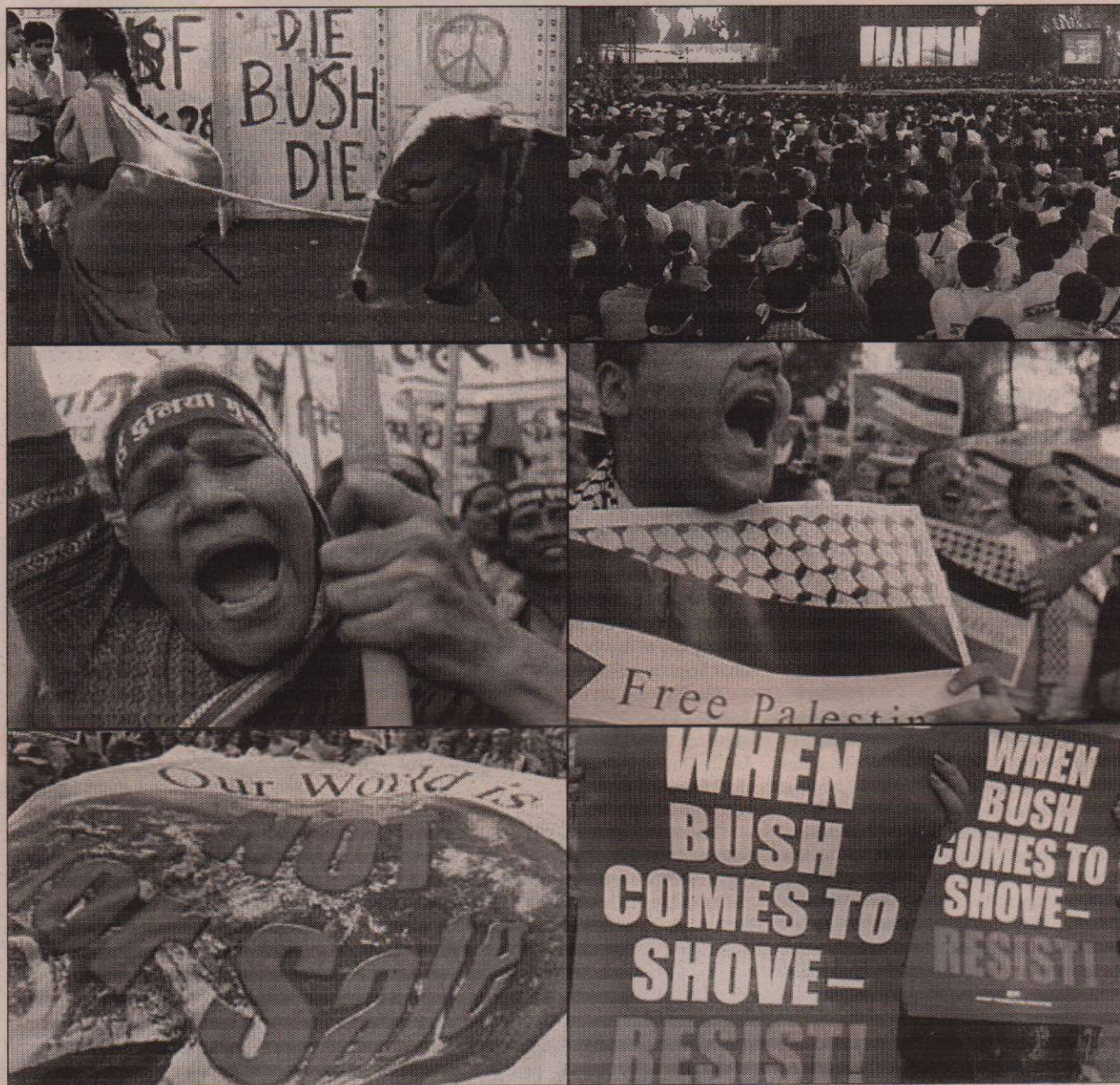
Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank, who was sacked for criticising the excesses of the IMF, suggested liberalisation and markets were part of the answer but only when regulated by strong state controls to ensure they improved living standards for the poorest.

In her speech at the opening ceremony, Shiri Ebadi called for reform of the WTO and UN, demanding the Democratisation of Globalisation.

Attac hosted a seminar to explain its Tobin tax, a proposal to tax speculative capital 0.01 per cent with the money generated going to alleviate poverty in the third world.

A few radical voices were occasionally heard. South African activist, Trevor Ngwane said: “The problem is capitalism, and the enemy are all capitalists, those who run industry and finance and those who run the

'THE PROBLEM IS CAPITALISM'



capitalist governments.” He called for radical direct action, seeing the key force as the world working class.

In general the solutions offered limited themselves to reform of capitalism. The domination by NGOs ensured this. This led to ferocious debate during the run-in to the WSF.

While claiming to be “the voice of civil society”, most NGOs receive huge funding from imperialist governments, corporations and their charitable institutes like the Heinrich Boll Foundation, Oxfam International and the World Council of Churches. It is inconceivable that organisations reliant on state or corporate handouts can consistent-

ly or fundamentally challenge the interests of big business and Western governments.

Much of the Indian left accuses the NGOs of taking over popular organisation thanks to the money they have to dispense and then limiting the struggle to reforms or self-help.

The ban on the participation of political parties – dictated by the Porto Alegre principles – continued in Mumbai, but was even more dishonestly upheld than in Brazil, where the Workers Party was everywhere. In Mumbai, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) were represented on the Indian organising committee. They participated extensively in the forum

via prominent intellectuals and front organisations. So why not hear – and be able to criticise – their official party policies for bringing about another world? In reality the ban on parties merely leaves them unaccountable for their actions to the movement.

For many of the unelected leaders of the WSF organising committee and the broader International Council, like the Brazilian Chico Whitaker and the honorary chair of Attac Bernard Cassen, this ban also prevents the forum becoming a movement. If it tried to become a movement, to direct action against global capitalism or imperialist war, then there would be a struggle for power

and authority within it.

Whitaker and Cassen are fierce critics of the “Assemblies of Social Movements” which meet alongside the WSF and the regional social forums. Instead they prefer to limit the WSF to being a “space”, celebrating diversity, where groups can network with each other.

The problem with this is that it condemns the WSF to being a grand talking shop. It further ignores the fact that the OC and the IC are already a locus of power, that they occupy it and its politics – an NGO reformism yearning to recreate a global social democracy.

Yet the assemblies have achieved one major result: 15 February 2003, the first co-ordinated global action against imperialism for decades. We need more such co-ordination of campaigns and struggles, across the wide spectrum of issues not less.

Cassen and Whitaker criticise the lack of democracy, preparation, proper representation at these assemblies. True, but the answer is not to retreat from holding assemblies but to make them more representative and more democratic. In short the assemblies must take more and more steps towards becoming an International.

Unfortunately those political tendencies that have championed the Assemblies seem to be in retreat, faced with Cassen and Whitaker's attacks. Christophe Aguiton of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire even suggested that the debate over “space” or “movement” was over, resolved in favour of “space”.

Robert Savio, a member of the WSF International Committee, expressed a more positive view, arguing that the WSF must develop “mechanisms” for creating the “other world” it believes is possible. He says that, in skirting attempts to adopt institutional or organisational structures in order to accommodate a wide range of views and activists, the WSF runs the risk of becoming an irrelevance, “a giant festival for the left and the progressive – and little more!”

The Assembly of the Social Movements met daily in Mumbai to debate campaigning proposals, assessing the WTO protests in Cancun in September of last year, developing the network of movements and coming up with a final declaration.

Unfortunately the meeting was taken up by speakers from the top table and little debate from the floor. In the absence of any formal decision making process, the chair was effectively empowered to make pronouncements on any proposals suggested by speakers from the floor: with no resolutions, amendments or votes, the chair alone decides what the “consensus” is. This frustrates the will of the majority in the interests of unidentified “big hitters”, who turn out to be party, union and NGO bureaucrats.

A commission appointed by the Assembly to produce the final declaration did their work behind the scenes with no explanation of how decisions were reached. The lack of participation by the Indian social movements was bemoaned by all, although they themselves gave the excuse, that they were too involved in the running of the main forum as hosts, to participate. Once again this shows the importance of delegation and representation – principles that will aid the movement if they are open, recallable, political.

After much dissent and referral back to a steering group a call did emerge which was read out at the final rally to a crowd of over 35,000. It reiterated opposition to the neoliberal system, calling for the immediate withdrawal of all occupying troops and support for Iraqi self-determination. It adopted the call from the General Assembly of the Anti-War Movements for 20 March to be an international day of protest against war and the occupation of Iraq.

As the movement has continued to grow it has maintained its ability to keep disparate forces on board, by not confronting divisive issues head on. But, increasingly, very different visions are being proposed for the future of the WSF and the movement in general.

Despite all these problems the movement still retains enormous potential. Through debate over goals, strategy and tactics, and through democratic decision making that results in action, it can build on its achievements over the past decade. The WSF can act as the organising centre for the new movement – as the core of a new, a Fifth International.

Revolution in Asia

The socialist youth organisation Revolution participated in its first political event on the sub-continent as members of Revolution UK and Revolution Indonesia came together at the International Youth Camp, parallel to the World Social Forum.

We distributed leaflets and collected names of supporters of the call for a new youth International. We also made contact with student organisations in South America, and many youth and student groups based in India, including the All Indian Youth Federation and the Democratic Youth Federation of India.

Some local students were so impressed with the politics of

Revolution that they immediately joined and vowed to build a Revolution group in India. At the closing anti-war demonstration on the 21st it was these new members of Mumbai Revolution who led the chanting, ‘No Justice, No Peace, US Out of the Middle East’ and ‘One Solution, Revolution’ as we marched proudly through the narrow streets with Revolution flags aloft.

During the closing rally in Kranti Maidan, from where Mahatma Gandhi had launched the final campaign for independence from British colonial rule in 1942, Revolution members, new and old, collected signatures on petitions calling for the immediate

release of Mario Bango. Mario, a Roma anti-racist, has been sentenced to 12 years for the “crime” of defending himself and his brother from a physical attack by neo-Nazi skinheads. Including those who pledged to support the campaign were UK MP Jeremy Corbyn and comedian Mark Thomas. As Revolution members explained, self defence is no offence.

When the rally came to a close with a huge concert in the fading light Revolution members gathered for an impromptu rendition of the Internationale. We exchanged contact details and promised to continue the fight for Revolution!

The lies are exposed over the weapons of mass destruction

By Keith Harvey

The game is up. It's official: there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. CIA arms inspector David Kay told Reuters on 24 January as he resigned his post: "I don't think they existed. I don't think there was a large-scale production programme in the 1990s." So Colin Powell's powerpoint presentation to the UN last February was hokum, as was vice-president Cheney's repeated insistence of "undeniable proof" of their existence.

Five days after Kay dropped his bombshell, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice emerged from the White House bunker to admit: "I think that what we have is evidence that there are differences between what we knew going in and what we found on the ground."

These admissions have thrown Blair on the defensive. The existence of WMD were his central, even exclusive, pretext for sending troops to Iraq. While the majority of the British people never believed Saddam possessed weapons that were "an immediate and direct threat to the UK", it was this argument that was used to coerce unwilling Labour MPs into backing the war.

Officially, Tony Blair still, "in good faith", believes weapons will be found – eventually. This, despite the fact that the only mission capable of "finding" them is being wound down and those in charge of the process do not believe they exist!

The truth is that, despite buckets of white-wash from his handpicked judge, Blair has been caught cynically lying to his party, to parliament and to the people. It is left to Jack Straw to try to cover his master's nakedness.

Straw admitted that it is "disappointing" that no WMD have been found, but tried to shift the argument onto other ground. He insisted that the real reason that Blair went to war was to enforce UN resolutions.

This was always a specious argument: it is for the UN security council to enforce its own resolutions, not one of its members to do so unilaterally. The UK and US acted illegally in doing so. Moreover, the pretext given for the invasion was that the decade-long policy of sanctions and inspections had failed. Saddam, they claimed, was more of a threat to his neighbours and his people in 2003 than in 1992 and his weapons programme was more developed.

This gigantic lie has been punctured by Kay's failure to discover WMD. Moreover, as a new Human Rights Watch report proves, the worst crimes of Saddam Hussein were carried out when he was backed by the US and UK in the 1980s – not toward the end of his regime.

It is only a matter of time before Blair is forced to own up to the absence of WMD. Will he resign? Of course not. He will at that point fall back on the argument that he acted in good faith based on the "available intelligence".

Bush too has retreated to this line of defence. "If the intelligence was a crock of shit don't blame us, blame the spooks." John Kay has gone one further: the intelligence failure was all the fault of Saddam!

His regime was in such a crisis-ridden state that that the messages coming out of it were unreliable and made the job of the intelligence services impossible! "If Hussein himself thought he might have possessed WMD then what chance did we have of getting to the truth?"



David Kay

And Rice has added: "When you are dealing with secretive regimes that want to deceive, you're never going to be able to be positive."

Well how unfair of them! And we were under the illusion that the intelligence services of the two most powerful imperialist states in the world existed precisely to get behind the lies told by dictators. Now we are asked to believe the spooks just recycled an old rubbish passed on by disaffected former Iraqi officials or cash-hungry stooges.

This claptrap is, of course, designed to protect the Bush and Blair and even avoid a damaging clear out of the heads of the security services. But holding their hands up to a "failure of intelligence" fatally damages any future case for pre-emptive attack. Who will ever believe any reason for war based on intelligence again?

Even the *Economist* says that it would

not back Bush and Blair in any future unilateral pre-emptive wars without an independent inquiry into the intelligence services to try to re-establish their credibility.

In fact, honest politicians were not led up the garden path by incompetent spies. Nor did the whole plan to invade Iraq even begin with 9/11 and the supposed (subsequently disproved) links Saddam had with al Qaeda. As soon as George Bush was installed in office the key hawks, the so-called "neo-cons" led by vice-president Dick Cheney and defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, pressed for an invasion of Iraq.

Former treasury secretary Paul O'Neill has rubbished the WMD rationale by revealing that Bush, in cabinet meetings as early as January 2001, asked his advisers to find a pretext for war: "It was all about finding a way to do it," he told CBS News, "That was the tone of it. The president saying, 'Find me a way to do this.'"

Once 9/11 occurred they had their excuse. As US defence analysts Stratfor put it last month: "The strategic purpose of the Iraq war... was two-fold. First, the United States had to establish its ability to carry out extensive military operations to the conclusion, despite casualties. The perception in the Islamic world – a perception that al Qaeda attempted to systematically exploit – was that the United States was unwilling to undertake the level of effort and endure the level of pain needed to impose its will on the region. The war in Afghanistan, rather than proving American will, was seen as the opposite – another demonstration that the United States is averse to casualties and unable to bring a campaign to a definitive conclusion.

The second goal was geopolitical. The

United States knew it could not defeat al Qaeda in the conventional manner in an open campaign. They were too well dispersed, too few and too secure. Defeating al Qaeda meant pressurising several countries to take action against them, particularly Saudi Arabia. These countries had little interest in the internal destabilisation that fighting al Qaeda would entail, and in some cases, they sympathised with al Qaeda. The United States had no direct means for inducing these countries to change their behaviour. Iraq – bordering on Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Iran – was the single most strategic country in the region, and a base from which to exert intense pressure throughout the region."

To which we can only add that seizing control of the country's immense oil reserves for gas-guzzling USA was a nice bonus.

However, governments cannot give such reasons to the public. For this a whole machinery of lies is needed to convince the public that their lives, and those of their loved ones, their homelands are in great danger. WMD fitted the bill. Blair decided, before he ever asked for intelligence, that UK imperialism's strategic interests lay in siding unconditionally with Bush.

It should not be the BBC where the resignations are coming thick and fast; we should demand that this whole gang of liars goes now.

More than 10,000 Iraqis have been killed. More than 500 allied troops have died too. The killing goes on. Blair, like Bush, is not simply a liar but a war criminal. We need to kick him out and bring him to justice.

Direct elections now! For a revolutionary constituent assembly

Bush and Blair don't need to ask their intelligence services if the Iraqi people want elections. Just take a look at the banner demanding them that adorns the statue put up to replace the one of Saddam, famously toppled for the cameras when the US entered Baghdad.

Or they could just listen to the tens of thousands of Shi'ites that took to the streets of Basra and Baghdad last month to demand direct elections to select a new Iraqi assembly and government.

These demonstrations forced Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, to re-open discussions on the agreement signed on 15 November with the Iraqi Governing Council, whose members were appointed by the US, to hand over sovereignty to a new, non-elected Iraqi government on 1 July.

Naomi Klein explained the underlying rationale for the Bremer plan and timetable. "A growing number of legal experts are challenging the legitimacy of Bremer's reforms, arguing that under the international laws that govern occupying powers – the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the 1949 Geneva Conventions – the CPA can only act as a caretaker of Iraq's economic assets, not as its



Tens of thousands march through Basra calling for direct elections

auctioneer. Radical changes, such as Bremer's Order 39, which opened up Iraqi industry to 100 per cent foreign ownership, violate these laws and could therefore be easily overturned by a sovereign Iraqi government.

This prospect has foreign investors seriously spooked, and many are opting not to go into Iraq. The major private insurance brokers are also sitting it out, having assessed Iraq as too great an expropriation risk. Bremer has responded by quietly

cancelling his announced plan to privatise Iraq's 200 state firms, instead putting up 35 companies for lease (with a later option to buy). For the White House, the only way for its grand economic plan to continue is for its military occupation to end: only a sovereign Iraqi government, unbound by the Hague and Geneva Regulations, can legally sell off Iraq's assets."

But a sovereign government elected by the people may just decide to kick the US troops out and the US companies with them. Hence Bremer's aim to appoint a government of placemen to legalise the occupation and sell of the country's assets.

Now the main leader of the Shi'ites, Ayatollah Sistani, has put a spanner in the works by demanding elections before 1 July to ensure that the majority Shi'ite community dominates any government.

The Iraqi people need free elections but Sistani is not to be trusted. He has never denounced the US occupation; he has helped to keep the guerrilla resistance out of Shi'ite dominated areas. He called off demonstrations in Najaf and other Shi'ite cities at the end of January; he has proven his point and he wants to cut a deal with Bremer, such as a system of some elections and some appointments. He will certainly want

any future constitution to bear the imprint of Islamic law.

He has even agreed for the UN to decide whether elections can be organised before 1 July. UN senior adviser on Iraq, Lakdar Brahimi, duly warned that premature elections "may do more harm than good" since "campaigns and votes can actually increase political tensions and violence, especially in a fragile society like Iraq."

The Iraqi masses must retake the streets; if hundreds of thousands and millions press for an immediate constituent assembly then they can force the CPA to back down.

Only such an assembly, based on votes for women and men aged over 16, can democratically decide the nature of a future government, its attitude to foreign investors, state ownership and even private property itself.

But such an election itself cannot be freely organised while Bremer's CPA censors the press, controls the broadcast media and continues to lock up 13,000 Iraqis for resisting the occupation. Their existence is the prime cause of "political tensions and violence" in Iraq.

The immediate withdrawal of the 150,000-plus troops and the CPA is a precondition for any fair process of elections.

French right wing president Jacques Chirac's policy to impose a ban on the wearing of the Islamic veil (hijab) by girls in schools has split the left - both in France and internationally. As a contribution to that debate, we print here an article by *Rumy Hasan*, a socialist activist from a Muslim background, and our reply by *Christina Duval*

Why the left should support the banning of religious symbols in schools

By **Rumy Hasan**
(a member of
Birmingham
Socialist Alliance)

The decision by the French government to ban religious symbols from French state schools has generated heated discussion around the meaning of secular education and religious and racial identity, in the context of a racist society. In the sense of clarifying key principles for socialists, it is useful; moreover, the issue may also arise in other European countries in the future, including Britain.

My starting point is that secularism is a fundamental pillar of socialist politics and therefore socialist organisations must have this at the heart of their programmes and campaigns. This necessitates the demand for the complete separation of the state from religion, which implies that state education must be rigorously secular (this is not to suggest that there should be a complete absence of religion from the curriculum; on the contrary, aspects of all the world's major religions should be taught - but not dogmatic, religious teaching and rituals, and certainly no privilege accorded to Christianity - as well as critiques of religion and the irreconcilability of religious 'truths' with science).



From this fundamental principle, it follows that socialists should not only call for the removal of religious symbols in schools (including private schools) but also the abolition of religious (or faith) schools. This means that the left should support the call for the banning of religious symbols in French schools, including the hijab, cross, and skullcap - and resist the demand for more faith schools. The argument in France has for the most part focused on the hijab,

and many on the left oppose the ban on the grounds that this is being conducted for racist motives by a right wing government.

Notwithstanding that Chirac's government is indeed right wing with a long history of racism, I do not think the case has adequately been made for this assertion. On the contrary, Chirac understands only too well the appalling and potentially explosive nature of the Arab ghettos in French cities and has reached the conclusion that some-

thing has to be done to stop the rot for which he and previous governments are responsible (whether the promised funds for the ghettos ever materialise, we shall have to wait and see, though the left in France should vigorously campaign for this).

I believe this was also partly the reason that Chirac took such a hard line against the Iraq war - including the threat to use the veto at the United Nations. Had France sent troops, he realised that the French Arab and

Muslim anger may well have led to the ghettos going up in flames, and bombs exploding in French cities. So, just because a right wing government propagates ostensibly left wing policies (opposition to war, or separation of religion and state) does not mean that the left should automatically oppose it. Such seeming contradictions are part of political reality. Moreover, opinion polls suggest that a very large minority or even a small majority of French Muslims support the ban. Surely, if the motive was racist then we should expect almost 100 per cent of French Muslims to oppose the ban (in France as a whole, 69 per cent support the ban; for the left, it is about two-thirds support).

The second key objection is that the ban contravenes the right to religious (and cultural) expression. First, yes the left should support this right but my argument is that not to the point of religious and cultural oppression. Left organisations do not explicitly make clear this distinction but do implicitly recognise it for some egregious practices (such as, in Hinduism, the caste system, not least the role assigned to the "untouchables" - dalits - or widows immolating herself on husband's funeral pyre - suttee; or clitoridectomy, or death by stoning for sex outside marriage - zina - or amputation for theft under Islamic sharia laws and so on.). Also, freedom of religious expression does not imply that Christians, Jews, and Muslims can insist that their chil-

Against the ban, for secular education

By **Christina Duval**

Rumy Hasan's support for the proposed banning of headscarves in French schools - due to be voted on by the French parliament early this month - flows from both a misinterpretation of the socialist demand for separation of church and state and an inability to grasp the way in which bourgeois republicanism can - and frequently does - distort ostensibly progressive policies and turn them into their opposite.

Rumy's support for the ban revolves around three main arguments:

1. The progressive nature of the ban is being obscured by a misplaced emphasis on the seemingly racist motivation of Chirac and his government.

2. While socialists should support religious freedom, freedom of religious expression is subordinate to freedom from religious oppression and the secular education principle.

3. The ban on the headscarf in schools will be an important tool for young Muslim women in challenging their sexual oppression within Muslim communities.

The first argument aims at the wrong target. Chirac's support for the findings of the Stasi committee he set up to investigate the issue is in keeping with his regular flashes of racist populism. Chirac is not the diplomat that Hasan paints him to be. Far from it. In an attempt to gain ground during the 1998 presidential election cam-

paign, Chirac professed his "sympathy" for those who had immigrant neighbours and were forced to put up with the "noise and smell" of immigrants.

Then, as now, Chirac was not interested in appeasing the unemployed youth in the Arab ghettos, but with gaining popularity amongst the less class-conscious and racist sections of the French popular electorate - like the 17 per cent who voted for Le Pen in the 2002 presidential election. Chirac's opposition to the US over the Iraq war had little to do with a desire to appeal to the five million strong Muslim population, and all to do with jostling for power on the world stage.

In fact, the tactics of appeasement described by Rumy are more appropriately applied to Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior and pretender to the presidential throne. Sarkozy has recently clashed with Chirac by supporting positive discrimination as a way of overcoming the lack of integration of the Arab community - presumably a carrot to complement his stick of increased repression in the French suburbs. On the issue of the headscarf, Sarkozy has made clear his opposition to the law and has suggested a compromise in the form of a bandana - flatly rejected by Chirac.

In the context of an international backlash against Islam and the long entrenched racism of the French state, the racism inherent in Chirac's populist rhetoric - his appeals to the defence of the "indivisible" republic against the "communitarianist threat" posed by Islam - the racist nature of this proposal should be clear to all.

Indeed, the wearing of the headscarf may also be, for many young women, a symbol of anti-racist pride, playing a similar role that pride plays in the fight for liberation among afro-caribbeans, lesbians and gay men. Certainly, socialists have something to say to these young women about Islam and women's oppression, but we should not denounce them for taking their first step opposing racism and imperialism's war on terror, let alone support their repression.

The quoted 48 per cent of Muslims in France who are in favour of the ban - even if we take opinion polls as accurate reflections of real feelings - has to be put in the context of this offensive, where standing up to this ban leads to Muslims being branded anti-Republic, anti-French and part of the "Islamic threat". In other words, there's no reason to believe that Muslims supporting the ban are less reactionary than those wanting to visibly show their solidarity with the victims of imperialism's wars.

But does this actually matter? Some have argued that, if the end result - the banning of the veil - is progressive, then socialists should support it regardless. This leads to the other, more widely propagated arguments laid out by Rumy.

Rumy correctly emphasises the centrality of secularism for socialists. However, he interprets the secular call to remove the influence of religion from education in a way which is at odds with the socialist support for freedom of religious expression. Secular education involves the removal of religious symbols from school buildings and the removal of religious indoctrination from

the school curriculum. The school, as an institution, must not propagate any religion whatsoever. This does not mean that as individuals, school students should not be allowed to express their religious faith. To do so is to deny their right to religious expression.

Rumy supports the right to religious freedom, but with two caveats: that this freedom does not entail oppression; and that it does not breach the principle of secular education. In justifying the former, he makes the error of rolling together the headscarf issue with religious practices that socialists unequivocally call for the banning of: such as death by stoning for sex outside marriage or clitoridectomy.

Such practices are clearly examples of savage and cruel religious oppression and are imposed on the women involved. Socialists think donning the headscarf is wrong, since it is a symbol of Islam's oppression of women, but adopting the symbols and practices of oppression (even if due to family and cultural pressure) is clearly not in the same category as being physically damaged or attacked in the name of religion. Indeed, all religious practices, insofar as they prostrate humanity in front of a higher, external authority, rendering people the object, not the subject of history, are oppressive. Rumy's caveats, if applied as sweepingly as he applies them, rule out any religious expression.

If Rumy really thinks wearing the veil is no different from these other savagely oppressive practices then he should support a blanket state ban on the veil and not just

confine it to the school.

A further argument to justify banning the headscarf at school revolves around youth oppression. To allow girls and young women to attend school with their head covered is tantamount to denying their right to be treated as citizens equal to non-Muslim women who are not obliged to be veiled.

But what about young women who are also forced to adopt other religious practices. They may not be veiled, but they still have their head pumped with reactionary rubbish about the role of women and are denied the right to sexual freedom that other young women are able to enjoy. These young women are denied the sexual equality enjoyed by more liberated and religion-free women. Rumy's argument assumes that equality can be achieved by the superficial means of removing religious symbols. But class society and inequality is more complex.

Rumy is correct to stress the role that secular education plays in countering the influence of reactionary ideas learnt in the family and close community. But this is not limited to religious communities. Homophobia and sexual oppression are also present in non-religious families. Secular education can play an important role in challenging these ideas. It encourages critical thinking which empowers youth to challenge the previously unquestioned world view imposed by parents. If education is identified with religion, this role will be undermined and the oppressive side of education under capitalism will be reinforced.

children are taught Creationism, or that the Earth is at the centre of the universe, and so on. It therefore follows that the left should oppose religious oppression and obscurantism.

Now in regard to the Islamic veil (full or partial), make no mistake: this is clearly the oppression of women. The stricture for veiling of women is given in the Koran in the following key verse (though there are others) in Sura XXIV:31: "And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or what their right hands' own, or such men as attend them, not having any sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts..."

Because there is ambiguity in this, some Muslims do not accept that this implies veiling in the manner of the hijab or burqa, and so many devout Muslim women do not veil themselves. But for socialists and progressives, the stricture, whether ambiguous or not, is intolerable and oppressive and, therefore, they should not take a neutral stance on the practice. On the contrary, they should argue against it.

It is true that many Muslim women willingly wear the veil, but even if this is an expression, or assertion of cultural, religious, and racial identity and self-pride, for example, in response to a hostile, racist environment (rigorous research needs to be done as to why exactly Muslim women in the West do this), it is nonetheless tantamount to their internalising their oppression. As such, it is an oppressive response to their oppression.

However, even whilst arguing against it, the left should support the right of women to veil themselves. But this right should not be extended to schoolgirls. First, as a religious practice, it is clearly in breach of the principle of secular education. Second, it is also a fundamental denial of the rights of a child (some argue that it is, in fact, a form

of child abuse). The reality is that there will be cajoling and coercion by parents for girls as young as five to wear the hijab at an age where they will have little clue about their parents' religion (and that is why girls from non-Muslim families, who are free from this, do not wear it). Therefore, an important democratic right – equality with non-Muslim girls – is denied them.

The importance of secular education becomes clear: the school becomes a religious-free space for children so that they are not artificially divided by the accident of birth of their parents' religions. They thus leave behind religious accoutrements at home, and are able to learn in a free, equal, less divisive, and more tolerant environment. A rigorous pursuit of this policy might then enable children, as they mature, to take up a critical view of customs foisted on them, as well as being more understanding and tolerant of differences between various peoples. This would go an enormous way towards immunising bigoted views and the belief that one's (or rather one's parents') religion is superior to all others. Even in Britain, divisions on religious grounds (especially among Asians) have become appalling in many cities, a phenomenon which the left has largely ignored.

It is important to stress that veiling not only acts as a barrier to normal relations between veiled Muslim and non-Muslim girls, it is invariably the precursor to other forms of oppression: the drive to gender segregation, restrictions of veiled girls to partake in physical education, especially swimming, or indulge in dancing etc. Moreover, some parents might go further and push their daughters to completely veil themselves, that is, to wear the burqa. If this were unacceptable to opponents of the ban, then why should the hijab be acceptable? For the reasons underpinning both are the same.

The third major argument against the ban is that there will be an Islamic backlash as this will drive Muslims into the arms of the religious right. Again, no evidence is ever provided for this assertion. The reality is that within the Muslim ghettos, their grip is already powerful – and it is precisely because of the threat to their influence that they have protested so vehemently over the issue. They know that a secular educa-

tion is a major threat to their power and control, especially control over ideas. Their indoctrination starts very early – about three years of age – as they systematically try and break children from critical thinking.

A leading proponent of the ban, Samira Bellil, of Algerian origin (who was raped twice as a teenager in the Paris suburbs by Muslim boys), provides a graphic example of some of the reality in French ghettos. She argues that girls are being pressurised to wear the hijab, as much to protect themselves from the casual violence of the ghetto, as by their families or religious leaders. In other words, there is the belief that she wouldn't have been attacked if she had been wearing the hijab instead of flaunting herself "bare-headed".

She is campaigning against this idea of women as objects, told what to do, and how to dress by men in Muslim communities. She clearly understands the challenge to reactionary male attitudes within Muslim communities that the ban should bring. That is why French North African women's groups support the ban – they are right to do so, and the left should be on their side rather than with the religious reactionaries who oppose the ban.

Finally, my view is that certainly for much of the left in Britain, there is a strong element of white, liberal, post-colonial guilt that prevents them from tackling oppression within oppressed communities. Fearful of being accused of being soft on racism, they invariably ignore, tolerate, or even accede to the latter and, by doing so, line up with reactionaries. I vehemently argue that the left must fight against both types of oppression simultaneously; that is, there should be no hierarchy of oppression. That means that in Britain, as in France, we need to simultaneously struggle against racism and imperialism but also against an array of oppressive religious and cultural practices that are being conducted in ethnic minority communities. A starting point for this, and certainly for the sake of children, is the demand for secular education.

Note: Some of the ideas here are taken from my article, 'Critical remarks on cultural aspects of Asian ghettos in modern Britain', in *Capital and Class*, vol. 81, Autumn 2003, pp. 103-134.



Youth oppression is not only situated within the family. Under capitalism, education is not the neutral free space that Romy and the defenders of the French Fifth Republic would have us believe. The classroom does not only enlighten, it also instils

discipline and allegiance to the bourgeois state. Struggles over the right to choose what to wear are not confined to confrontation with the family – the classroom has also been an important arena for this struggle. To deny the right of Muslim girls

to wear the headscarf if they so choose, in the name of secularism, is to side with the oppressive side of French bourgeois republicanism.

Will banning the headscarf enable those young women who don't want to wear it break free from their oppression? No, since outside of school they will still be obliged to don the headscarf. Even worse, some may be taken out of school – as has already happened in France – where they will be even more isolated from progressive ideas. Unsurprisingly, calls for separate schools have increased within the Muslim community since the publication of the Stasi report.

Romy is wrong to trivialise the effect a ban would have on reinforcing the hold of Islam amongst some sections of the Muslim community. Young Muslim women have already begun to don the headscarf as a sign of defiance against this attack on their religion and culture. The fight to empower young Muslim women to challenge their oppression becomes obscured in such a context.

Liberation cannot be imposed by state bans. History has shown that oppressing religion only serves to reinforce it. Socialists are in favour of the self-emancipation of the oppressed. Young women forced to wear the veil must be supported in their struggle for liberation by concrete means within schools and within communities, by setting up support networks.

Opposing the ban does not mean that socialists are indifferent to young women who choose to wear the headscarf. We must convince them to break free from this symbol of oppression, as part of a wider struggle to challenge the sexual oppression inherent in organised religion. But this can only be achieved through debate and discussion on the nature of religion within and outside the classroom, not by state repression.

Brazil: Expulsions from PT start moves for new party

By Stuart King

In the middle of December the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) Directorate voted by 55 to 27 to expel four members of the PT parliamentary group for daring to vote against the PT government's attacks on state employees' pensions.

The so-called "pension reforms" were part of a series of agreements with the IMF and Washington aimed at cutting state expenditure and aiding various privatisation measures. Around the same time as the expulsions, the IMF approved its new package of loans for Brazil and George Bush phoned President Lula to congratulate him on the government's performance. Little wonder then that leading PTers have referred to the emergence of a "tropical Blairism" in the party and that the PT has gone into a deep period of soul searching.

In this context it was absolutely necessary for the party's leadership to take a hard line against the dissidents. They were determined to show that there had to be discipline within the party. They needed it to carry out a series of anti-working class measures that were causing growing discontent among the workers and landless poor who had placed their hopes for radical change in the new PT government (see *Workers Power* 278).

One of the best known of the expelled members is Senator Heloisa Helena of the Socialist Democracy (DS) tendency (a group in the PT linked to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International - USEC). Two other expelled deputies are members of organised left groups: Luciano Genro is a member of the Movement of the Socialist Left (MES), and Joao Batista 'Baba' a member of the CTS - Socialist Workers Tendency.

The reformist policies of the Lula government and its determination to follow the conservative policies of the IMF have led to a growing chorus of criticism from prominent members of the PT. The expulsions of left critics have added to the sense of crisis in the party and numerous resignations have followed. "This is not the first year of the Workers' Party government, it's the ninth year of the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government," said Francisco de Oliveira, a founder of the party, referring to the right wing president who preceded Lula. Even the rightist Democratic Labour Party, sensing the need to act left, has departed from the government accusing the Workers' Party leaders of abandoning their principles and selling out to international capitalism. Lula increasingly relies on the large right-wing parties in Congress to push his measures through.

The question is how to relate to this crisis. Clearly the millions of workers and peasants who voted for the PT government, and the tens of thousands of PT militants who spent 20 years building the party, will not easily give up on a struggle to reclaim the party – nor should they. At the same time the vangard, sections of workers under attack and the landless labourers being offered little, are deeply disillusioned. Meanwhile the sections of the left willing to defend the interest of the workers not the capitalists



Senator Heloisa Helena

find themselves expelled from the PT.

The DS Tendency linked to the USEC has one answer. Of its six elected parliamentarians, only Senator Heloisa voted against the attack on pension rights – the rest voted for, or abstained, citing PT party discipline as an excuse for saving their skins. Miguel Rossetto, a DS member, remains as a minister in the bourgeois government, responsible for an Agrarian Reform programme that is settling fewer landless peasants than its right wing predecessor. Other members of DS staff many of the other ministries. At a recent DS conference a resolution calling for the withdrawal of DS members from the Ministry of Public Finances, the most right wing ministry, received only 10 per cent of the votes. No one, of course, called for Rossetto to protest the right wing policies by resigning. The DS tendency, far from acting like Communist revolutionaries, act like the left tail of a rightist social democratic government, trying to moderate an increasingly rightist government from the inside, in fact providing it with left cover.

The expelled deputies and Senator Heloisa, now sitting as independent along with other left figures, have put out a call for a "Left Democratic Socialist Movement for a new party". They say,

"We do not accept that a government, whose majority is made up of the Workers' Party, can present as great conquests those things that only serve the interests of the market speculators...We consider, therefore, that Lula's government is determined to undertake the task which was done in the past by institutional social democracy – to do for big capital what the traditional right wing was not able to achieve...We have the right, if not the obligation, to build a party political alternative, to occupy the ground which they have abandoned. An alternative party of struggle, against the neoliberal model and the government which is applying it, in defence of the demands and banners of the working class."

If they can link this struggle to a fight inside the PT to overturn the expulsions through a special conference and to reverse the right-wing policies of the Lula leadership – they could offer a real alternative to the hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants looking for a movement and party offering real, revolutionary change in Brazil.

As the BNP and NF start to flex their muscles, it's time to...

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WAKE UP TO THE FASCIST THREAT!

The fascists of the British National Party have flung down the gauntlet. After last May's successes in the local council elections in Burnley and elsewhere, Nick Griffin, the BNP's leader, claimed that, in this June's elections for the European Parliament, the organisation could capture four or five seats. Tony Lecomber, the BNP national organiser and convicted bomber, said that they could gain up to 60 councillors. In total, they will contest a record 600 council seats, with a full slate for the Euro elections, and candidates for the London mayoral and GLA elections as well.

The BNP threat has grown dramatically over the last two years, especially in the north of England. The fascists currently hold 17 council seats across England – a dozen of them in Lancashire and Yorkshire. While ultimately failing to gain a single seat in the city of Sunderland, the BNP recorded votes exceeding 25 per cent in three of its wards.

In 2000 the BNP's active membership in Bradford was fewer than 30; it now totals more than 150. Up to 40 BNPs have confronted recent anti-fascist leafleting sessions in west Yorkshire. The attempt in mid-January by BNP members in Manchester to disrupt a large anti-fascist meeting marked another sign of their growing confidence.

There has been a recent resurgence of both BNP and National Front activity in Greater London, with fascists mobilising at least four times in the space of a month. In addition to leafleting a council estate in the Pimlico district of Westminster, the BNP turned up in some force on 30 January for a counter-protest in opposition to a demonstration outside the headquarters of the Daily Mail called against its racist and xenophobic (and lying) coverage of asylum seekers. The NF had even tried to march through an overwhelmingly Asian area of Newham in East London on the eve of the Muslim holiday of Eid.

The fascists are also staging more and more public meetings: one in Yorkshire recently attracted 170 people. They are also organising more branches, with the BNP establishing its first Sheffield branch in a decade.

The long-term goal of the Griffin leadership remains to forge a mass racist base from its election work and then recruit into the fascist wing of the party.

This quest for electoral respectability is a source of



potentially explosive tensions within the BNP's own ranks. The hard core of fascist thugs and racial purists in the Nazi tradition are just waiting to be let off the leash to start their "real work" of fighting for control of the streets.

Some can't wait, however, and a fair few of the organisation's most vicious elements have left to join the White Nationalist Party, which has support in and around Leeds and Doncaster. It also recently tried to organise a march in Bradford in a failed attempt to replicate the success of the NF tactic in 2001, which sparked that summer's militant but brutally repressed fight-back by local Asian youth.

The WNP has indicated it will actually stand against the BNP. While it is unlikely to siphon off more than a small proportion of BNP votes, there is the possibility that it will become sufficiently large and organised to pose a threat to Black and Asian communities, and the left as a whole in some areas. This could mark the return of overt fascist violence on a scale rarely seen in Britain

since the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The BNP's reasonably successful turn to electioneering has led many on the left to stop talking about "no platform": driving the fascists off the streets and giving them no chance to mobilise, hold meetings, street sales, etc. As important as it is to stop the BNP at the ballot box it is not sufficient.

Likewise, it is vital to expose the leading lights of the BNP and NF as the closet Nazis they are. Both Griffin and particularly Lecomber have long criminal records. But references to fighting fascism in the Second World War are unlikely to dissuade the young, the unemployed – or pensioners, for that matter – from voting BNP when they are thoroughly disillusioned with New Labour and full of media-fuelled resentment against refugees and immigrants generally.

The months between now and the 10 June elections will demand that socialists turn towards building militant and effective opposition to the fascists, both at the

level of ideas and physically. A number of cities have seen or will soon see the launch of the "Unite Against Fascism" campaign, which has attracted the support of a number of national union leaders and London mayor Ken Livingstone, along with figures from ruling class parties.

In as much as this marks a recognition of the dangers posed by a resurgent fascism and steps towards a working class united front against it, socialists should welcome this development.

But the support of "respectable" politicians, union general secretaries and clerics of whatever faith is not more important than challenging the vicious racism contained in New Labour's asylum and immigration policies. Likewise, it should not mean a reliance on state bans to block fascist marches and rallies, or on the police to protect labour movement and anti-racist events.

Organised self-defence against fascist terror gangs is imperative. And if "respectable anti-fascists" demand we choose between their continuing support and effective tactics – then we must choose the latter.

For this reason, trade union and anti-racist activists should fight to ensure that there is democracy and accountability within any new anti-fascist movement; that the movement must be capable both of defending our meetings and demonstrations, and of leaving the likes of the BNP, NF and WNP with no space for theirs; that it does not flinch from attacking Labour's racist asylum policies and racist rhetoric – even under the accusation of splitting the vote and letting the fascists in.

Sorry. But the reason that the BNP has grown so much since 1997 is because of Labour's betrayals – not because of those fighting Labour.

Ultimately, keeping the fascists at bay will mean building a working class socialist alternative with a programme that provides the concrete answers Labour will not and cannot provide to the problems of unemployment, low pay, rotten housing and the resulting despair that creates the base for fascism's growth.

In short, the answer to the would-be fascist parties is a new workers' party, with deep roots in the workplaces and council estates, and armed with a revolutionary anti-capitalist programme.

* Turn to "Letters" on page 5 for more on campaigns against fascism.

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