

Socialist OUTLOOK

Unite to fight Tory workfare rip-off

Keith Sinclair (Secretary, Hull Trades Council)

THE TORIES have decided to extend their Workfare scheme -- "Project Work" -- which has been piloted in Hull and Kent.

This reactionary scheme forces the long-term unemployed to work for a mere £10 per week plus their benefits. Refusal to do so will mean that all benefit is stopped.

Activists in other areas can learn from the experience of the campaign against the pilot schemes in North Humberside. Opposition to the scheme has to be mobilised quickly and needs to involve a range of tactics.

In Hull we combined high profile public campaigning, including a demonstration involving hundreds, with persuading organisations not to be involved.

Local councils will be approached early on to be involved in placements. It is vital they oppose the scheme, so winning over Labour groups will be key. Council opposition will obviously reduce the number of placements. It is also important because it raises doubts with others who might get involved, and builds up an image of "Project Work" as being unfair.

Union opposition has to be central not only from the civil service unions (CPSA and PTC) but also unions that represent workers where "Project Work" schemes may take place (eg NUT and UNISON in schools).

Most councils will formally consult unions about any proposed involvement in "Project Work". All council unions need to be lobbied to ensure that they oppose these schemes -- don't forget the small unions.

The role of the unemployed is important both in terms of publicity and information. "Project Work" attracts a lot of local and national media attention. Be bold with press releases and activities. Lobbies, pickets and stunts all have a role to play.

Of course the scheme is a fraud: the Tories don't give a damn about the unemployed. As sure as night follows day, stories will be planted in the media about so-called "benefit cheats". Be ready with instant rebuttals from advice bureaux quoting real live examples.

Building opposition to "Project Work" also means taking up arguments about the national minimum wage and the fight for full employment.

Fighting for the rights of unemployed people and those in work is the same battle -- campaigning on one strengthens the other.

Tories are real benefit cheats!

George Thompson

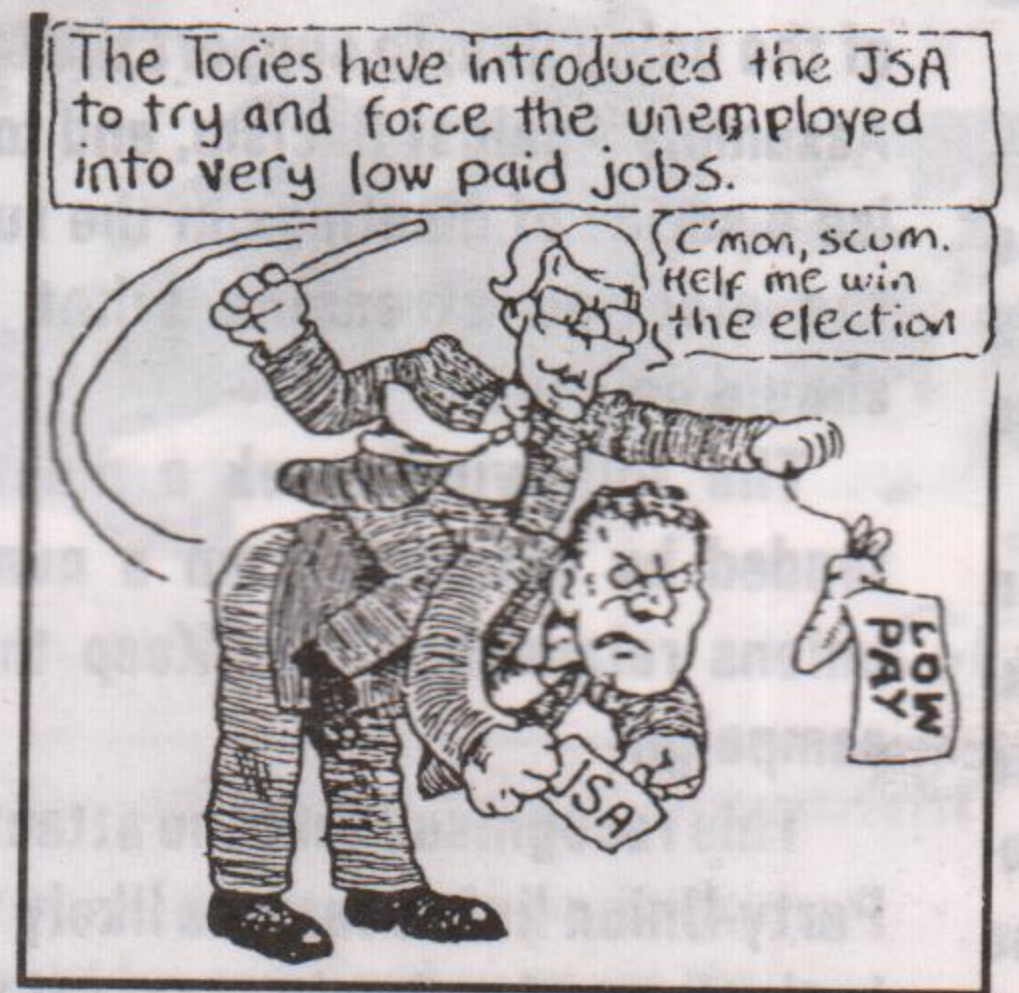
THE BRUTAL new Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) is the latest Tory government plan to steal money from hundreds of thousands of claimants and drive down the wages of all workers.

They risk facing a rising tide of rebellion prior to a General Election as the unemployed and employed say enough is enough.

More and more people are ringing the hotlines of their local JSA campaigns to join the struggle against the real benefit cheats, the Tories.

Despite the Labour Party's failure to oppose the JSA and the TUC's near invisible campaign against it, there are the beginnings of serious opposition to the new law. Anti-JSA groups exist now in most cities and several bodies are trying to coordinate national opposition.

Although the civil service union in the Benefits Agency (the CPSA, under the leadership of Militant Labour) has shamefully wound down the campaign for better health and safety under the JSA without even consulting the



Cartoon frame from the excellent London Against JSA leaflet

membership, there is some grassroots discontent over this move.

An important test for the new 'Left Unity' in the CPSA is whether it can relaunch a genuine fightback against the Act at the January JSA conference of Benefit Agency and Employment Service workers.

Abandoning the fight will only weaken future CPSA struggles to stop privatisation and further job losses.

Anti-JSA groups must build links with union members and encourage them to strike not only on the health and safety issue but



on the wider impact of JSA.

Distancing ourselves from the "Three Strikes and you're out" nonsense, whereby claimants are encouraged to harass workers who zealously implement the new law, is essential to this process.

Such a tactic only damages relations between campaigning groups and workers in the offices.

To develop support in non Civil Service Unions anti-JSA groups must explain that this is an attack on the whole of the working class.

This argument is given new strength by the latest scandal-- JSA claimants have now been sent from England to scab on the strike in Northern Ireland hospitals against support services contractors Compass, under the threat of having their benefits withdrawn completely if they refuse to do so.

We must link the demands for full employment and a minimum wage to the demand to scrap the JSA.

We should be arguing that all unions need to start organising the unemployed and campaigning now against the Tory imposition and extension of Workfare

('Project Work').

This means we must also put pressure on Labour's front bench to ditch their plans for similar policies.

The British leg of the Euro-March has made the demand for the scrapping the Job Seekers' Allowance one of its main slogans.

As the march will take place in the aftermath of the General Election, it will probably give us a good opportunity to demand that the Labour Government immediately repeal this vicious Tory legislation.

Anti-JSA groups are encouraged to follow the lead of London Against the JSA (LAJSA) and support the Euro-march.

■ LAJSA is organising a National Conference at Camden Irish Centre on December 7. For further details contact LAJSA PO Box 3140, London E17.

■ The Welfare State Network is also holding two anti-JSA events, and a picket outside the Department of Employment and Education at 12.00 on November 25. Details: WSN 0171 639 5068

Union lefts prepare to take on Blair

Fred Le Plat, Campaign for a
Fighting and Democratic
UNISON

With the general election only months away and the likely outcome a Blair led Labour Government, the left in the unions desperately needs to discuss common problems and begin to develop a coherent militant response across the trade union movement.

The most immediate aspirations of union members, as embodied by their conference policies, can only be met if a majority Labour government is elected and if such a government is then forced carry out these policies.

For Unison members, for example, this would be an ending to all forms of privatisation, a minimum wage at £4.26p, adequate funding for the welfare state and the repeal of anti-union laws and the Asylum and Immigration law. Campaigning for these policies during and after the election would eventually have to be backed by industrial action.

An unprecedented co-ordination between 12 trade union left organisation is being built up to meet this challenge. These left caucuses come from a variety of industries and services as well as different political traditions. A conference to consolidate this co-ordination will take place on the February 1 1997.

This initiative should be supported by every socialist who wants to see our unions being built as campaigning organisations. At the moment, too many decisions of our national leaderships are the subject of scrutiny by lawyers and campaigning too often reduced to promoting credit cards.

For far too long each union left has been, through necessity, concerned with the affairs of their own respective union, yet we face common problems across the unions. The lack of united response by the left in the unions has made it easier for the "new realist" leadership of the TUC to drag the whole movement to the right.

Onslaught

Over the last 17 years, unemployment, privatisation, cuts in services and the anti-union laws have battered the unions. Activists at rank and file level have had to face the full onslaught, while the "new realist" leaders failed to organise any concerted fightback and increasingly adapted to this situation.

Organising a union left wing across the whole of the movement is not a new idea. But in the recent past such organisations have been more the property of a particular political organisation rather than a genuine attempt to bring together militants with different traditions. This may be one reason that such efforts have rapidly floundered in the past.

But now twelve genuine union lefts such as the Socialist Teachers Alliance, the Print & Media Broad Left, the Communications Workers Broad Left, and the Equity Left Alliance have been meeting together and have decided to organise this conference. This is a major step forward.

The task of the conference is to start planning a strategy for the unions to fightback against the old free-market Tories and the New Labour freemarketeers and which would have at its heart the interests of workers and union members.

Higher Education workers prepare for action

United strikes close colleges



With Labour silent, students themselves must fight Tory fees and loans

March against Student Debt

THE TORIES are threatening to end student grants -- and Tony Blair and his friends in the leadership of the National Union of Students agree with them. Colleges are threatened with closure, classes are full to breaking point, staff are threatened with redundancy and discretionary awards under attack.

Over the last 17 years the education system has suffered blow after blow -- and now universities rather than fight

for the extra funding needed -- threaten to introduce tuition fees.

With the NUS leadership refusing to organise opposition and the Labour leadership going along with most of the Tory plans, the Campaign for Free Education has called a major national demonstration on Wednesday November 20th at 12 noon from ULU, Malet St.

Education is a Right!

Labour Left steps up the fightback

Pete Firmin

Despite Blair's "Albanian" victory in the sham referendum process on Labour's manifesto, those opposing his policies have stepped up their organisation.

Blair may be twisting in the wind on the single currency, and "a senior backbencher" may write in *Tribune* (under the pseudonym "Cassandra") of unlikely scenarios of Labour MPs ousting Blair as leader a few months after his election victory, but the real job is to build up an open political opposition around key issues.

On Saturday, November 9 150 activists attended the conference called by the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups. As well as significant workshops on campaigning against the Immigration and Asylum Bill, Education, the minimum wage and trade union rights, the priorities understood by most people were underlined by the lively discussions on Party democracy, the Party-Union link and European Monetary Union.

Policy and campaigning resolutions passed emphasised this with decisions to oppose the Maastricht convergence criteria and support the Euromarch for jobs, to step up campaigning in defence

of the union link, to support the National Assembly Against Racism, and to organise a series of meetings in the run up to the election stressing what Labour should deliver.

The following week a meeting attended by activists from a number of unions relaunched the "Keep the Link" campaign.

This recognised that the attack on the Party-Union link is far less likely to come in the form of a simple proposal to sever the link than as a downgrading of conference to a rally and the abolition of local policy-making General Committees, which while leaving the unions attached to the Party would remove any say in policy, rendering the link meaningless.

A model resolution was prepared for union conferences and CLPs, a broadsheet discussed, coordinators agreed in every union, and a steering committee elected.

The 'Keep the Link' petition has already been signed by several union general secretaries, many activists and half the European Parliamentary Labour Party, the task now is to turn this into real support throughout the movement and commit unions at their conferences next year to fighting Blair on the issue.

Susan Moore

Tuesday November 19 sees unprecedented action in the higher education sector with members of all eight unions, covering teaching and non-teaching staff, voting overwhelmingly to strike on that day.

Students in a number of colleges have also agreed to support this historic action. The day's strike will be followed by a campaign of more limited industrial action, the form of which will be decided locally.

The action has been triggered by the derisory pay offer made by the employers in the negotiations over a rise which was due in April 1996. With average wages for manual workers in the sector standing at £7504 a year, the proposed rise of 2.4 per cent is worth only a meagre 9p an hour.

For clerical and administrative staff on a average wage of £ 12,655 the offer of 1.5 per cent is worth the princely sum of 10p an hour.

While lecturers are not generally considered to be low paid the reality is that their pay has fallen drastically

over recent years.

With a current scale of between £15,000 and £26,400 they no often earn less or little more than secondary school teachers, with the result that their vote for action was one of the most decisive.

Workers and students in higher education, like workers and users in other parts of the public sector have been bearing the brunt of the government cut-backs.

The pitiful offers on pay have combined with trade unionists' frustration with other attacks on jobs and conditions. Workers have been building up stronger joint union organisation at a workplace level in response to these attacks, which has made possible the co-ordinated action now agreed.

Many activists are aware that if this campaign is not successful we could well see moves to end national pay bargaining in the sector. The experience of the NHS, where this has already happened, and where so far less than one quarter of Trusts have settled on the 1996 pay round are a timely reminder of why such a move would be a disaster for all.

Post leaders give Blair an early Christmas present

Brian Gardner

A FUDGE between Royal Mail and the CWU postal workers' union has lifted the threat of industrial action taking place before Christmas.

The long running dispute over teamworking and deliveries has been hived off to two joint working parties. Chaired by the conciliation service ACAS and consisting of equal numbers of union and management representatives, these hope to reach agreement by April next year, effectively delaying any further action until after the next general election.

It is, unfortunately, a good result for Tony Blair who, along with the union's general secretary, Alan Johnson, tried everything he could to

prevent the dispute escalating and embarrassing Labour in the run-up to the poll.

There will now be a ballot on accepting a without-strings 3 per cent pay rise and ending the dispute. Although this is likely to be won, a majority of postal workers remain angry and defiant, and will need some convincing that in the longer term the new committees can reach an agreement.

The task for union activists on the ground is to continue to campaign against the threatened changes and build opposition.

The fight is only postponed temporarily and Mr Blair's embarrassment may eventually arise when he is in office.

Welfare State Network

Foundations for freedom

A womens' conference putting
the case for defence and
rebuilding of the welfare state
SATURDAY NOVEMBER 30

University of London Union, Malet Street London:
Goodge Street tube. Creche and food available.
Registration £5/£2 to: WSN Womens' Conference,
183 Queens Crescent., London NW5 4DS.
Tel 0171 639 5068

No reliance on Brussels Unions must fight for a 35 hour week

IT IS NO surprise that John Major is pledged to fight the decision of the European Court on the working time directive. While his opposition is fuelled by the need to placate the Euro-sceptic wing of the party, this is by no means the only issue at stake.

In the last 17 years the Tories have done everything in their power to drive down workers' living standards and conditions. The success of that assault is partly shown by the fact that in 1994 22 per cent of full time workers in Britain worked more than a 48 hour week – a higher proportion than in any other state within the European Union.

The fact that the Tories oppose the directive does not mean that trade unionists should be bowing in gratitude to the European Court. The directive would anyway have only a marginal impact on working practices because it is full of exceptions. Less than a million of the four million working over 48 hours in Britain today will be affected.

Discretion

Those exceptions include workers in those industries where 'long hours are inherent' – such as those who work in transport, at sea and doctors in training – and give governments the discretion to exclude other groups.

Those who work on a seasonal basis and those who are asked to work more than 48 hours only on an occasional basis are also excluded.

Crucially, those who work overtime on a "voluntary" basis are also excluded. But workers are driven to work overtime for a number of reasons. For many, their hours of work are dictated by the very low hourly rate they receive, making it difficult if not impossible to make ends meet without the addition of extra hours at overtime pay.

For others who are not paid any enhancement for working long hours, the drive comes from their fear that if they do not agree to their managers' requests – and even seem enthusiastic to do so – they could well end up without a job at all.

None of these workers will see their lives enhanced as a result of the European Union directive. On the contrary it is only through the strengthening of trade union organisation and the ability of workers

to take industrial action that decent standards of living can be achieved and the tyranny of "new management techniques" rolled back.

This reality will not stop those in the trade unions and in Blair's Labour Party who want to cuddle up to Brussels, trumpeting the directive as yet another reason why the labour movement should be enthusiastic in its support for European integration.

Such arguments not only ignore the inherent weaknesses in the directive itself, but they fail to ask why it is proposed in the first place.

Is it really believable that unlike in Britain the governments and bosses in the rest of the European union are on the side of the workers?

Class struggle

Such a notion would of course be useful for those who want to convince us all that the class struggle is outdated and no longer necessary, but it doesn't give any answers to all those who have suffered attack after attack under the Tories.

The reality is that is that the purpose of the directive and other measures like it are to create a 'level playing field' across the European Union – not between bosses and workers, but between different bosses – so that they can compete on more equal terms than is currently the case, given the differences in law and working practices between different countries.

Such differences are essentially the result of battles between the classes – representing the concessions that workers' organisations have been able to wring from the employers.

Some employers do recognise that their own self-interests (i.e. their profits) are not always best served by working the workforce into the ground.

Many surveys show that the longer

people work the less productive – and therefore profitable – each extra hour is. And with the recent court case won by a social worker against their employer on the basis of stress there are some, especially in the public and voluntary sector who are worried that they too could fall foul of such actions.

These advocates of 'modern' capitalism who oppose Major's attempts to return us to the conditions of the last century, are not questioning, but reinforcing the need for profitable exploitation: they simply have a different view of what is in their interests.

Capitalists with even a modest degree of historical awareness may recall that despite the frenzied warnings of nineteenth century mill-owners and factory bosses, the introduction of legislation to limit the working day and end child labour did not bring the predicted collapse of industry.

On the surface, capitalism may appear to have changed, but the essentials remain the same. In the late 20th century, as in the early 19th, socialists and trade unionists should not be under any illusions. Rather than placing any reliance on the institutions of the European Union or in the employers whether here in Britain or across the EU as a whole, we need to rely on our own strength and organisations.

We are in favour of equalisation as long as this means levelling up conditions between workers – across Europe as a springboard to fighting for this across the world.

Such campaigns should be on the basis of the best conditions already achieved. Fighting for the 35 hour week, for the abolition of schemes like the Job Seekers Allowance and building the Euro March need to be our first rallying calls in such a fight.



Far from killing off jobs, a shorter working week offers a way to share out the work available among larger numbers of workers.

Gordon Brown's new line: "Definitely maybe not" Labour hedges bets on Euro

AT FIRST sight, Labour's new promise to hold a referendum before any decision to join the single European currency should be welcomed as a significant step forward.

Of course many will have reservations about the way this latest policy shift – like most of New Labour's political platform – has been simply proclaimed by one of Blair's inner sanctum (Gordon Brown) with no prior discussion or agreement in the official organisations of the Labour Party.

So what appears to be a concession to grant greater democracy emerges in a completely undemocratic fashion.

But why has Blair's team pronounced this shift of policy, and what are its implications?

There is no doubt that it is an important shift. While Labour has not explicitly opposed a referendum, this is the first categorical promise that one would be held, to allow voters a say on whether or not to proceed.

With the Tories in the electoral doldrums and plagued by an increasingly virulent species of chauvinist 'sceptics', Labour has for several years been seen by the European bourgeoisie as the party most likely to deliver a single currency and further British integration into the EU.

Blair has been feted by Germany's Chancellor Kohl and by others for precisely this reason.

But as the Tory sceptics have gained ground, and the potentially disastrous



German workers fight Maastricht

economic and social policies that would be required to meet the Maastricht convergence criteria have become more obvious, Major has perceptibly shifted ground, taking his distance from the EU and the single currency.

Creating and cranking up a headline-grabbing row with Brussels over the 48-hour week issue has been a convenient peg on which Major has chosen to hang Tory claims that the minimal rights and protection of working conditions offered by the EU social chapter would "destroy jobs".

From this the Tories had already begun to sketch out a campaign to brand Labour as the poodle of the dreaded Brussels bureaucrats.

Labour's private polls show that this would be an electoral weakness – and that is why, within days of the Tory switch, Labour, too seems to have climbed aboard the Euro-sceptic

bandwagon.

Many activists will assume that it is impossible for Blair to win a referendum vote in favour of a single currency when the price to be paid includes massive cuts of upwards of £18 billion in public spending, with ruinous consequences for the welfare state.

But we should question whether Blair himself sees a referendum as unwinnable, and whether this pledge, rather than simply offering Labour a decent escape route from a single currency, may not be a more sophisticated way of postponing any decisions until after the next election.

Labour's shadow Treasury spokesman Alistair Darling, questioned by Radio 5 on the referendum pledge, insisted that no decision has yet been taken for or against a single currency. In other words Labour has still not ruled out a possible decision to join.

But in order to keep the option open, the incoming Labour government would have to take action to comply with the Maastricht criteria: it would have to begin the spending cuts needed to reduce the spending deficit to the permitted limit of 3% of Gross Domestic Product.

It would have to hand control of domestic monetary policy to a privatised Bank of England – and carry out all the unpopular austerity policies which have already triggered angry resistance in Germany, France, Belgium, Italy and Spain.

Could Tony Blair, carried away by

the scale of the 95% yes vote in his party plebiscite on the "Road to the Manifesto", really believe he could win a referendum, despite the strident opposition of much of the Tory press and mass media?

We don't know the answer to this puzzle, and we may have to wait months to find out.

But what is clear is that while we support the call for a democratic vote on any decision to join a single currency, it is not enough take an agnostic stance on European Monetary Union.

The Maastricht process is already massacring jobs and vital public services across Europe.

The full implementation of the Treaty would place an unelected quango of eight bankers in charge of the EU economy, a quango which would decide the future of the jobs and living standards of the European working class on the basis of lust for profits of a small minority of capitalists.

Labour should say now that there is nothing to be gained for workers from a single currency, and that a Labour government will reject the Maastricht criteria.

Instead Labour and the TUC should link up with the trade unions and mass movements throughout Europe, which are fighting back against austerity.

Our fight is to establish a New Europe of working people, not a Europe for bosses, bankers and bureaucrats.

Socialist Teachers Alliance
CONFERENCE
After the Tories: Beyond New Labour Rethinking Education Reform
SATURDAY NOV 30
10.30 am - 5 pm
South Camden Community School
Charrington Street
London NW1
Contributors include: Clyde Chitty (Co-author *Thirty Years On*); Hilary Wainwright (Editor *Red Pepper*); and Carole Regan NUT President (personal capacity)
£10 waged, £2 unwaged

From Rwanda to Zaire – Africa martyred

The 1996 European Union aid programme for the Great Lakes area of Africa is 284 million ecus (£230 million). Only 75 per cent of this money has gone to the people of the region: NGOs take 25 per cent to finance their operations. Of the money distributed 65 per cent has gone to the two million refugees living in camps, surrounded by Hutu militias. Seven million Rwandans have received the other 35 per cent. This leaves nothing for the Rwandan government to facilitate the return to Rwanda of Hutu refugees not involved in genocide. Without massive aid any return of refugees is impossible.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees are now threatened further by the spread of fighting and famine to Zaire.

CLAUDE GABRIEL explains the reasons for the crises in Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire.

Rouge: Was the conflict one which could have been foreseen?

CG: The current situation was to be expected, not just foreseen, for several reasons.

The first element is the reality of the refugee camps. They throw together several hundred thousand people, for the most part totally disarmed. Immediately, the different cliques present try to pull strings. The Zairean army, unpaid and without officers, use the camps for their own ends: promoting the black market, trading on connections. The leading figures in the ex-Rwandan regime, and notably the militia, also various others, come to do business and mount their own politico-military operations.

There is a combination of massive and incomparable poverty and enormous despair on the one hand, and on the other, the refugee camps, which from the start have been arena for power struggles. The stakes are not only military but also economic, which is all-important in a situation of such poverty. The reality is that the people in the region effectively fight over the morsels of poverty. The camps in themselves are a powder-keg.

The second element that makes this situation predictable is the fact that the Zairean state is only a state in name. On the one hand the regime is totalitarian, "kleptocratic", the country's resources have been pillaged for nearly 30 years by one family, one clan, one man. On the other hand,



Mobutu has been in power now for 31 years. "His is an unspeakable regime – totalitarian would be a euphemism"

outside the presidential guard, the Zairean army is non-existent in operational terms, and seems to act more as a gang dedicated to using its force against the people.

Rouge: What are the roots of this situation?

CG: Two things appear important. First of all the question of Zaire. Mobutu has been in power now for 31 years. It is an unspeakable regime – totalitarian would be a euphemism – responsible for the assassination of thousands of people.

It has not allowed the slightest opposition, and has plundered the basic resources of the country to accumulate wealth for itself. It would otherwise have been threatened with the destabilising of its power, if there had been the slightest attempt to construct a real Zairean state in the 1960s. It is no longer today the state of Zaire today to which the governments of Europe and North America have more or less continuously lent support.

It is clear that the absence of state and economic factors weighs heavily

on the current situation in Kivu, which is in the east of Zaire, bordering on Rwanda and Burundi. These are elements aggravating destabilisation and deterioration of the situation. It is one thing to have camps containing hundreds of thousands of people in a real country; it is a completely different matter to have them in a country that is an abstraction, a virtual country, where no legitimate power exercises control over daily existence.

The second element relates to the aggravation of this situation by the genocide in 1994 in Rwanda, which has gone totally unpunished. Such impunity impacts at several levels; for those who have already committed crimes and are ready to commit new ones as they form new alliances. Today they are candidates for receiving arms or for again becoming linked to this or that state, this or that diplomacy.

However this impunity also works in favour of the new rulers who know that because of a past that has gone unpunished they too can indulge in extortion or opt for military responses rather than the necessary political and

social solutions.

Obviously all that flows not only from the responsibility of the regimes or of African political movements; it also flows from the responsibility of the great powers, who have played an essential role in supporting these regimes.

Rouge: Do opposition forces exist?

CG: The oppositions which appeared, particularly in Zaire, during the wave of democratic pressure in 1990-1991 are more or less totally absent or accomplices of the regimes.

They play absolutely no role as a counter-force. The situation in Kinshasa, where part of the opposition is participating in demonstrations against Rwandan aggression demonstrates the role and nature of the majority of the opposition forces. It illustrates to what extent the political and social situation has deteriorated in these countries. There regimes are extremely unstable, even imploding, yet at the same time the oppositions do not represent a credible alternative.

Consequently there is a risk of break down and a willingness to look for confrontations.

The major problem is land, which is becoming more and more rare because of excess population. The financial returns are falling ever lower and the social surplus product is consequently stunted. This level of poverty, combined with the crisis and actual dismemberment of these economies and states, ensures that conflicts inevitably break out over the division of what remains.

Social criteria no longer have any reality so people attach themselves to the nearest, most immediate entity – village, clan, different ethnic group. These are the sole reference points that remain for them.

The reaction today is one of panic and withdrawal into this identification with 'otherness'. There is above all a desire to take from or keep from the 'other' – who equally wants to take from or keep from you.

It is essential to understand that. Within this framework fragmentation is therefore inevitable. We are not heading for a war between Tutsis and Hutus. If things continue to deteriorate there will be, as elsewhere in Africa, fifteen or twenty small groups who will fight among themselves. An array of temporary alliances will be formed, based primarily on material interests which appear to us utterly derisory. It is for this reason that what needs to be recognised by both the Rwandan regime and the 'international community' is a regional solution. There can be no Rwandan solutions to the problems of Rwanda, just as there can be no Burundian solutions to the problems of Burundi.

There can only be regional solutions: not for reasons of immediate ethnic identity but simply because the problem results from poverty. One can develop neither Rwanda nor Burundi with just their resources.

It is also necessary to separate off the east of Zaire, which is a long way from Kinshasa. For natural geographical reasons it needs, in any case, to have an intense economic and social relationship with the other countries of the Great Lakes.

Therefore it is necessary to think about economic and social solutions which affect the region. But in order to do that it is obviously not a question of proposing, as has the French government, a conference of these states and regimes. The problem also revolves around the nature of these regimes. What is the Burundian regime today?

The French government supported a boycott of the Burundi regime after the last coup d'état. Today it claims that a political solution for the region involves a conference of those states – i.e. a conference of the very states it proposed to boycott. None of this makes any sense.

Resolving the problems of Africa in the medium term requires a halting of any sort of support for regimes such as that in Zaire, as well as all the existing cliques who will inevitably engage in similar policies. The only way is to put an end to these manoeuvres which, in the name of strategies and alliances, support profiteering and money-grubbing. Thirty years of these policies have created a humanitarian disaster without precedent and which is now the third or fourth such in the region.

● (This article was originally published in November 7 edition of Rouge, weekly paper of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, French Section of the Fourth International).

All eyes on the Lebed factor

Gerry Foley

BORIS YELTSIN may have formally resumed office in Russia after his supposedly successful operation but this will not stem the speculation either in Russia or internationally about who will succeed him. Below we publish the analysis of some of the main factors at work in the unravelling crisis from the November edition of the American paper *Socialist Action*

YELTSIN'S dramatic firing of Aleksandr Lebed from the post of security chief highlighted the growing instability of the capitalist restorationist regime in Russia.

A worn out and trembling Russian president went on national TV on October 17 to announce that he was dropping Lebed – essentially, he indicated, because the former general was not a team player. In particular, Yeltsin accused Lebed of creating a sort of "pre-electoral atmosphere", when the next presidential elections are not until the year 2000.

Lebed himself seemed to regard Yeltsin's repudiation as a launch rather than a setback. Adam Laszyn, Moscow correspondent of the Polish daily *Zycie Warszawy*, wrote in the October 18 issue of his paper:

"At the press conference called early yesterday, Lebed smiled broadly and seemed relaxed. He said, "My separation from the government is reminiscent of the way that Boris Yeltsin was driven out of the [Communist] Party elite of the time."

It was Yeltsin's removal from his party post by Gorbachev in 1988, in fact, that enabled the former Sverdlovsk party boss to ride the wave of opposition to the bureaucratic system to the summit of political power.

Lebed's ambitions are apparently no more modest than were Yeltsin's. The former general has a history of being an adventurer and not a bureaucratic climber. He is clearly aiming for the top or nothing. He knows that the country is on the verge of an explosion and he wants to be able to ride the wave.

"We are on the verge of a very hot fall", Lebed said at his news conference. "There is no doubt about that."

The approaching catastrophe

Zycie Warszawy put the sub headline "Cassandra" – the ability to predict the future – over the part of its story where it reported Lebed's vision of the coming explosion. But a collaborator of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, which supports the attempt to restore capitalism in Russia, took no less dramatic a view.

In its October 24 issue, this Russian daily, one of the best informed and most political of the Russian papers, ran a long article by Tatiana Koshkareva titled, "The Approaching Catastrophe and How to Combat It."

The author acknowledged taking her title from an article by Lenin



Aleksandr Lebed: sacked or set free? His departure gives him the chance to pose as a man "too honest" for Yeltsin

written on the eve of the October 1917 revolution. She saw an oncoming confrontation between the government and various categories of workers as an immediate cause for Lebed's ouster

There are several reasons that led the government to close ranks. One of them is the protest actions scheduled in early November by the most varied groups of workers, from judges to airline workers.

"Moreover, in this connection, the turbulent Lebed was removed before these events, because his ill-wishers in the Kremlin believed that he was quite capable of taking advantage of them for his own purposes by taking the leadership of all the malcontents."

Koshkareva's article led off with a report from a recent meeting of the Temporary Emergency Commission (TEC): "A lot has been said in recent times about the impossibility of changing the economic course. But it was in fact overturned at the first meeting of the TEC."

"We don't have time to concern ourselves with theory," said Premier Viktor Chernomyrdin. And shortly after, taking about the basic approach to the situation, he said that it would be "strict government regulation."

Koshkareva commented: "The government has been forced to make such sharp turns (above all in its own world view) by the approaching economic catastrophe and what promises to be unprecedented popular outbursts."

"The very fact of the TEC's existence testifies to the presence, with certain reservations, of a prerevolutionary situation. "The lower orders" do not want and the "upper orders" are no longer able to live in the old way. Neither has any money.

Russia is closer than ever to becoming a country with a two-party system [sic]. For the first time there is appearing a "party of government" and a "party of opposition", including all the political organisations that have existed up until now.

In these conditions, even to preserve the status quo, the "party of government" has no choice but "within the framework of the Constitution" to assume additional powers – above all, powers to raise money at any cost, even at the cost of changing the economic course. Only money can pacify the

tormented masses. Up until this time in their numerous strikes they have not raised political slogans. That is, they did not have a single ideological leader. The threat today is that the "lower orders" have reached the point that they will accept any leader who is able to offer a general idea for the country, a clear road (however utopian) that the society can follow in the coming years."

Credit drying up

At about the same time this was written, the International Monetary Fund refused to deliver the \$350 million in aid funds that were due for October, and the World Bank rejected a request from the Russian national bank for a \$1 billion loan.

In the October 26 issue of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Koshkareva and Rustam Narzikulov wrote that "Russia is already living in the conditions of an economic catastrophe." In an interview in the same issue, Grigory Yavlinski said that one of the reasons for the drying up of international credit was that only 30 members of the parliament voted for the government's budget.

He also pointed out that the international supporters of capitalist restoration in Russia had poured money into the country at the time of the elections in order to preserve the Yeltsin government, and that political motivation was now gone. Of course, the capitalist money bags will continue to use their financial power to try to assure the economic course they want in Russia. But it is a vast country, and their resources – to say nothing of their altruism – are not unlimited.

Public opinion polls, according to an article in the October 27 *Eleftherotypia*, the most prestigious of the Greek papers, show that Lebed has the support of 35 per cent of the population, as against 15 per cent for Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and 12 per cent for Yeltsin.

The same article points out that 75 per cent of the Russian population supported the peace agreement that Lebed negotiated to end the Chechen war.

Some commentators in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* have written that

personally appealing to voters, depend in the last analysis on the size of investments in politics."

"This financial monopoly means", the journalists wrote, "that the only means of changing the government is military force". However, the military is also dependent on money, and the army is falling apart for lack of it. Lebed frightened Yeltsin's entourage, according to the Russian press, by openly opposing cuts in the armed forces.

Spectre of a popular uprising

In fact, the impoverishment of the Russian masses by the attempt to restore capitalism has had a powerful effect in demobilising them. On the other hand, if they are pushed too far and rise up in desperation they have the power to seize whatever resources are available in the country. That is the possibility the Russian press is now openly discussing.

It is not, of course, that the former general has any intentions of organising the masses. There is nothing in his history that indicates that he has any desire or ability to do that. But he has gotten into a position where, in the absence of a revolutionary leadership, he can hope to take advantage of a popular explosion to gain power.

In that event, money would be no problem. The bureaucrats who have been robbing the country to turn themselves into plutocrats would pay anything to anyone who might save them from a social revolution.

The shadow of a popular uprising is now falling over all the corrupt bureaucrats. They are all manoeuvring in their various ways to try to deflect it.

One of the accusations against Lebed, for example, was that he supported a scheme for forming an elite force out of the most brutalised elements of the Russian armed forces – embittered Afghan war veterans, former volunteers on the Serbian chauvinist side of the Bosnian war, and so on.

No one in the government has denied that such a plan existed. It was, in fact, a scheme for creating something like the reactionary armed forces that were used against the workers and the left in the revolutionary period in Germany in the early 1920's. That is, it would be a special creation for civil war, since the army as a whole can no longer be relied on.

But it is also clear that Lebed had no copyright on this plan. It was a scheme of the military command and the government in general.

And the fact that such a scheme was conceived is an indication of how explosive the situation in Russia has become.

SPECIAL OFFER

Two years in the writing, *Socialist Democracy's* founding document *Ireland: the promise of socialism* is the most extensive Marxist analysis of Ireland since the 1940s.

Ireland: the promise of socialism

We are offering a special price of just £5. Send a postal order or cheque payable to **Socialist Outlook Fund** at:
PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU.

Of Heroes, Myths and History

Brian Gardner reviews Neil Jordan's film, Michael Collins

For many bourgeois commentators, the release of a film about a hero of the Irish national revolution is an act beyond the pale.

Their fear is that particularly in America the film will encourage support for the present IRA and cause damage to a peace process in which that organisation is not currently involved.

Some of these same commentators have criticised the film for its lack of historical accuracy, implying that this in itself leads to the glorification of the eponymous hero. It is certainly true that in its dramatic reconstruction of some six years of Irish history, the film alters the sequence of some crucial events and skirts over others.

For example, after Collins has successfully sprung Eamonn de Valera from Lincoln prison, virtually the next thing we see is the crowd's adulation of the Sinn Fein leader in a parade through Dublin. An audience with little knowledge of the political events of the time might well be confused as to why this enemy of the British state is not immediately rearrested.

It is not explained that in the month following de Valera's escape, the government released all Irish political prisoners. It was at this moment that de Valera became President of Sinn Fein's self-styled Irish Republic; in the film he already holds this position in 1918, before the party's spectacular success in the British general election of that year.

Dramatic motif

However, this change in the historical sequence does provide for one of the film's central dramatic motifs - the beautifully understated tension between Liam Neeson's Collins and Alan Rickman's de Valera.

From the outset the President of the Republic is portrayed as a cold diplomat, seeing it as more useful to go off to America and gain support there than to participate fully in the armed insurrection at home. As the commander in chief of this insurrection, Collins is useful to his friend Dev but he is also a threat.

Where the film scores with complete historical accuracy is in de Valera's use of Collins to negotiate peace with the British government and the formation of the Irish Free State. The shrewd leader distances himself from a new state which does not include the six counties of Ulster and which requires members of its parliament to swear an oath of allegiance to a British king.

Some critics see Neeson's portrayal of Collins as lacking depth, and while to a certain extent I think this is true, the fault is not so much with Neeson the actor as with Jordan the

scriptwriter and director. Collins, the working class lad from Cork and man of action, is pitted against the cold intellectualism of de Valera - a man with few ideas other than his central obsession, the struggle for liberation. In the absence of knowing anything else about his intellectual life, we could be forgiven for imagining that perhaps he was something of a socialist. In reality he believed in the establishment of a Napoleonic dictatorship to prevent communism gaining a foothold.

No characters in the film ever mention the dreaded S or C words and the national struggle is a romantic one, for the liberation of a land and people. The tragic outcome of this struggle is the civil war between the two republican factions and the assassination of Collins by de Valera's henchmen.

Despite all of these misgivings, this is an exceptional film - while it serves to shore up many of the myths surrounding the Irish national struggle, it also succeeds in debunking others.

It shows clearly that the Irish state was not born without bloody internal strife. And when it comes to depicting the repressive, murderous and often genocidal actions of the British state, Jordan pulls no punches. All of this is no bad thing in a film financed by Hollywood and with a wide commercial release.

Technically, it is more than proficient, and at its beginning and end, two wonderfully edited sequences, in their emotional power, hit you straight in the gut.

As Collins travels towards his ambush, his intended spouse is purchasing her wedding apparel in a Dublin store. As she does this and as the assassins take up their positions, we hear on the soundtrack the lament "She Moves Through the Fair".

The film begins with the Easter Rising of 1916. After de Valera has been arrested, he sits in his prison cell writing that he will probably be spared execution by virtue of his birth in America. Meanwhile all of the other leaders are brought out one by one to face the firing squad.

One of these was the Irish republican socialist James Connolly. Severely wounded during the assault on the Dublin GPO, Connolly was stretched out to the firing squad, tied to a chair, and shot. The manner of his execution caused widespread revulsion.

More than any other republican, it is Connolly who, through his writings and his actions, combined the struggle for national self-determination with the struggle for socialism, and who, like another great republican, Wolfe Tone, fought not merely for the idea of the land but for "the people of no property".

The prospect of Hollywood biopics covering the lives of such figures is at present difficult to imagine.



Neeson as Collins: a vivid portrayal of the working class lad pitted against the cynical intellectual de Valera

A novel look at a strike

The Price of a Cigar, by Peter Wood, Anchor Books £9.95. Reviewed by Keith Sinclair

The Price of a Cigar is a novel that tells the story of the Great Docks Strike of 1889.

That strike won the "Dockers' Tanner" for London's dockers and was the first British docks dispute of any significance. There had been local strikes before but none had the impact of this successful dispute in the capital city.

Peter Wood has taken real characters and settings and blended them in with a few of his own. Whilst this might not appeal to the more pure-minded historians, it results in a book that will be read by many who would not think of picking up a detailed factual account of the strike.

Wood introduces the main characters of the strike - the dockers' leader Ben Tillet, John Burns, Will Thorne, (founder of what is now the GMB), Eleanor Marx and Cardinal Manning.

He also creates the character of James Donnelly, an American journalist, through whose eyes we see much of the story. Donnelly is shocked by what he finds when sent to the East End by his editor. He develops a sympathy for the strikers and uses his contacts to help boost the distress fund.

The 1889 Docks Strike represented a

landmark in British trade unionism, unskilled workers had fought and won a great victory. The term "New Unionism" was coined to celebrate this successful organising of the mass of unskilled workers.

Previously, British trade unions had been more successful in winning skilled workers into unions such as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE).

Attempts

There had however been attempts to organise dockworkers prior to 1889. In the 1870s there were disputes in both Liverpool and Hull.

What was distinctive about the London strike was its success and the attention gained throughout Britain and internationally. Donations poured into the strike fund from countries like Australia.

Peter Wood has succeeded in writing an interesting and lively

account of this major strike. The events he recounts may have taken place over a century ago, but the issues remain alive in the ports of Britain today.

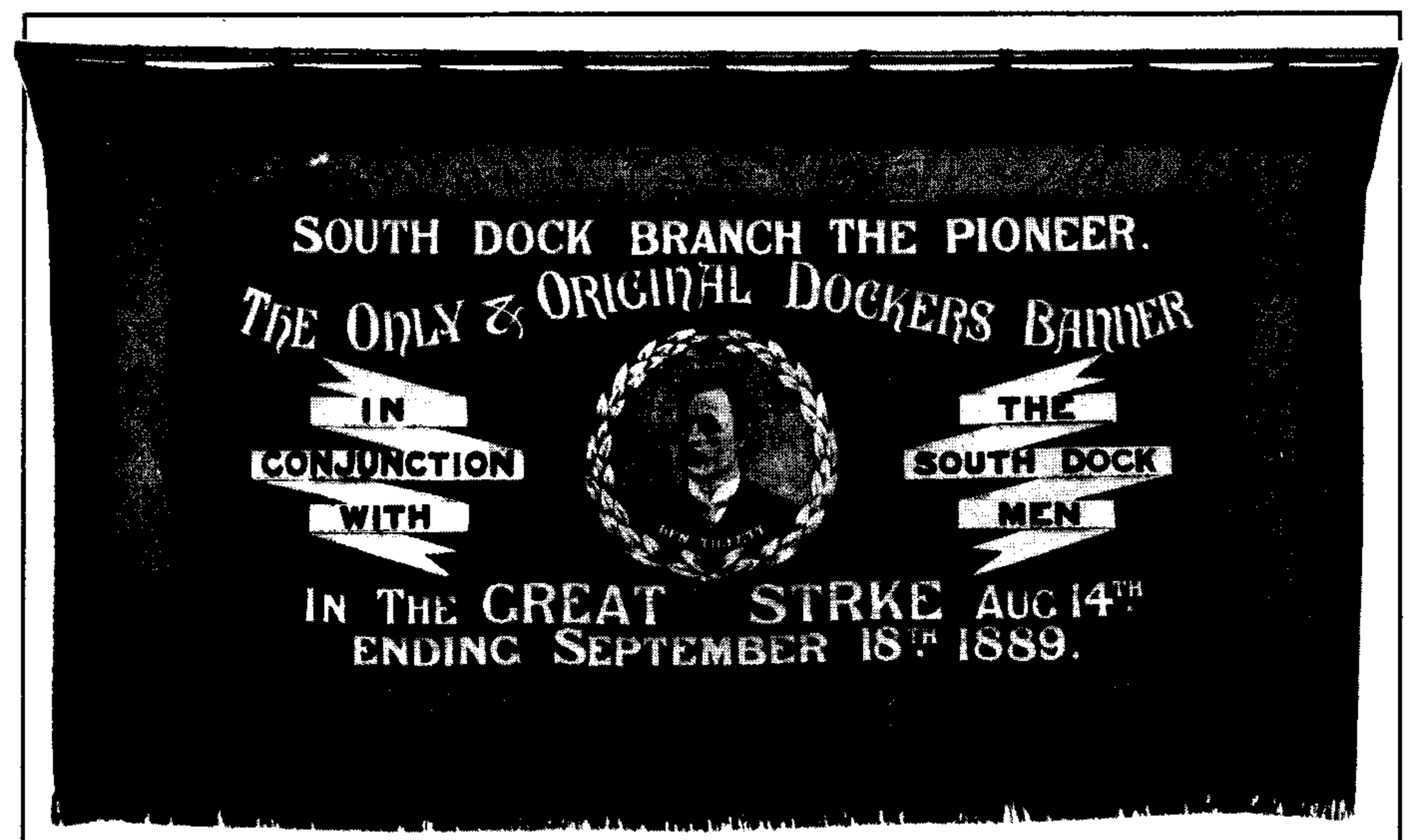
In the 1890s casual labour was the norm, just as it is today. The only difference is the isolation. In the last century you fought at the call for a day's work - today you sit at home wondering whether the phone will ring or not.

The effect is the same as unscrupulous employers can pick and choose their "blue-eyes" and ensure that the militants are driven out.

However the great fight of the Merseyside dockers today shows that a fight-back can and will develop.

The Price of a Cigar shows what can be won when workers unite together.

Read it, learn from it and use it to convince people to support the Liverpool dockers in 1996.



The novel reawakens historic memories of decisive class battles

Subscribe to

International Viewpoint

Socialist Outlook and International Viewpoint can be yours for the next year at a special discount price. It is the hard-hitting monthly review of the Fourth International, the world socialist organisation. Send your cheque for £30 payable to 'Outlook International', PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU. Offer available in Britain and Ireland only.

Name

Address

Post code

As Canada fights austerity: Mass protests seize Toronto

by Barry Weisleder

It was a two-day festival of the oppressed. Toronto on October 25 and 26 was positive, peaceful, upbeat and disciplined -- at times boisterous, at others eerily tranquil. It was the biggest labour shutdown of a Canadian metropolis, followed by the largest march and rally in this country's history.

Exhibiting tremendous poise and self-confidence, hundreds of thousands of unionists and their social movement allies said NO to multi-billion dollar Ontario provincial government. Planned cuts to healthcare, education, and social services, to environmental deregulation and wholesale privatisation of public institutions, and to widespread attacks on labour and consumer rights had aroused this massive opposition.

Apology

Support for the protests was so broad that reactionary Ontario's Conservative Premier Mike Harris felt compelled to apologise for initially underestimating the huge turn-out.

Harris' shoot-from-the-lip frustration was not surprising. Hundreds of thousands of workers had defied employer intimidation tactics and joined in cross-picketing and protest rallies on the Friday, or simply stayed at home, in all

cases sacrificing a day's pay to register their opposition to the prevailing big business agenda.

On that day there was no public transport, one hundred construction sites were stilled, most government offices were closed or offered little service, cultural and recreational institutions were shut.

College shutdown

Colleges and universities did not function, elementary and secondary schools had few teachers and fewer students. Hospitals operated on holiday staffing levels, and many factories were down.

Thousands of workers, accompanied by family and friends, attended noisy, angry, music-filled rallies -- at the Toronto Stock Exchange, at the Education Ministry, and at city halls throughout the city.

Police stood by quietly on the sidelines as thousands of pickets and hundreds of trained union/community-designated marshals took charge, shutting down business-as-usual. For once Toronto looked and felt like a "union town".

On Saturday morning an immense crowd gathered at the lakeshore, near the Canadian National Exhibition grounds, and began a 4.2 kilometre

march to the provincial legislature. It took nearly three hours for the parade, which included over 200 social justice and community organisations along with dozens of unions, to pass en route the Metro Convention Centre where the Conservative Party held its annual policy conference.

The gigantic rally filled the large grassy park, the surrounding roadway, and the wide expanse of University Avenue boulevard, southward for ten blocks or more at its height. The crowd, already in a decidedly festive mood, was treated to performances by various folk-rock stars.

Way forward

Speeches by labour and community leaders extolled the event as a triumph of coalition-building, but had almost nothing to say about plans for the future of the struggle against the Tory cutbacks.

In all, the Metro Days of Action activities, which spanned six days and included an anti-poverty tent city dubbed "Harrisville" set up just behind the Legislature, had a theme: "Organise, Educate, Resist".

The key test now will be to ensure that the leadership is forced to build on this success rather than allow the enthusiasm to ebb all too quickly away.

Gearing up for Euromarch 97

The Labour leadership's about-face on a referendum on the single European currency, bringing them into line with Major is an indication of the depths of tension which exist in the ruling circles about this issue.

Only the Lib Dems of the main parties are now openly committed to going into the single currency on the first wave which will include Germany, the Benelux countries and France.

The implementation of the Maastricht convergence criteria and the resultant cuts in social spending has led to some of the biggest demonstrations and strikes in every major country since World War 2.

So far, the strategic advantage that the EU and EU governments have is that they are organised to chop welfare at the European level while mass reactions have been confined to the national.

Well, the planned European marches could be just the start of that European fightback.

Last weekend Ken Coates MEP called for support for the marches at a 100,000 strong rally at the end of a march in Southern Italy against unemployment and cutbacks in Naples, organised by the Partito Rifondazione Comunista (PRC). The German Green Party is now also backing the marches.

This week sees a week of action on

the issues by the French organisations organising the march including sit-ins and demonstrations.

Support is also building in Britain. The TUC Joint Consultative Committee, which nationally coordinates County Associations of TUCs has now overwhelmingly backed the marches, as has the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs and the AGM of the Socialist Campaign Group Supporters Network.

The next stages of the campaign are:

- to produce a high quality publicity to help build support and raise money towards the estimated £60,000 needed to build the march.

- to produce 4-5 issues of a march paper in the lead up to and during the marches

- to mobilise 50 march volunteers for the European launch rally on February 1st/2nd.

- to organise a national meeting Sheffield January 18

The London Committee will be meeting Monday 25 November at the Lucas Arms Grays Inn Rd, 7.30pm.

If you want to march or get involved contact Glen Voris at St Helens TUC Resource Centre, 21-31 Barrow St Helens WA10 1RX. Tel 01744 755 889 Euromarch information is also on Website <http://www.gn.apc.org/labournet/> or e-mail enquiries 101326.41@compuserve.com

Old Labour and the bankers

John Lister

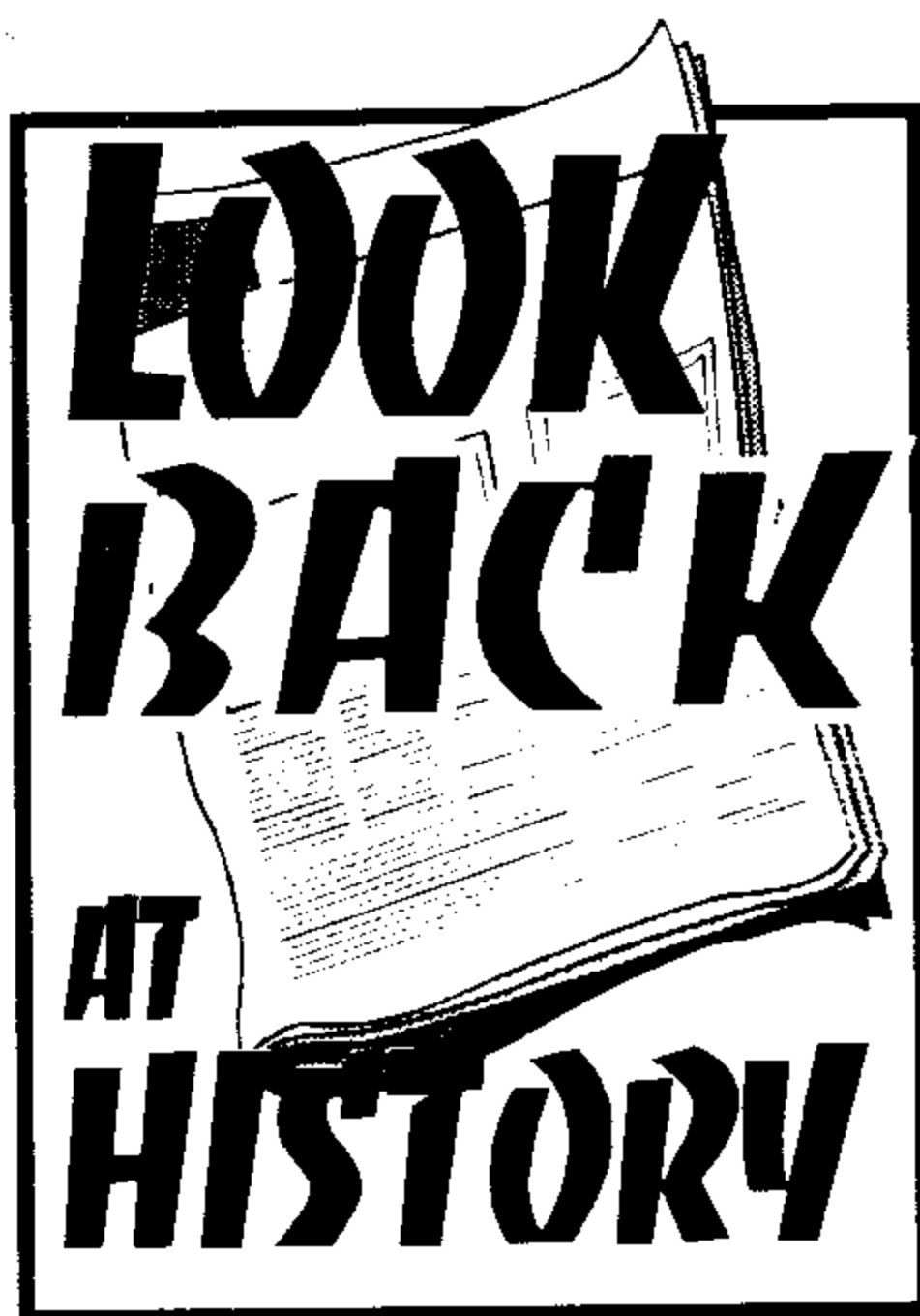
TWENTY years ago, one of the biggest-ever demonstrations on a working day united 13 trade unions and mobilised over 80,000 through the streets of London in opposition to cuts in welfare services.

Most of the unions involved were from the public sector, although the white collar engineering union TASS and the NUM lent their support.

The protest was unusual in that right wing union leaders were pressurised to join with the left in building a protest against the Tory policies of Jim Callaghan's Labour government, underlining the strains already beginning to tear apart the flimsy "social contract" between the unions and the government.

They stopped short, of course of calling a one-day strike: but the 'left'-leaning public employees union NUPE had already announced a campaign of guerrilla strikes against cuts in health, education and local government services. Localised one-day stoppages had included a strike and 4,000-strong lobby by Oxford NUT.

Driving forward the angry fightback in the unions were the package of £3 billion cuts imposed earlier in 1976 by Chancellor Denis Healey, compounded by the on-going top-level talks between the Labour



government at the International Monetary Fund over the terms for a loan to bolster up the value of the pound.

At the beginning of 1976, sterling had been trading at comfortably above \$2. By the summer it had slumped to \$1.70, and by the autumn the slide had threatened to continue below \$1.50.

Committed as they were to managing and maximising the efficiency of British capitalism, Labour ministers looked desperately for loans to stabilise the currency: and such loans could only be had on terms laid down by bankers and the US government, both of them hostile to Labour and its links with the unions.

As the sterling crisis escalated, Healey was forced to turn back at the last minute from a flight to an IMF

conference in the Philippines, and head instead for the Labour conference, where he defiantly announced his intention to negotiate a loan.

The scale of the public spending cuts demanded by the IMF (initially demanding an additional £5 billion on top of Healey's earlier cutbacks) was so great that it threatened to split the Labour cabinet.

Callaghan deliberately dragged out the negotiations throughout October and November as he tried to pull together sufficient support and bargain down the scale of the cuts required.

As the huge demonstration marched through London in the gloom of a dank afternoon on November 17, the attention of Labour ministers will have been on the handful of IMF negotiators rather than the demands and needs of the labour movement.

A handful of left wingers in the cabinet, led by Tony Benn, attempted to hold out against the bankers' demands for austerity. Benn summed up his position:

"They said to me, 'You see, your plan, Tony, will mean a siege economy'. And I said 'We haven't an alternative to a siege economy. The difference between my siege economy and yours is that in my siege economy we'll have our allies with us, against the bankers. In your siege economy, we'll have the bankers with us and our supporters outside.'"

Benn went on to circulate his cabinet colleagues with copies of the minutes of Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Cabinet in 1931, when "exactly the same discussion took place".

In the event a cuts package amounting to £2 billion and the sale of BP shares worth £500m was agreed with the IMF, and loans were made available to shore up sterling. The cuts were specifically targeted at reducing public sector spending

The letter of intent demanded by the IMF declared that:

"An essential element of the government's strategy will be a continuing and substantial reduction over the next few years in the share of resources required for the public sector."

The Labour government was now fixed on a collision course with the labour movement, as increasingly rigid wage controls began to cut living standards, while jobs and precious public services were squeezed by order of the IMF. Here were the seeds of the notorious "winter of discontent" of 1978-9, in which anger exploded and wage controls were swept aside by a succession of public sector strikes.

The resistance was already building. The Grunwick strike, led by low-paid Asian women, was escalating as a focus of the fight for unionisation and the right to picket.

Even during the IMF negotiations health workers in London voted to stage a historic "work-in" occupation to prevent the closure of the Elizabeth

Garrett Anderson Hospital for women: that fight was to last four years, becoming a focus for the struggle to defend the NHS. The hospital was saved -- and was part of a one-day strike last week in the current NHS pay dispute.

In the same month of 1976, teachers from various left currents and groupings in the NUT met to launch a new organisation, the Socialist Teachers Alliance; a much stronger STA still fights on today at every level in the NUT.

And once again we have the prospect of a Labour government coming to office under pressure to slash back public spending to meet the requirements of international bankers: the Maastricht Treaty and the drive for European Monetary Union could mean cuts of £18-£25 billion.

It is a real enough threat to bring recent stern warnings from Denis (now Lord) Healey that the single currency could trigger "riots in the streets". Twenty years after he was booted off Labour's conference rostrum, he should know.

FEEDBACK

Socialist Outlook welcomes letters. Post them to Feedback, PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU. Those over 300 words in length will be edited. You can E-mail us at outlook@gn.apc.org We are on the web at [HTTP://www.gn.apc.org/labournet/so](http://www.gn.apc.org/labournet/so)

Get organised, get active!

- I want to know more about Socialist Outlook
- Please send me your introductory pamphlet: 'Socialism after Stalinism'. I enclose a PO or cheque for £1.00 payable to 'Socialist Outlook Fund'.
- Please send me details of the Socialist Outlook Fourth International Supporters Association

Name _____

Address _____

Post Code _____ Tel _____

Post to: Socialist Outlook, PO Box 1109, London, N4 2UU.

Socialist OUTLOOK

Who will lose out in Clarke's Budget cuts?

It could be

YOU!



Clarke: will he take another slice out of the NHS, squeeze pensions and benefits, or confront the growing anger of staff and students fighting cuts in our colleges?

AS WE approach Kenneth Clarke's final budget before the next election, press speculation is already rife.

How big will be the tax cuts he offers as a desperate bribe to win back lost Tory voters? And how will these be paid for?

Whose services, whose benefits, whose jobs will be cut to line the wallets of the rich and buy a fifth term of Tory rule?

The *Mail on Sunday* claims to know that a further hike in petrol prices, booze and fags will be used to suck in extra cash, which could then be ostentatiously "given away" - with the most generosity, as usual, going to those on the highest incomes, and thus paying the most in tax.

The promise of tax cuts (together with nationwide relief at the departure of Maggie Thatcher and her hated Poll Tax) was what is reputed to have won John Major his 1992 victory - against the odds.

Since then, however, as Labour politicians keep reminding us, the Tories have disregarded their own pledges and repeatedly and massively increased taxes, to such a level that no Clarke budget could

Pre-Budget Lobby of Parliament
Tory Hands Off Our Welfare State!
Monday 19th November 7.30pm
Called by the Welfare State Network
Rally speakers include Tony Benn MP, Neill Gerrard MP, Geoff Martin (Convener London Region UNISON), pensioners, students and anti-JSA campaigners

now hope to reverse the process.

The gamble for Clarke is whether tax cuts would now be recognised by the electorate as a cynical gesture, and serve to undermine rather than rebuild support for the Tories.

Lined up to lose?

But there is another calculation, too. Clarke knows that - whatever he does in this budget - there is a strong chance that the Tories will lose the next election.

It is obvious that there is a body of Tory opinion that feels this might not be a bad thing. It would leave Labour to carry the can for divisive policy decisions on European Monetary Union, and to pick up the tab for the Tories' 17-year spree of borrowing to finance tax cuts for big business and the wealthy. And it would give the divided Tories time

to slug it out over Europe and regroup.

On this scenario Clarke could well be tempted to go for broke, imposing hefty cuts in taxes and in public spending, knowing that this will leave the welfare state in tatters and put immediate pressure on an incoming Labour government.

This kind of "scorched earth" policy could exploit Labour's political timidity, and leave a new government rapidly discredited.

Blair and Brown have gone out of their way to tie their own hands in advance, by promising they will not increase taxation.

But all the indications are that the Tory squeeze on NHS budgets, on schools and higher education and on social services will have triggered a succession of crises by next May.

Preliminary leaks from this year's

public spending round suggest that Health Secretary Stephen Dorrell lost out heavily in his bid for extra cash to avert a major crisis next year. Since then NHS Chief Executive Alan Langlands has repeated a categorical insistence that there will be no additional money to stave off closures and bed shortages as Trusts run into difficulties this winter.

Analysts also appear to agree that part of Clarke's strategy will be to cut back on central government grants to local councils, forcing a massive hike in Council Tax payments, safe in the knowledge that there are only a handful of Tory-run councils and that therefore Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors can be forced to take the blame.

Labour has also fended off rather than resolving the pressure from the pensioners' movement for a restoration of the link with earnings and for a significant increase in the basic state pension.

Retreats

New Labour has staged a succession of damaging retreats from full-hearted defence of the welfare state, and insisted that their minimal pledges on health, education and training schemes can be funded from one-off sources (cutting bureaucracy, ending the assisted places scheme and the "windfall tax" on privatised

utilities). But despite Blair's conservatism, Labour's electoral appeal rests on the widespread assumption that a change of government would bring real changes, and would be a way to defend the welfare state.

These - and other - demands cannot be met without raising additional revenue from taxation - which Labour insists it will not do. But it need not involve raising income tax on individuals, if Blair and Brown grasp the nettle and step up the taxation of big business, which has revelled in astonishingly low levels of taxation since 1979.

As Alan Simpson MP has pointed out, a tax of just one eighth of one percent (0.125%) on the speculative turnover of the City of London would generate a massive £50 billion a year, (equivalent to 25p on income tax): enough on its own to pay the pensioners' demands, rebuild our schools and hospitals, and put the country back to work.

The Tory calculation is that Labour will lack the nerve to implement even such minimal reforms, and will swiftly antagonise and disillusion its supporters. The fight we must wage inside the trade unions, the campaigns and the Labour Party is to make sure this plan misfires.