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Socialist OUTLOOK

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Mini-budget – small ideas. Pensioners have been given a heating hand-out equivalent to running a 1-bar fire for just 13 days: not much of a substitute for the pensioners' demand of restoring the link between the pension and average wages axed by Thatcher.



WELCOME as improved childcare undoubtedly is, it doesn't justify the attack on single parent benefit.

While a package of £300m for after-school care is important, there remains the need for much greater investment in affordable child care provision, available when parents need it – and that isn't just after school.

The package of training for 50,000 young people to become carers also merits close scrutiny – if the Louise Woodward case has taught us anything it is that care of children is a skilled job and needs to be treated as such.

Warming though the increase in cold weather payments for pensioners is, they won't compensate for the real decrease in the value of pensions since the link with earnings was broken.

Gordon Brown's fine words that he is "simply not prepared to allow another winter to go by when pensioners are fearful of turning up their heating because they do not know whether they will have the help they need with their fuel bills" will cut little ice with pensioners' groups campaigning hard to restore that link.

Tony Benn was correct to criticise the Chancellor's mini-budget for having "no element of redistribution". We all know that it won't be company directors that are hit by Brown's pleas against high wage increases, but working people – and even more so those on benefits.

Plans were unveiled for the most substantial overhaul of the welfare state since its introduction, with the welfare to work proposals as the centre piece.

The abolition of family credit and its replacement with tax credits has

COLD COMFORT FROM HARD LABOUR

already been met with fierce attacks by those who argue that it will lead not only to the overturning of recently-found tax independence for married women, but to money being spent by men rather than on the children for whom it is intended.

Justified as these criticisms are, they focus on the effects of the proposals rather than their intentions.

In order to mount a serious response to these attacks and others before them on the whole idea of the welfare state it is necessary to understand those who are its enemies.

Blair's New Labour Government is mounting such a vicious attack on the so-called "dependency culture" it even makes Maggie seem a bit of a liberal.

Fees for students is one side of this

assault – you have to pay for what you get. The other is the idea that any one without a job is worthless and should be bloody grateful to be dragged into a job, no matter how low the pay and insulting the conditions.

With the wave of a magic wand the problem of mass unemployment is "solved" – as is illness, disability, caring for small children or any other part of working class people's lives.

While all this is being announced by Brown we also hear that Labour's determination to stick to Tory spending limits will lead to a likely rise in Council tax bills of 10 per cent next year.

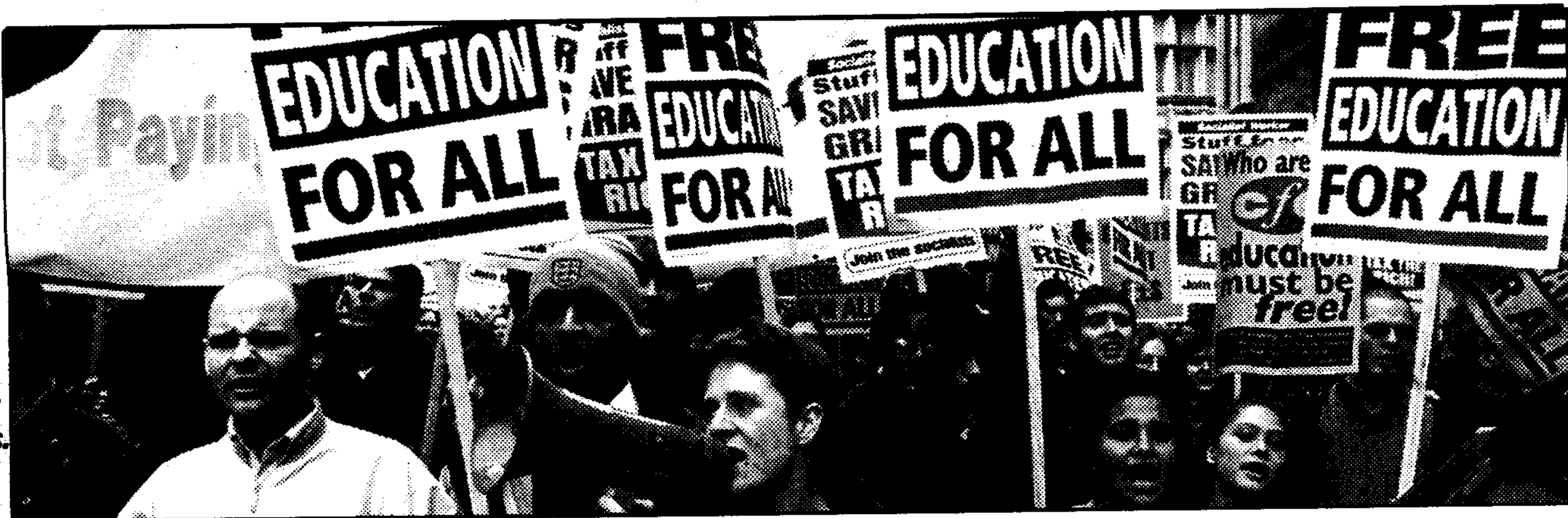
Ministers have agreed to a limited lifting of the spending cap on local authorities for next year in the hope that an extra £800m can be pumped into education to prevent the deep – and unpopular cuts that would otherwise be necessary. Other than that spending limits will only increase by 2 per cent.

The Local Government Association calculates that a further £1 billion would be necessary to prevent cuts. While schools desperately need funds, so to do other local services.

The threatened squeeze on social services in particular could have disastrous consequences as councils are forced to pay for expensive residential care in the private sector where many in-house places have been sold off. Frail elderly people are increasingly likely to fall through the net, missing out on NHS and social service care.

Plans need to be laid now for a mammoth lobby of the Parliament at the time of the Budget next spring, and to debate up and down the country how best to fight to retain the public services that so many thought they were voting for on May 1.

The demo may be unofficial, but there is no doubting the determination of the thousands of students who turned out on a cold November afternoon to register their opposition to New Labour's new fees.



Students fight on against fees

IN A LIVELY demonstration of over 10,000 on November 26, students showed their anger at Labour's plans to abolish student grants and introduce tuition fees.

The demonstration called "unofficially" by the Campaign for Free Education (CFE) showed the potential for a mass campaign that could defeat the government's proposals.

Unfortunately, the "New Labour" leadership of NUS are doing all they can to sabotage any campaign in defence of grants. Whilst NUS did call regional demonstrations against tuition fees, it was clear that this was only because they felt they had to be seen to be doing something.

Limiting role

If the NUS hadn't organised these demonstrations, then students would have organised on their own anyway. At the same time, the NUS leadership did all that it could to limit student anger, rather than providing a lead.

On all the regional demos NUS did very little to mobilise students, but did try and control the slogans shouted, and did produce its own placards opposing tuition fees.

It was also clear on all these demos that the overwhelming majority of students are also opposed

to the scrapping of student grants. Whilst the NUS leadership have themselves already benefited from the grant system, they are quite happy to sell that right away for all future students, leaving them with years of debt.

Whilst the NUS leaders demand that the students fight for the interest of all students, their is little possibility of a leadership so far out of touch with its membership ever reforming itself - rather it must be replaced.

November's CFE demo has shown that there is the potential to mobilise students even in the face of the opposition of NUS.

A new, militant student leadership can be built from the bottom up, by building campaigns within colleges, schools and universities and harnessing the anger that already exists into a mass movement.

To join the CFE write c/o Helen Grayson, The Union Society, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 8QB or phone 0958 556 756

cially recognise their dispute.

Luigi Malabarba of the Italian S.In.Cobas (a national co-ordination of rank & file committees) described attempts in Italy to unite the trade union lefts and the attempts to create a new, fighting union. He invited all the delegates to a forthcoming meeting of trade union lefts throughout the European Union.

There were two main proposals coming out of conference. Firstly, the organisation of a lobby of parliament to demand a minimum wage and for adequate funding for public services at the announcement of the budget next year.

The second was to co-ordinate submissions to the Trade Union Congress across all the unions.

The real test for TULA will be its ability to put these proposals into practice and to lead a campaign for public services and for a decent minimum wage over the next few months.

Left prepares to fight in new civil service union

Darren Williams (Branch Secretary, CPSA ONS Newport, personal capacity)

THE SECOND annual conference of 'Left Unity' in the CPSA on November 29 was attended by eighty activists.

This will be the last such conference before the merger with the other major civil service union PTC on January 1.

Members voted to accept the merger in October, on terms which had been rejected by both unions' annual conferences, and which are calculated to entrench the power of the bureaucracy.

The membership had been consistently misled about what was on offer, continuing the long series of manoeuvres which strengthened the control of both unions by right-wing cliques espousing the politics of "business-unionism".

Within CPSA the left had been weakened by factionalism and an over-reliance on contesting national union elections.

The dire need for a strong

united fightback against the right has, however, impelled CPSA's three socialist groups to transform Left Unity from a loose electoral pact into an increasingly cohesive organisation.

This is now to be further strengthened by the addition of the PTC Broad Left, and hopefully the same union's 'Unity' group.

The conference made welcome declarations of intent, passing motions which committed Left Unity to becoming "an active campaigning socialist organisation" and to organise solidarity with workers in struggle. The need for such an organisation, capable of providing a fighting leadership for the new union, cannot be in doubt.

Under the Tory government, right-wing 'New Realist' union leaders sat on their hands while civil servants faced repeated attacks.

There is little sign of any change coming from New Labour, with the continuation of the pay freeze and other Tony policies, and unwelcome innovations like the New Deal.

The right wing union leadership are as unwilling as ever to organise

action to defend members' interests, preferring instead to focus their attention on their "enemy within" - left-wing activists.

The conference received a reminder of how viciously the bureaucracy is prepared to attack political opponents from Huw Lloyd, a leading left-winger in CPSA for twelve years.

Lloyd's consistent defence of union democracy and support for workers in struggle have made his all-Wales branch a thorn in their side. Periodic attempts to obstruct or silence him have been stepped up over the last year.

In a concerted campaign of harassment, national officials, and their servants at regional or departmental level have

- * used stooges at branch level to manufacture complaints against him

- * attempted to interfere in branch elections, intimidate activists and take over branch committee meetings

- * prevented Lloyd's branch from voting in section elections or submitting conference motions

- * quietly cancelled his membership subscriptions and ignored his repeated attempts to continue payments.

This last ploy seems likely to be used to deny that he had been a member for the last year, and to suggest that he has therefore been using facility time under false pretences.

This together with the "mysterious complaints", will apparently be used to encourage management to take disciplinary action against him - the penalty for which could be the loss of his job. This is clearly intended as a warning to others that they too can be picked off.

It underlines the need for a Left Unity organisation strong enough to organise collective resistance to the leadership's attacks on individuals - one which provides a permanent rallying point for all those who are prepared to challenge management and, if necessary their own officials.

It is to be hoped that the recent conference is a step towards such an organisation.

Left must link up to fight for a decent minimum wage

Fred Leplat

Around 100 trade union activists attended the second national conference of the Trade Union Left Alliance (TULA) to re-affirm their commitment to fight against the bosses and the Tory policies being carried out by new Labour.

TULA was formed a year ago by all the major left currents within the trade union movement.

Geoff Martin, Unison's London Regional Convenor, said that the scales fell from peoples eyes about new Labour at the same time as they did about the Spice Girls. He went on to discuss the fight for a minimum wage and for decent funding for public services.

Jimmy Nolan spoke about the struggle of the Liverpool Dockers against both their employers and the TGWU leadership, who throughout their struggle have attempted to stitch up deals with management behind the dockers' backs, and who still refuse to offi-

Defend Bernie Hynes

Simon Deville
NOVEMBER'S Socialist Outlook reported on the de-recognition of UNISON activist Bernie Hynes by British Gas.

Since then, Bernie's branch has passed a resolution (re-printed below) in his defence. This resolution was duly forwarded to the Secretary of UNISON's District Gas Committee, but strangely the Secretary appears to have lost the resolution and not included it on the agenda of their next meeting on 4 December.

It is clear that at least one UNISON full-timer was complicit with management in Bernie's de-recognition, and it is quite likely that they will use this opportunity to replace him with a right-winger more acceptable to management and the union bureaucracy.

If the British Gas management think they can get away with choosing who the workforce has to represent them, then this practice will become commonplace.

All those who believe that the workers themselves should decide who represents them should take the following resolution to their trade union or other organisations.

"This branch/organisation calls upon British Gas Service management, both at Leicester Area Service Centre and at the Staines Headquarters, to rescind the de-recognition of Bernie Hynes as a UNISON Staff Representative, and to restore trade union facilities to him.

"We further call upon UNISON at all levels to campaign to get this de-recognition rescinded and to win the restoration of trade union facilities as a matter of urgency. We demand that UNISON gives full legal backing to the Industrial Tribunal application, and that no attempt is made to undermine the application.

"We support the decision of the local staff representatives not to replace Bernie Hynes as a staff representative or as the chair of the local Joint Commit-

tee Staff Side, and call upon the Regional Gas Committee not to replace him on the Service Sector Executive or the National Joint Committee Staff Side.

"We call upon the Regional Health and Safety Committee to take up the campaign with particular regard to his de-recognition as a health and safety representative".

Resolutions should be passed to:

- * British Gas HQ, 30 The Causeway, Staines, Middlesex, TW18 3BY

- * British Gas Leicester Area Service Centre, PO Box 28, Aylestone Road, LE2 7QH

- * UNISON East Midlands Regional Office, 15 Castle Gate, Nottingham NG1 6BY

- * UNISON Energy Committee, 1 Mableton Place, London, WC1H 9AJ.

- * Bernie Hynes, 18 Walnut Street, Leicester, LE2 7LD.

Our motto for Left: cooperate in 98!

A year of two halves...



1997 has not been an easy year for political activists in Britain.

May 1 did see the long awaited defeat of the Tory government – a moment for much celebration. Their replacement by Blair's New Labour Party has meant that attacks on working people have continued – just under a different gloss.

Even those who warned that Blair was wedded to the same reactionary policies as his predecessors have been somewhat taken aback by the scale of the continuing assaults. The Bank of England, nationalised by the 1945 Labour government was handed back to the private sector.

The cry of "Education, education, education" has been turned into the introduction of fees for students. Despite a couple of handouts, the crisis in the NHS continues unabated. The fiftieth anniversary of the Health Service next year must be turned into a mammoth campaign to defend its very existence.

Underlying the assaults on public services and working conditions lies not only a general determination to attack the living standards of working class people but New Labour's commitment to European Monetary Union and the Maastricht Convergence criteria.

As Britain prepares to take over the Presidency of the European Union in the New Year, Blair has made clear that he aims to try to export the flexible working practices that have become a hallmark of wasteland Britain to the rest of Europe.

While existing uncertainty about the benefits of entry into the single currency may have led Gordon Brown to delay the referendum until after the next General Election, it is certainly clear that we will still face the very same austerity measures that would 'fit' the economy for entry.

Women may well have been heartened to see the large intake of new women MPs on May 1. But our "sisters" have so far delivered a pretty sour menu – cuts in lone parent benefits, the abolition of family credit, no improvement to dwindling abortion facilities let alone a strengthening of the law.

Black people heeded 'Operation Black Vote', and turned out to support Labour in large numbers. While there have been some gains with the victory of some anti-deportation cases like the Onibiyos, and the inquiry into the vicious murder of Stephen Lawrence, the panoply of racist laws remain intact.

Not even the devastating benefit cuts for asylum seekers have been reversed, and despite the high profile successes the rate of



(Top) The dark night of Tory rule ended ... leaving students (above) to fight New Labour's Tory policies

deportations actually seems to be rising.

Now there is a new racist threat too as hysteria is whipped up against gypsies from the Czech republic fleeing the violence of fascist thugs.

While the National Front managed only a pathetic turn out for Dover there is no doubt that with Labour in government the far right is set to make gains.

Sharp end

Young people in particular have been at the sharp end over recent months. The so called 'New Deal' for the unemployed is first targeted at those under 26. While opposition to Project Work and the JSA was growing before May, too many have been taken in by Labour's promises in this area.

The reality is that people will have no choice but will either be forced into dead end schemes which mirror the Tories practice or forced off benefits altogether to disappear into the ranks of 'non-people'.

add to the thrill of smoking – as well as raising the price as younger people bribe others to shop for them.

Valiant struggles have continued after Labour's election as the Liverpool Dockers, the Magnet workers and the Hillingdon Hospital workers have continued their bitter battles completely unaided by a government that has ample power to settle their just grievances.

The alliance developed last year between the Dockers and activists from 'Reclaim the Streets' has been further cemented and there is a good deal of moral and financial support from rank and file trade unionists...

These strikes however have so far remained isolated. While there has been increasing anger at the failure of Blair's government to reverse Tory attacks and indeed his determination to deepen them, this is not in itself enough.

Trade Union organisation has been devastated during the long night of Tory rule and the anti-union laws still constrain effective

may have won her battle with Mandelson around exemptions but there is little likelihood of the minimum wage being set at a decent level without a major campaign around it – one that the bureaucracy show no signs of getting off their knees to lead.

It seems further to be taken for granted that it's OK to exclude young people altogether – what ever happened to the notion of Equal Pay for work of equal value?

There have been some positive changes since the election. The victory of the Scottish and Welsh peoples in their respective referendums is no small step. Blair may back devolution for his own reasons which are completely different from those of principled socialists but this in no way diminishes the victory.

Teeth

Now the vote needs to be built on the ensure that the Assemblies which are to be put into place have real teeth. Especially in Wales where the result was much closer

There seems to be increasing recognition amongst at least some sections of the left and some layers of activists that if the Blair bubble is to be burst we had better all work together.

Escaping to college is hardly an option for most when not only have fees been imposed but the crumbling and under-funded colleges already have more students than resources permit.

At the same time Jack Straw is attacking young people on the street, with his notion of imposing curfews and stiffer penalties for young offenders.

Nor will the latest wheeze – to make young people pay for Blair's faux pas over Formula One sponsorship by making the sale of cigarettes under 18s illegal – do anything to save them from this addiction. Instead, illegality will

action just as much as they did before May.

Despite these weakness, patience may begin to run out before too long. Gordon Brown has stressed the need for wage restraint in his mini-budget but despite his pleas his words will fall on deaf ears amongst the fat cats.

Trade unionists especially those in the public sector have had enough and there is a real possibility that action may follow in the spring.

Nor is it likely that the Commission's proposals on the minimum wage will do enough to buy off this anger. Margaret Beckett

isation around the referendum much weaker, this will be an uphill struggle.

In Ireland the so-called "peace" process has made little progress. While the cease fire is undoubtedly welcome the Orange colours of the British government were demonstrated all too well during the marching season.

New Labour have continued the incarceration of Roisin McAisley, now deprived of her liberty for more than a year for a crime she could not possibly have committed.

Yet even the pleas of the Irish government, no friend to Roisin or

her family have fallen on deaf ears in the British Home Office. The real negotiations on the future of the six-county state are likely to take place when Gerry Adams visits Blair later this month – but unfortunately the Republican movement has few cards to play.

The need to rebuild a solidarity movement in this country has never been greater.

Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope in a different sphere. There seems to be increasing recognition amongst at least some sections of the left and some layers of activists that if the Blair bubble is to be burst we had better all work together.

Unity in action, while retaining open and comradely debate about differences in ideas is more crucial today than ever.

Sectionalism on the British left puts off many people from becoming involved on a broader basis – they may be forced to defend their own jobs or services but will then retreat into the cocoon of inactivity unless socialists get their act together and present something more attractive than our usual squabbling.

Working together

Slowly and partially this is beginning to dawn on the left. Whether through the recent Socialist Alliances conference or the Welfare State Network or the Trade Union Left Alliance better working relationships are being built.

This is not a minute too soon if we are going to mount a fight back against government attacks – let alone create a new political force that can really represent the interests of working class people.

Some inspiration can be gained from developments outside Britain itself. Across Europe over the last twelve months militant strike action and other forms of protests against the effects of European integration have continued.

The huge demonstrations in Amsterdam and Luxembourg were beacons of international solidarity.

Nor have successes been confined to Europe. Across the globe, whether with the massive tumult in South Korea early in the year, or the huge demonstration in Prague which surely precipitated the fall of the Klaus regime, the working class remains very much centre stage. The end of history is not nigh. The question is rather how we can go forward with renewed determination and unity to ensure that its pages are written in our interests.

We need a strengthened offensive against the evils of capitalism, and a renewed vision of a future free from exploitation and oppression.

Buddy, can you spare a Bernie?

Harry Sloan looks at the New Sleaze

APPARENTLY the sum of £1 million has become known as "a Bernie" since the row over the donation to the Labour Party by Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone hit the headlines.

But this may already be out of date: £1m could be a "burger" after Planet Hollywood fat cat Robert Earl became the latest top employer to flick through his small change and find a handout for the "people's party".

Amid fresh claims (from no less a source than the authoritative *Daily Star*) that Tony Blair is contemplating changing the name of the party to the Democratic Party, it seems almost every day brings a new Clinton-style whiff of scandal.

The US administration which appears to offer the finished model for New Labour is plunging ever deeper into sleaze and ridicule, with continued public debates on the shape and disposition of the Presidential penis.

Of course nobody would dream of implying that the saintly and apparently well-zipped Mr Blair could ever be lured from the scriptures long enough to become embroiled in Paula Jones-type allegations, but those around him may yet be more vulnerable.

Whatever the sexual proclivities of New Labour, and whatever they get up to on the front bench, the Party has lost no time in cultivating its own unsavoury bunch of big business cronies, all of whom bring with them the suspicion that after years of profitable and cosy coexis-



Blair: taking (grateful handouts) from the rich and giving to the ... rich.

tence with the Tories, their sudden wish to support the new regime may not be unconnected with the wish to promote – or obstruct – specific policies.

The Ecclestone case was especially suspicious. This long-time Tory supporter swung late behind Labour – but his million in readies, and Party chiefs' hopes of getting even more from him – were established on the scene in time to apply extra pressure on the issue of tobacco advertising.

Every aspect of the surrounding scandal was appallingly ill-judged

by Blair's seemingly all-conquering "spin doctors".

Labour's belated decision to return the donation gave Ecclestone the ultimate double satisfaction: not only had he got the decision he wanted, but he even got his money back into the bargain!

The repayment of this cash was made much easier in the event by the well-timed arrival on the scene of over-priced burger magnate Robert Earl, whose ability to donate £1m to Labour was no doubt influenced by the fact that his chain of restaurants pays staff as little as

£2.98 an hour – well below even the lowest projected figure for a national minimum wage.

Sloshing around enormous sums of money may seem to Mr Earl to be a way of attracting free media coverage for his tedious restaurants and piling on pressure to keep wages low: it certainly appears that the government was already leaning towards a minimum wage closer to his target than to the trade unions. Maybe he guessed this and wanted to say a little thankyou.

But all the while the government is desperately keen to prove that money can't buy influence – especially if that money is the tens of millions of pounds funnelled into Labour coffers over the years by the trade unions.

Given the results of Gordon Brown's latest budget preview, promising to hold down wages while giving still further tax cuts for companies which already pay the lowest taxes in Europe, the unions have a strong case for demanding a refund. Any passing millionaire has more say on policy than they do.

We have had right wing Labour governments before. But Blair has brought a novel development in the incorporation of more millionaires – with former BP chief Lord Simon, and now Jaguar's ex-boss Geoffrey Robinson making controversial efforts to stash their personal loot on one side as they take time out to act as ministers.

Peter Davis, the man from the Pru, one of the prime culprit firms in the mis-selling of pensions under the Tories, has also been wheeled in as a government advisor. Frank

Field's Chilean chums are also hanging round.

And in the background lurks the bearded, grinning figure of the high-flying opportunist Richard Branson, who could yet be the beneficiary of the government's determined moves to impose a directly elected Mayor on an unconvinced London labour movement.

The basic ingredients are there for an ongoing problem of sleaze for as long as the government clings to its attempt to make "partners" out of exploitative bosses.

But with ministers as right wing as Jack "Private Jails" Straw, and the Blunkett/Byers gang (now seeking new collaboration with public schools), there is surely no need for the bosses to fork out good money to get the policies they want: they can get them for nothing.

New Labour, new scandals: but there is a plus side. At least the weakening of the apparent invincibility of the spin doctors and party managers seems to have opened a slight space for left wing critics to speak out within the party.

Last week 120 Labour MPs, not all of them on the left, signed a letter opposing the cuts in lone parent benefits. The size of the vote against fox-hunting was in part a show of rebellion against a government which wanted to keep this election pledge on the back burner.

Two Commons committees have now denounced the retreat over Formula One tobacco advertising.

Perhaps we needed sleaze to raise its head to enable some real politics to re-emerge after six months of sycophantic drivel?

Labour left must turn outwards

Pete Firmin looks at the tasks facing the Labour Left for the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups Conference, to be held in Leeds on December 6.

SIX MONTHS into the Labour government, the Leeds conference takes place at an important time for the Labour Left. It is now possible to assess what that government is doing and the response of the Left so far.

The government has shown clearly that the pre-election move to adopt Tory policies was no mere smokescreen. From day one, the priority has been to gain the confidence of the employers and to carry out policies in their interests.

This has meant independence for the Bank of England and bringing millionaires like Lord Simon into the Cabinet. It has ensured a firm commitment to the single European currency, with all the cuts in the welfare state that entails, even if there has been some uncertainty about when Britain should join.

Cuts in lone parent benefit, the 'New Deal' forcing people into low paid jobs are one side of this equation. The other side is the delay in introducing a minimum wage (likely to be low and with at least the exemption of young workers) and no move on the Tory anti-union laws,

little progress on union rights.

The refusal to address disputes like the Liverpool dockers, which the government could move on since it is a shareholder in the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company is part of the same picture.

In government, the Blairites have found that reality cannot be manipulated as easily as the Labour Party. Even their famed presentation skills have failed them with the farce of Ecclestone's £1 million.

On the terrain of Party democracy it has been a mixed bag for Blair. "Partnership in Power", a fundamental attack on Party democracy, went through conference without too many problems.

Blair is seeing through the expulsion of key activists in Leeds North East. He has so far managed to mute any rebellion by MPs by changing the PLP's standing orders so that MPs are disciplined for voting against the Whip on anything, rather than only on motions of confidence as previously. Even the Left MPs have only been willing to abstain rather than vote against policies they oppose.

The other side to the coin has also been evident however. Blair's favourite son, Mandelson lost to Ken Livingstone for the NEC. The four MEPs suspended for having the audacity to question the system by which MEPs will be elected next time won a lifting of the suspension and the gag, and now Jack Straw has even retreated on the system of election itself.

On the Parliamentary front, things may come to a head soon with the vote on the scrapping of lone parent benefit, where there is a large group of MPs may well defy the Whip, facing Blair with a choice of suspending them or backing down.

If they are suspended, then the Left needs to respond quickly with a massive campaign of support to show the MPs are not isolated.

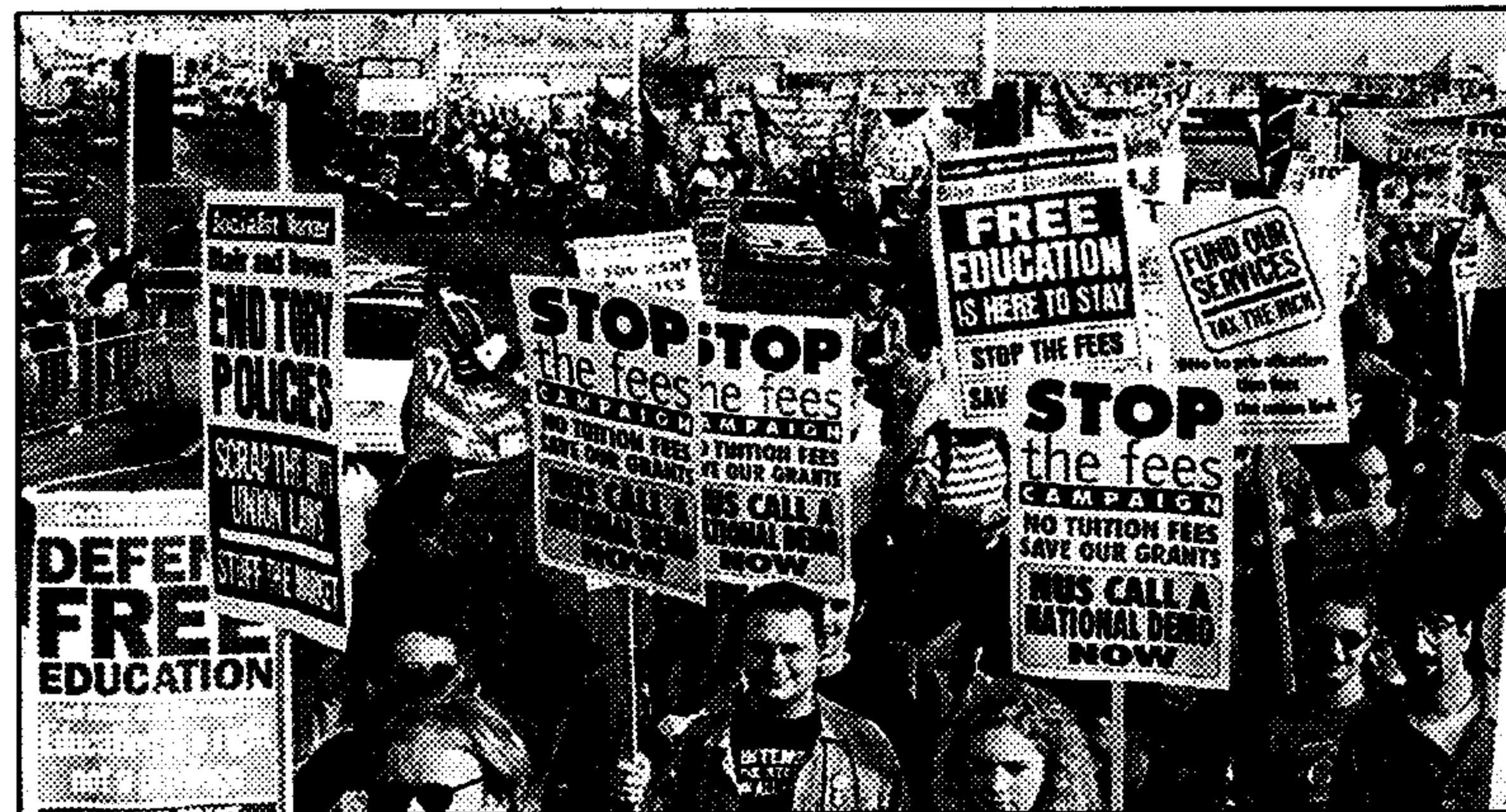
The real issue facing the Left however, is not the question of the balance of forces within the Party, at whatever level, but what it can do to fight back against the policies of the government, and if possible force them to be reversed. The internal fight over democracy and policy is a part of that fight, but only part of it.

Promote fightback

To defeat tuition fees for students, the 'New Deal' for the unemployed, or any other aspect of the government's policies, the Labour Left has to be part of, and promote, the fightback by those affected by the policy.

While MPs voting against pernicious policies is to be welcomed, given the government's majority, the number of MPs on the 'payroll vote' and the number of sycophants, this is not going to defeat the policy. What might do so is if those MPs lend their weight to supporting and promoting the campaigns which exist on these issues, and Party members help to build and spread them.

Blair had an easy ride at confer-



Left MPs must join up with fight against student fees

ence mainly due to the support he received from the leaders of the big unions on Partnership in Power and other issues. Yet union members are among the hardest hit by the policies labour is pursuing.

Several union leaders defied their own conference policy to give Blair this support. They are not upset at the adoption of Partnership in Power because, just as it allows Blair to avoid being accountable to the movement, so they do not need to openly flout their unions' policy. Cosy chats in Downing Street are, of course, not minuted.

Labour Party members are not alone in being outraged at union leaders' conduct. Within every union there are members arguing for the union to pursue its own policy more vigorously, for the accountability of the leaderships and for policies which would provide opposition to the direction of the government.

Instead of denouncing 'the unions', Party members need to be involved in left formations in their own unions and link up campaign groups with those in their areas fighting within the unions.

Labour Party branches and CLPs must be turned outwards to campaign around issues like tuition fees

and defence of the welfare state, together with the existing campaigns.

Campaigns to win places for the Left on the NEC and Policy Forums should be seen in this context of building support for a fightback on policies and Party democracy. The individual candidates are less important than a vigorous campaign around key policies.

Informal discussions are already taking place between sections of the Left (or not-so-Left like Labour Reform) to construct slates. There is no harm in this, unless it is used to carve out a section of the Left in order to accommodate Labour Reform.

The danger is that such informal discussions will take place instead of, rather than supplementing, a general forum of the Left to decide on a platform and a slate of candidates.

There are already signs that this is the case, with various forces trying to avoid involving the Network until such time as they have a slate to present as a fait accompli.

The Network conference needs to demand openness in such discussions and that the Network campaign around key issues in the coming year.

Get ready for the day Blair's bubble bursts

John Nicholson

IT USED TO BE said that there were only two things certain in life – death and taxes. Under Tony Blair, of course, the latter is a little less certain. Actually, the way in which he tried to take over the national mourning for Diana suggests that he is working on the former too.

But let us hazard a guess that Tony's hair is indeed going to thin and go grey and that his waist is indeed going to thicken and go saggy... and that he is going to become subject to mortality despite all his image-makers can do for him. What is going to happen then?

When Blair's Bubble Bursts, where will you be?

The signs are already there. Blair's Labour government is not disappointing its enemies – it never wanted to please us in the first place – but it is disappointing its friends. Look at these comments in the media

"(Blair) preaches "giving". He will be judged by whether he has given in to Thatcherism."

"The growing realisation is that we may soon not be able to look to the Labour Party to represent what we believe."

"Australian politics are known to influence New Labour – so the message is clear: It should prepare to move to the left."

Who said the above? Not socialists, not "old Labour", not even the Blessed Lord Roy of Hattersley. No, it was the Editor and Business Editor of the *Observer*, some of the strongest to encourage Blair in the "new" direction to abandon Clause IV and public ownership and the means of re-distributing what the Tories had unfairly distributed over the last 18 years.

EMU

In business circles the same disappointment is forthcoming. European Monetary Union is demanded by Blair's business "partners".

So much headway has been made by Blair in enlisting trade union support for his "project" that the trades unions themselves have joined (at TUC level anyway)



Left to the left of Labour? Clarke

in the call for Maastricht's rigid anti welfare state criteria to be adopted – with a call of "when do we want them? Now!"

As for the "people", those sweet ordinary somethings who Blair was so keen to "include" in a Whitehall open-door approach, look at the patronising pat on the head which Blair gave Blunkett after the latter's speech on education to the Party Conference.

Who can forget the secret shake of the hand which Blair gave to Gerry Adams, paternally elevating him to "human being" status?

Hence Blair's language before the Election: to people who are black, or disabled, or lesbian or gay, he pronounced that these "differences aren't important".

To all those suffering disadvantage generally, he envisaged a society which would be fair to ordinary people. Equality is for all "ordinary" people. Discrimination is "unimportant". Four legs good, two legs better.

But Blair seems upset when his erstwhile friends become surprised by his new (newer?) directions. Don't they understand, he petulantly asks, that the Tories are still in Government?

Treasury

Don't they understand that the "Treasury" has set these spending limits? One local Labour Party leaflet, in a constituency with a fair number of middle class parents, advises its readers to "join the Labour Party" if they are concerned about tuition fees for higher education, as it is the "Treasury" which is to blame for all the difficulties!

The same goes for health. Poor Frank Dobson has no choice but to live within the government (that's the Tory Government) spending limits. John Prescott likewise, cannot tackle environmental and transport concerns.

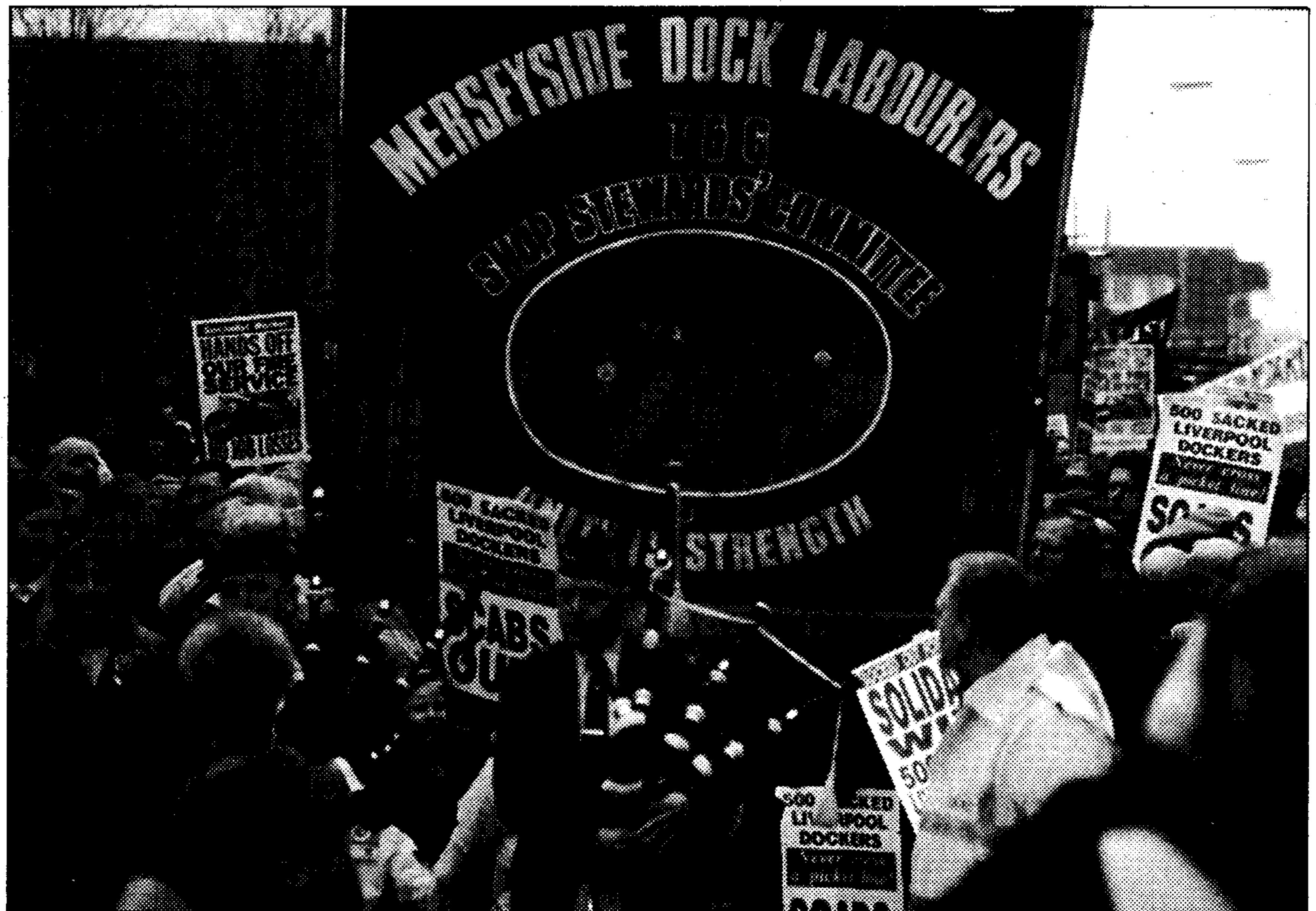
It's the *government* (that is, the Tory government) which held public inquiries into road schemes and Runway Extensions and these inquiries were properly held and there's nothing we can do about them.

And the Mersey dockers should know better than to ask their union leadership (the mighty TGWU) or the government (13% shareholders in their employer's company) for support in their dispute.

They (the Labour government and the TUC) would be breaking the law. Their hands are tied. There's nothing they can do about it, is there?

(Except of course that if the Tories had won again, taxes would have gone up by now to pay for the economic deficit they had left for their successors.)

Any willingness Clarke and Hestine may have had to join a one-nation party of left-Tories, new-Labour and middle-ground Liberal Democrats, must have gone out of the window – now that they have effectively positioned themselves to the left of Blair.



Reaching out to build a new style of alliance: the Liverpool dockers show the way for socialists

But a lot of us are not Blair's friends. Dockers, deportees, disadvantaged, disenfranchised, discriminated against... people can't wait for Blair's bubble to burst. We have to help make it happen.

This is because new Labour's new danger is still the same old danger: that the opposition to its sunshine smile and Camelot carry-on will come from the far Right.

To redress the balance, to counter the threat, there is no single right answer. No-one has a monopoly of ideas.

Instead there is a compelling argument for developing alliances of forces. Socialists, environmentalists, direct action campaigners,

trade unionists, need to join together in new ways of working across the issues and across the regions, to say that there is an alternative (there has always been an alternative) to the free-market madness of Blair and Major, Hague and Thatcher.

This is what the Liverpool dockers have represented, in making links with many non-traditional forces; and this is why their struggle is not old but new.

Their struggle is about challenging the globalisation and casualisation of work and workers everywhere, about connecting the environment with the economy, and about raising the standard of

human dignity against the oppression of the new capitalists and their "partnership" politics.

Their struggle is all our struggle. Their victory will be all our victory. Morris and Blair could do with remembering that this is where their organisations come from, before they themselves are consigned to the place in history which they seem so eagerly to desire.

And we need to put them there, not just sit back and wait for the bubble to burst.

John Nicholson is Convenor of the Network of Socialist Alliances in England

Mood of co-operation strong as Socialist Alliances link up

Chris Jones

70 delegates attended the 'Blair's Bubble Bursts' meeting in Walsall on November 29. The delegates from a wide range of socialist and green organisations in England, Scotland and Wales exchanged opinions and experiences about their activities and hopes for wider co-operation amongst socialists.

There were sharp disagreements over electoral activity and attitudes to the Labour Party and Labour Left. These, however, did not detract from the comradely spirit of the meeting; nor the concerns that existed for developing co-operation and the creation of Socialist Alliances in more towns across Britain.

A small minority felt it was possible to rush towards the creation of a new socialist party and have large scale anti-labour electoral campaign in the May 1998 local elections.

Nobody disagreed about the need for a new, strong party fighting for working class interests. Most, however, had a more sober appreciation of the immense tasks facing socialists in ringing this about.

The strength of the Labour Party within work-

ing class politics was under-rated by many. Some delegates' pre-occupation with elections led them away from the central task of fighting for working class unity – a unity vital to confront the bourgeois offensive currently being led by Blair's policy on Europe.

The decision to send comradely greetings to the Socialist Campaign Group AGM in Leeds on December 6 was not universally popular – a hint of sectarianism that hopefully will not grow.

As at previous Socialist Alliance meetings the federal nature of the relationship between national alliances in England, Scotland and Wales was recognised. Speakers from the Scottish and Welsh Alliances expressed their pleasure at attending the meeting and explained the distinction of the political situation in their countries.

In a subtle dig at New Labour, delegates rounded off the day with beer and sandwiches in a wine bar owned by a Walsall Democratic Labour Party member.

Delegates took away a wide range of ideas for future activities and agreed to reconvene in June to review progress. A small liaison group will continue to facilitate exchanges between groups and the development of new contacts.

"Best value" – but whose values?

by Eikle Dee

Labour's election manifesto pledged to "abolish CCT and replace it with a duty to obtain best value".

Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) had been central to the Tory strategy for privatising public services and reducing public expenditure through cutting services and jobs and driving down pay and conditions for workers.

Many people hoped that in this area at least, the new Labour government would deliver an improvement. Some hope.

'Best Value' could well be worse than CCT. Trade unionists and activists in campaigns to defend public services and the welfare need to understand why.

Labour intends to limit public spending. There will be no extra money in the short term for most services, already damaged by so many years of cuts. The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) will be maintained.

Competition

The concept of Best Value maintains an emphasis on open competition and value for money in the free market. Don't forget Blair's words on the need for a flexible, competitive workforce. CCT is not going to be abolished immediately, but gradually replaced.

The plan is to encourage voluntary competitive tendering (VCT) by councils and other public sector organisations by offering incentives, while enshrining Best Value in law. Councils will be allowed to offset VCT tenders against CCT requirements, and given more freedom in decision making.

The main piece of CCT legislation, the Local Government Act 1988, made it illegal for councils to take "non-commercial considerations" into account when awarding contracts. Non-commercial considerations include working conditions, employment rights, practices of a tenderer towards existing workers, etc.



Victims of the squeeze on council budgets: London firefighters protest at threatened cuts to services.

This was clearly intended to stop councillors taking account of workers' interests.

The only reform now proposed, in a Private Member's Bill from Oona King, is to require contractors to take part in the Welfare to Work scheme!

To understand the context in which best value is being introduced it is worth looking back at Conservative policy on local government. The local government reorganisation in the 1980s was based on a monetarist approach to economic management and a view that public spending is basically a negative activity, to be minimised wherever possible.

"Customers"

To impose this vision, people who rely on public services had to be reinvented as "customers". Never mind that access to local services isn't simply a matter of looking round the shops and choosing what you want to spend your money on, or that many "customers" of councils don't have any money anyway.

Changes in local government taxation were key to this.

While the Poll Tax's unpopularity led to its replacement by Council Tax, the principle of

individuals as customers paying for services was successfully introduced, with huge consequences for local government and for the welfare state.

Any public spending can be linked in people's minds with a rise in Council Tax. The unemployed, single mothers, asylum seekers, others who need services and do not directly pay Council Tax, are portrayed as scroungers, not just off the state but off those with jobs.

The interests of Council workers asking for decent wages and conditions are also set against those of local people. This nasty but effective piece of divide and rule has had a real impact.

The Labour government explicitly maintains this principle: "The duty of best value is one that local authorities will owe to local people, both as taxpayers and the customers of local authority services".

Current policy retains the concept of the purchaser-provider split, introduced throughout the public sector in the 1980s to limit public spending. The role of the client/purchaser is to keep costs down by buying the service as cheaply as possible, while the provider/contractor has to be competi-

tive. The needs of the working class whether as employees or service users are deprioritised.

The introduction of PFI by the Tories extended privatisation. Under PFI the public sector contracts to buy services not assets, and retains a role in the project – as client. Far from rejecting PFI, Labour's concern has been to promote and encourage its implementation.

In local government, there had been no major schemes signed up by April 1997, although a number were being developed. Private companies and banks had doubts about the extent of councils' legal powers in relation to projects on the scale of PFI schemes, and Labour's response has been to draw up the Local Government (Contracts) Bill, likely to become law by the end of this year.

Guaranteed profit

This will reassure private investors that Councils have powers to make deals and guarantees and that they will therefore get their money back and make a profit. Labour evidently hopes to make PFI an attractive option for delivering "Best Value" in services.

To return to Best Value, what is the reality behind the rhetoric?

Policies are still being developed, but statements from Hilary Armstrong, minister for local government, and the pilot projects being drawn up by some local authorities, make it quite clear that the emphasis is still on value for money, ie keeping costs down.

The government's document 'A Framework for Best Value' states that authorities should establish a "corporate view of what they want to achieve and how they perform against both objective indicators and against the aspirations of the local community".

Councils will be required to review service activity, monitor achievement and publish and report back on their performance. Monitoring and reviews will be audited. The Secretary of State will have powers to intervene.

Reviews will set "targets for improved performance and efficiency" and "identify the means by which these will be achieved. The

presumption will be that open competition will be used unless authorities are able to demonstrate that this is inappropriate".

An emphasis on monitoring and publishing statistics is already endemic in local government (as in schools league tables), CCT monitoring of private contractors and in-house Direct Service Organisations (DSOs).

Anyway what *are* objective indicators? Why measure something which doesn't relate to someone's needs/interests, and isn't therefore subjective?

Success in reducing expenditure and increased productivity in local government may be in line with the government's priorities, but measurements of these are not objective indicators.

The published principles of Best Value involve an attempt to put an attractive gloss on government policy, with references to improving the "effectiveness and the quality of local services" and "local accountability to the electorate". But the reality is that this is in a context of cuts in public spending.

Consultation?

There has been a view put forward that "the public" is central to best value, but this is not clearly defined.

Local authorities have prepared for Best Value by setting up consultation procedures, such as surveys of service users, open forums, and talking to residents' associations. But there is no requirement on local authorities to take any notice of the public's expressed wishes.

As with CCT, a huge workload is created by the need to collect, analyse and present statistics. The trend to cut staff working directly with the public while appointing more managers on both client and contractor sides looks likely to continue.

Islington Council for example plans to make huge cuts in its front line staff while appointing Quality Managers. You can't improve the quality of services while cutting the cost.

Like CCT, Best Value will continue to be profitable for the private sector. Money paid for public services is being spent on fees to private companies who have won contracts. They wouldn't get involved if it wasn't profitable.

Privatisation of public services means that taxpayers' money is being paid to directors and shareholders of companies like Onyx, who deal with street cleaning and rubbish collection for a number of London Boroughs.

Competitive tendering, compulsory or voluntary, and Best Value, involves employing consultants to prepare services to be sold off, and commercial law firms to draw up the contracts.

Consultancy firms will be involved in service reviews and monitoring, and the published principles of Best Value imply a role for private management consultancy as a method of intervention where councils have failed to meet performance targets.

The hefty fees paid to these firms will mean money being taken away from service provision: value for money? I don't think so!

Rail workers resist privatisation

GREG TUCKER reports on developments in the rail industry

"YOU HAVE to recognise, privatisation under Labour is different to privatisation under the Tories".

So the RMT Executive were told last month by one of our sponsored Mps.

RMT members may be forgiven for not appreciating the subtleties of this "difference" as John Prescott, himself an RMT member, prepares to sell off London Underground to the highest bidder.

Underground workers are not prepared to see their jobs privatised. Already they have forced

Prescott to stop the sell off of LUL's Acton Works.

A campaign of regular pickets of the Transport Ministry by Acton Works staff was followed up by a successful ballot for industrial action. The threat of a strike forced Prescott to withdraw the sale.

Now a report by Price Waterhouse sits on his desk. Well publicised leaks indicate a massive sell off is planned, leasing and contracting out virtually every existing LUL job.

As far as the RMT is concerned, Acton Works is only a foretaste of the campaign of industrial action we are prepared to wage to defend a publicly owned, publicly-controlled LUL.

Elsewhere in the industry, railworkers are going on the offensive. On South West Trains, now owned by Stagecoach, and on Wales & West, guards are being balloted on our demand for a 37 hour week.

SWT also faces a ballot over pay for all staff. Both companies face the threat of strike action before Christmas.

Railworkers are fed up being pushed around by our new "owners". With the Labour government refusing to honour its former pledges to reverse privatisation the time has come to take our destiny into our own hands.

SOS for our National Health Service!

THE WELFARE State Network is planning a major conference next spring in defence of the NHS. Part of the preparation for this conference is seeking trade union support for a platform of policies which offer a way forward for the NHS, which can be demanded from the Labour government.

The latest issue of the WSN's paper Action carries a centre-page spread setting out detailed proposals from John Lister of London Health Emergency. Here we carry a shorter version of his proposals, and urge readers to back the campaign.

THE GOVERNMENT'S allocation of an extra £300 million to the NHS to relieve the looming "winter crisis" is a recognition that more money really is the key to the problem.

But the new money, ministers insist, is strictly a one-off exercise: it will not be incorporated into next year's budgets.

Worse, the government plans to get through the winter peak by reducing many Trusts to an emergency-only service. Of course in a growing number of hospitals this is already the case.

Health Secretary Dobson has set up yet another "hit squad" of bureaucrats to tour health Trusts telling them how to reduce their waiting lists. But the only way the Tories reduced waiting lists was by spending more money.

Wards must be reopened, and funded to ensure they give care all year round, in addition to "peak-time" provision in the winter

months.

Running an acute ward costs around £350,000 a year. Opening two extra wards in each of 100 health authorities would cost around £70 million. 250,000 extra patients could be treated.

Waiting list operations cost an average of £1,500: with £450m extra spending on core budgets the entire waiting list could be cleared within five years.

Mental health beds for the most severely disturbed patients are under an almost impossible strain. One psychiatric ward at Guy's Hospital recently recorded a bed occupancy rate of 230% - effectively three to a bed.

The Tory government last year admitted that there was a massive gap in the provision of 24-hour nursed accommodation to provide continuing care after the closure of the old Victorian asylums - and even costed out a plan to provide them, but, predictably did nothing to fund it.

Crowd control

With psychiatric nursing staff reduced to little more than crowd control on dangerous, overcrowded wards, and all but the most seriously disturbed patients being excluded from care, new money is urgently needed.

Much of the money saved from closing the old psychiatric hospitals has been squandered and diverted to other areas of care, any moves to fill this yawning gap must be funded by new government cash. Department of Health estimates showed that the required 5,000 extra places would cost £500

million in capital to establish, and £400m a year to run.

Services for the frail elderly also need urgent attention. Tory policies effectively privatised much of this care, with health authorities and Trusts closing geriatric beds, dumping the problem onto social services which in turn have become totally reliant on privately-run nursing homes.

For many pensioners requiring care there is the added misery of means tested charges, which are forcing an estimated 40,000 people a year to sell their houses or spend their life savings.

Social service budgets have also been cash-limited, and the growing problem of funding care in private homes is creating a huge backlog of patients awaiting discharge from hospital.

This year social service budgets are being slashed by over £200m, with more cuts come in 1998, while hospital bed closures have meant that every bed "blocked" by a patient who would be better cared for elsewhere causes huge knock-on problems.

The big nursing home chains have been amalgamating into ever-bigger corporations. Rather than allow these firms to profit from care of the frail elderly, the government should nationalise the nursing homes, and run them as a separate wing of the NHS, introducing basic minimum standards of staffing and care.

Even if the homes were bought at the full market price, for little more than £500m the government could take a huge stride forward in care for the elderly. A logical next



The NHS must invest in staff. Paying a decent rate, to protect services

step would be the elimination of means tested charges for nursing home care.

This would have a revenue cost, but could be set against the savings on bureaucracy and the consequent improvement in the efficiency of NHS hospitals.

NHS staff have been ground down by ever-increasing workload, successive waves of cuts, and wages declining in real terms. Rock-bottom morale has become a tool of management as cynical Trust bosses set out to close units by putting staff on short term contracts, then announcing that the services are "under review" - and then watching qualified staff leave for more secure jobs elsewhere.

The NHS has to recruit able and confident young people: it has to offer decent pay, conditions and job security. The new government should commit itself to a policy of ensuring a real-terms pay increase each year for health workers.

This, together with the injection of new resources into the NHS could revive morale and ensure recruitment and retention of staff.

The NHS should also invest in

new hospitals. The Tory Private Finance Initiative brought all hospital development to a standstill for four years. Now the Labour government is attempting to make the failed Tory scheme work.

The long-term costs are potentially ruinous. Hospital wings costed at £40m are likely to wind up costing upwards of £425m as city speculators and contractors take their slice.

If Labour really wants to ensure value for money, it should scrap PFI and expand the kitty of NHS capital. Instead of regarding this investment in the infrastructure of our health care system as public sector borrowing, it should follow the practice elsewhere of counting it as a capital asset.

*** The full text, a model resolution, and details of other WSN activities, can be obtained by subscribing to the WSN (£5 individuals, £25 union branches).**

Write to WSN, Camden People's Centre, 183 Queen's Crescent, London NW5 4DS. 0171-639-5068.

Education under fire in Hackney

Lizzie Bloom

EDUCATION in Hackney, one of the poorest boroughs in the country is under fierce attack.

Ministers Byers and Barber (the latter himself an ex-Director of Hackney Education) are determined to use the schools, teachers and children as a laboratory for their "naming and shaming" policies.

The borough had already been under the magnifying glass of an schools inspectorate. This report acknowledged Hackney as one of the most impoverished areas in Western Europe. However they did not then go on to recommend any measures to counteract this such as more resources for the schools or the Education authority.

Judging Hackney by the government's own standards the report recognised an improvement. GSE results have improved "at a rate that is faster than the national average". The five A-C grades index has rocketed from 14 per cent in 1990

to 32 per cent last year.

Byers responded to all of this by sending in an "improvement team" in September - an unprecedented intervention into the affairs of a local education authority. Just to make sure that this was a group that workers and users would have confidence in, he put Richard Painter - the man primarily responsible for the closure of Hackney Downs school - in charge.

Painter adopted a novel strategy and organised a cheese and wine event to which he invited all Head Teachers in Hackney. This was obviously the best way to follow the mandate to "set ... clear targets for raising standards in schools."

Telling tales

That is if you think that telling tales on the authority, its officers, the record of other schools or even your own staff is the road to higher morale and a better for the children. Some positive recommendations did come out of the inspection team's report - such as

their acknowledgement that the abolition of the Director of Education's post by the Council and its replacement by a lower graded and less powerful post was a mistake.

This was all in the name of 'Transforming Hackney' - an agenda that has introduced internal 'trading units' to the council and forced thousands of workers to apply for their own jobs.

However these recommendations from Painter were brushed aside by the authority who stood by their new Chief executive, Tony Elliston, formerly of Brent council.

They have been supported by the government in their determination to 'Transform Hackney' into a slicker outfit - with the same old shortage of resources as before.

What is been taken on board in an informal sense at least is the team's stress that schools should be following the agenda of the government's white paper on Education by undermining and indeed abolishing mixed ability teaching.

Stephen Byers made clear in

The Guardian Education debate that "Naming and Shaming" is official policy and will be used well beyond the boundaries of the borough.

From this, naming and sacking teachers is not far off. The White Paper is both an attack on progressive teaching methods and on teachers' working conditions.

Sickness

The problem is further compounded in Hackney by another attack on primary school teachers. Schools have been told they are not very good at managing sickness (which translated means they don't force teachers to come to work when they should be in bed because they are ill.)

As a result of this it is now proposed that instead of getting money from a central pool to cover staff on long term sick, schools will have to manage their own cover budget.

This may sound fine - but what it means in practice is that once a school has someone on long-term

sick the money will run out very quickly and no more cover can be paid for.

This new attack must be resisted by teachers, parents and governors.

Hackney Teachers Association have an alternative perspective on the situation.

They are planning their own report "Hackney Schools speak for themselves", which will show that what is needed is not naming and shaming but more resources to provide the standard of education that all Hackney's children deserve.

However insufficient resources are being devoted to this campaign - a recent lobby of the council and public meeting were sparsely attended. What is desperately needed is a strong and confident critical analysis of New Labour's project in Education.

This is needed at a national level - but in Hackney the need is more urgent.

Victory for Onibiyo family

Mark Jansen

THE ONIBIYO family were told by the Home Office last month that they had finally won their struggle against deportation.

They had lived in Britain since 1964 and were granted permanent residency in 1976. But because Abdul spent over 2 years working in Nigeria he lost his right to permanent residency.

Abdul had been active in the pro-democracy movement in Nigeria and was quite clearly under threat from the dictatorship. He was deported to Nigeria in October 1995, where he was arrested and beaten.

When his son Ade was deported, the Guyanan government offered him a safe haven rather than see him face the same fate as Abdul.

The Nigerian government sent fictitious reports that Abdul was not in detention and was living happily in Nigeria. They attacked the Onibiyo family as being traitors, and even sent representatives to Ade's hearing.

Disgracefully, Tory Home Office minister Anne Widdecombe used these reports from the Nigerian dictatorship to support her claim that the Onibiyo family were not under threat.

Six months

Whilst in opposition, Labour opposed the Tories on this case. However since the General Election the family have had to endure six months in which Joyce and their two children Toro and Yemi also faced the threat of deportation.

The government could have stepped in immediately to lift the threat and allow Abdul and Ade back into Britain.

Thousands of others are facing similar threats. The main reason that the Onibiyo family have at last been successful is that there has been a high profile campaign demanding justice for them.

The Labour government are only likely to adopt immigration policies any different to the Tories if they face a mass campaign demanding change.

Now is the time to start piling on this type of pressure.



The long-awaited reunion: returned deportee Abdul Onibiyo and wife Joyce welcome home deported son Ade as he arrives at Heathrow

Fascists fail to mobilise in Dover

Simon Deville

FOLLOWING the recent anti-gypsy racism expressed throughout the media, and from Dover council, the fascist National Front called a demonstration hoping to tap in to this sentiment.

The racist Asylum and Immigration Act has meant that many people fleeing persecution will not be entitled to state benefits, though local authorities have a legal responsibility under the Children's Act and the National Assistance Act to provide basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing.

Rather than demand that

central government provide resources, the council has instead tried to discourage Eastern European Romanies from fleeing persecution in the first place. The national media has been almost unanimous in supporting this racist approach.

Against this background the NF obviously expected to be able to build upon local racist sentiment.

The feeble attendance of only 60 on its demonstration showed that it had badly miscalculated. The counter-mobilisation(s) of around 300 anti-fascists was a brilliant suc-

cess in comparison.

The NF were forced to march two hours earlier than planned, with police escorting them back to their coaches. To compound the humiliation, they were forced to abandon their rally at the end of the march.

The anti-fascist mobilisation was extremely useful, with a group of around 150 marching from the town centre to the port (where the fascist march was taking place), breaking through police lines on a number of occasions.

Many local youth joined the anti-fascists as they marched through the town.

Despite the success of the counter-mobilisation, the left showed itself to be hopelessly divided.

Had the fascists been more successful in their mobilisation, this could have proved disastrous.

The Anti-Nazi League held its own demonstration of around 50, whilst Anti-Fascist Action, eager to "do the business" kept away from either demonstration, and were kept by police in the pub that they met up in until after the fascists had left.

The main bulk of the anti-fascists met at a rally centrally organised by Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE) and the National Assembly Against Racism (NAAR).

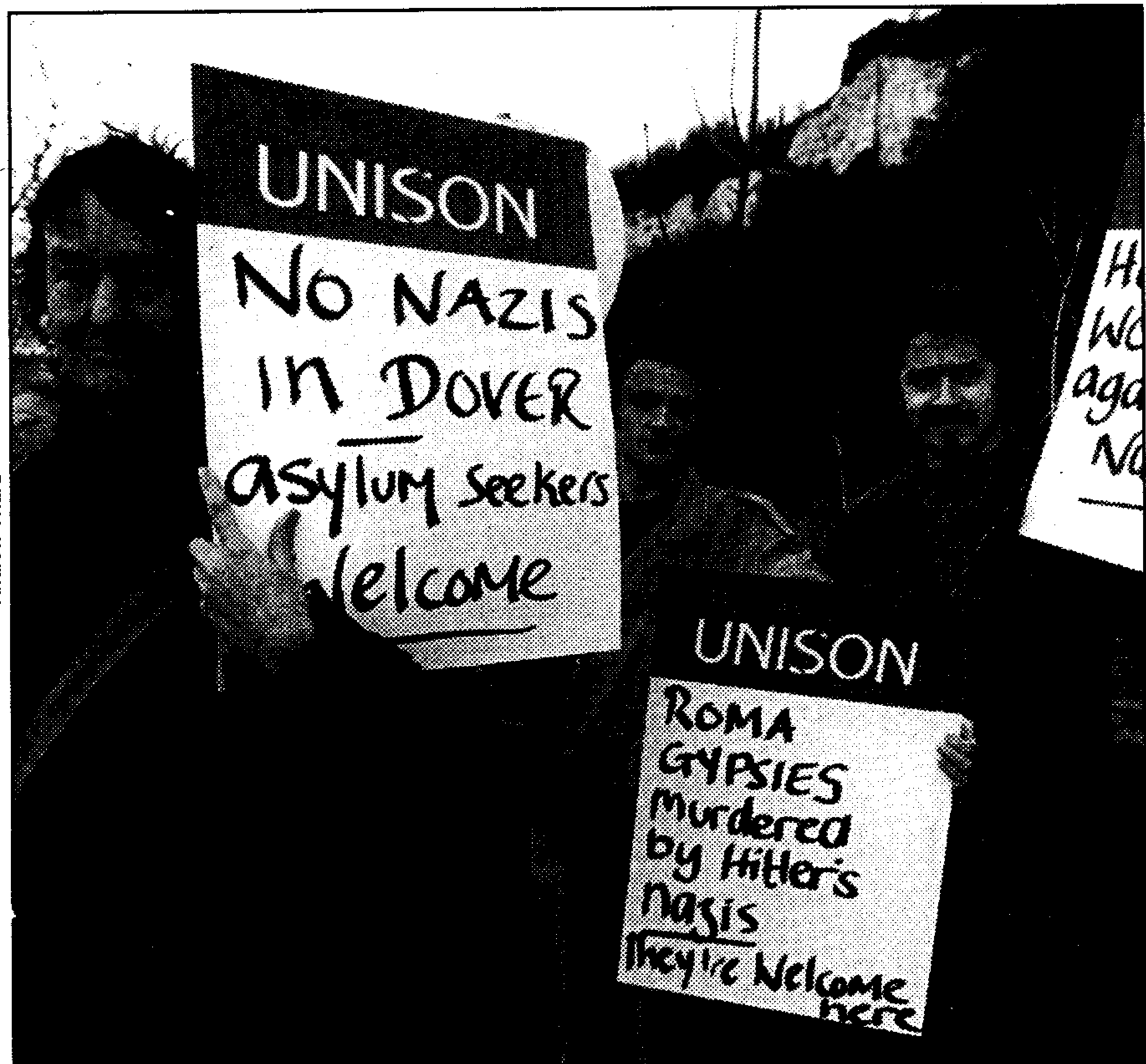
Around two thirds of those at the rally were in neither organisation and decided to march to the port where the NF were. Both the YRE and NAAR remained at the rally, presumably to deliver speeches to each other.

Dangerous divisions

Anti-fascists cannot afford this level of disorganisation and divisions when faced with fascist thugs. The chaotic and pitiful nature of the fascist mobilisation meant that it didn't really matter this time.

We cannot, however, rely on such poor turn-outs from the far right. The fascists are likely to grow as more and more people become frustrated by their social exclusion and disillusioned in New Labour.

It is essential that the left is able not only to provide a political alternative, it must also be able to physically counter the threat of far-right thugs in a disciplined and unified way.



Anti-fascists were divided, but turned out five times more than the feeble NF protest

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Fighting unemployment – while union bureaucrats act the goat

Glenn Voris, Secretary of St. Helens TUC (personal capacity)

St. HELENS TUC and its Resource Centre have been building a local campaign to resist the Job Seekers Allowance and Project Work.

Our organisations were key to the successful campaign around the European Marches against Unemployment, Job insecurity and Social Exclusion in Britain.

In October we held a successful public meeting on "Stuff the JSA and Smash Project Work". This was followed by a protest inside the local job centre by 15 activists.

3 goats accompanied us, giving a novel twist to the action and underlining our argument. "You must be kidding if you think we're going to take these jobs that are on offer". Some of these pay less than £1.50 per hour.

The peaceful protest surprised staff who were stunned by our presence. We explained to them why we were protesting and made a special effort not to alienate them.

We know we need to unite the trade unions and the unemployed on these issues. Management were extremely agitated, especially as some of the staff were fraternising with the protestors – and even stroking the goats!

Both the local newspapers were

present and took photographs and did interviews which were printed the next week. We gained a lot of good publicity and now we have an active unemployed action group.

The Regional secretary of the civil service union PTC wrote to me a week later and viciously attacked our actions. The letter started with, "direct action - invasion of the job centre" and was later followed with, "all you achieved was to alienated my members from your espoused cause by the intimidatory nature of your presence".

He was obviously worried by our successful action and was trying to police the trade union movement.

Rather than cower to his intimidation I took the liberty of photocopying his letter and together with photocopies of the press cuttings handed them out at the next meeting of the NWTUC Regional council.

I raised the debate on the issue and there was a sharp discussion.



On the horns of a dilemma? Campaigners demand no ifs and no butts – an end to JSA!

The chair ended by saying that in future their should be greater communication with the unions when we take these sort of actions. Basically, the argument had been won.

Since then Jason Sloss, a leading Euro communist and the NW Regional officer of the CPSA has also written a hysterical letter on the same subject.

He ended by saying "perhaps you should think on before launching any more puerile gestures". He attended the NWTUC meeting but left during the debate as he didn't have the bottle to argue his corner.

Sloss is the Assistant Secretary of the second biggest CPSA branch in the country, and has also sent a similar letter to a delegate to the

Merseyside Association of TUC's who defended me at the meeting.

These attacks were raised at the next meeting of the Merseyside Association in November. The Association agreed to write to Jason Sloss telling him to stop this witchhunting.

This saga is obviously set to continue with further letters and debates on the North West TUC. We need to keep plugging away and trying to force the bureaucracy to take up a serious fight against mass unemployment.

The bosses are happy to use the fear of job losses to divide those in work from those on benefit and to help prevent strike action.

The St. Helens Unemployed Action Group has stepped up its campaign and is planning a protest inside the local Project Work office with the support of local TUC, Liverpool Dockers and local pensioners group.

Our message to Blair and the TUC bureaucrats is that this situation is unacceptable. We demand a total re-distribution of wealth to create to full employment in socially useful work.

These demands should begin with the implementation of a 35 hour working week with no loss of pay with TUC minimum wage rates and an end to slave labour schemes.

What future for Lesbian and Gay Law Reform under Blair?

William Craig and Peter Purton

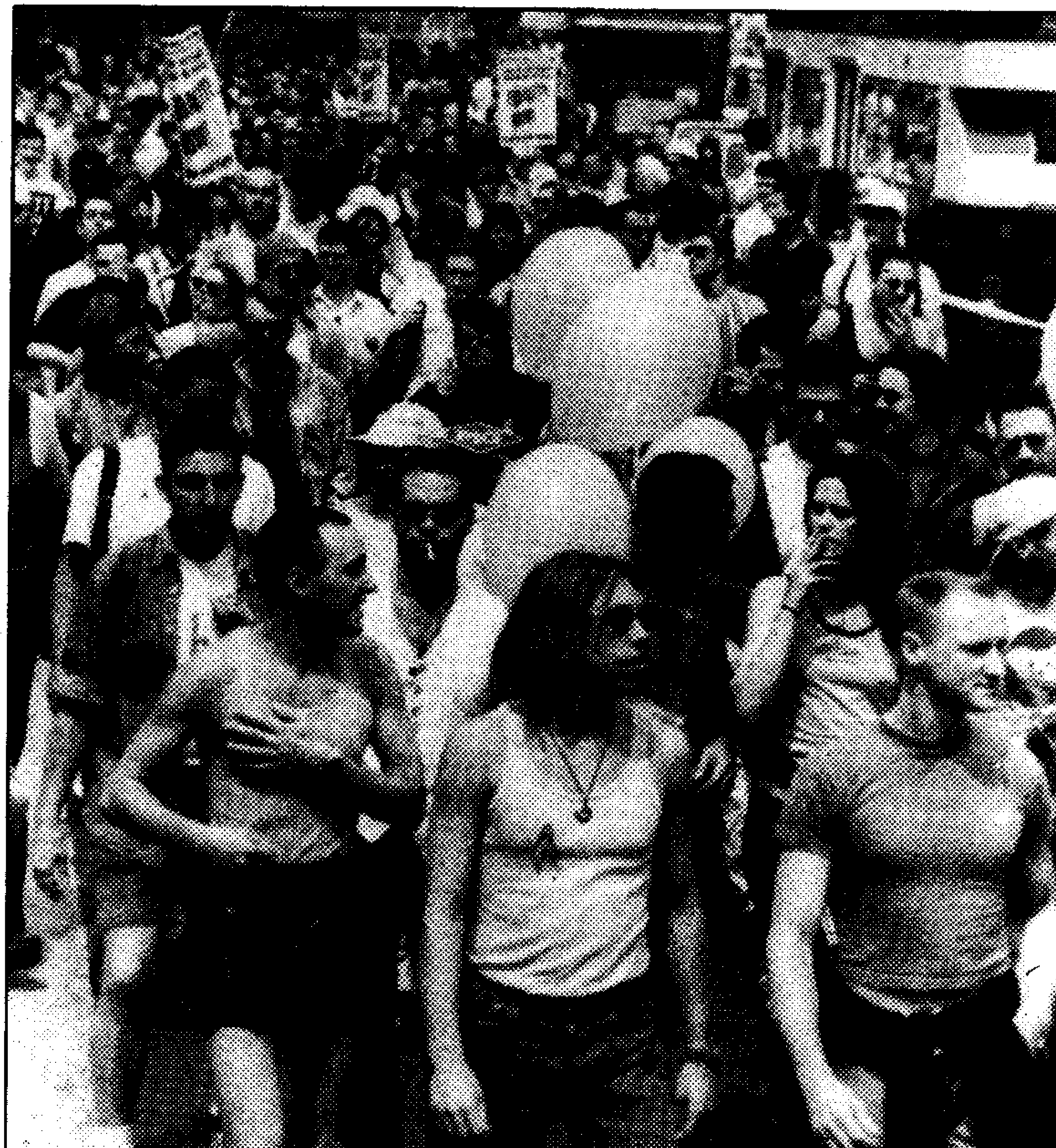
THE IMPORTANCE of the struggle for Lesbian and Gay liberation has not diminished since the election of the new government.

Decisions of the European court are likely to put pressure on for at least limited law reform. However, both the weaknesses of what is proposed and the vagueness of the timetable lead to big problems about achieving legal equality within the lifetime of this parliament:

* The proposal to reduce the age of consent for gay men from 18 to 16 as it is now has one big weakness; it is proposed as an amendment to the existing 1967 law which has major repressive elements to it.

The key phrase in the existing act is "Consenting adults in private", which therefore means that sex between men is only lawful within these constraints. Technically it is illegal for two men to have sex in a 'hotel room, let alone any more 'public' place. This will remain in the new law, which means carte blanche for the police to pursue gay men for "cottaging".

Prosecution for age-of-consent offences under the act will make anyone technically guilty of paedophilia, with all the repressive consequences that the government intends.



It's been a long march for legal equality: and we're not there yet!

A sexual act between a 16 and a 15 year old will probably result in imprisonment and the older person being placed upon the new "paedophile register" and potentially notified to vigilante groups.

The legal position of gay sex as a "Tort" will apparently remain. So

will older laws about Gross Indecency (the law used to prosecute Oscar Wilde). It should be noted that the Stonewall-backed European Court case has been dropped in the expectation that law reform is imminent.

* There are no proposals to

equalise the rights of lesbians and gay men to have/adopt/foster children, although there are signs that the new government may be a bit more pragmatic than the last.

* There are no proposals around equalising partnership rights or non-discrimination legislation, although the European Court decision on the Lisa Grant case is expected to be favourable.

This would put the pressure on for changes to the law. Clear non-discrimination legislation with no loopholes should be introduced swiftly.

* There are no proposals (and the government has explicitly rejected this) to remove discrimination in the armed forces. However, there is a European Court decision pending and the latest information is that this is likely to succeed. This could have the interesting effect of trapping the government between the rock of the Euro Court and the hard place of the military hierarchy over reform of MOD rules.

A favourable decision could result in massive compensation claims. This and the Lisa Grant case would also encourage the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation.

Arguing for this reform must be accompanied by debate the role of the armed forces in general. Socialists are always wary of arguing for any sort of reform within the armed forces. We are for their abolition as they are fundamentally part of the

system of oppression of working people!

Peter Tatchell has an interesting article about this in *Labour Briefing* (it is also on their web site at <http://www.labournet.org/11b>).

* There is no timetable either to introduce the age of consent reform, or to repeal Section 28. It has all be left either to a Private Member's Bill, or to an amendment to another bill. The government has made it clear in any case that only a free vote will be called. On Section 28, there is doubt whether the government in fact intends to repeal this at all.

Stonewall has been spearheading the law reform campaign, but this has been mostly done by behind-the-scenes lobbying. Weaknesses in the reform proposals have not been brought out.

The Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights has also been involved. LCLGR has been pushing hard on Section 28 and for maximum law reform in general.

While it has also been lobbying, it has been raising law reform through open campaigning at Labour Party conference and through pushing its manifesto. Recently it has resolved the long debate over admission of bisexuals as members (they are encouraged to join!) and it should be able to concentrate further on its campaigning work.

* Join LCLGR - they can be contacted at PO Box 306, London N5.

As Blair clings to Clinton's coat-tails

'New' Labour apes the old Cold Warriors

Geoff Ryan

DURING recent weeks as the United States has threatened military action against Iraq we have watched the sickening spectacle of New Labour straining every muscle to back this warmongering.

It is hardly surprising that Tony Blair has been Clinton's strongest supporter. Since 1945 the foreign policy of Labour governments has been totally tied to that of the United States. The supposedly radical, reforming Labour government of 1945-50 was the foremost champion of NATO.

All Blair's proclamations of 'New' Labour are revealed for what they are: merely a continuation of subservience to the political and military needs of the strongest capitalist power, the United States.

This is thrown into relief by the break-up of the temporary coalition against Saddam Hussein which was put together at the time of the Gulf War. France, Russia, China, Syria, Egypt and other Arab states all urge caution now: Blair commits British forces to Clinton's military build-up. Scratch 'New Labour' and very old cold war warriors are quickly revealed.

The US and British governments have tried to justify their military threats by reference to various United Nations resolutions requiring the Iraqi regime to allow investigators to inspect suspected sites for the development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. These resolutions are simply "victors' justice".

Does anyone seriously believe that Tony Blair would allow UN inspectors unfettered access to Porton Down and other British weapons establishments – however many UN resolutions called for it?

Would Bill Clinton allow the UN to monitor the US nuclear programme? Not a chance!

Only Iraq is subject to such measures.

Behind the rhetoric of enforcing UN resolutions lies good old colonialist attitudes. The crisis was not sparked off by Saddam's refusal to allow UN inspectors access to military facilities, but his refusal to allow US inspectors access.

Withdrawn

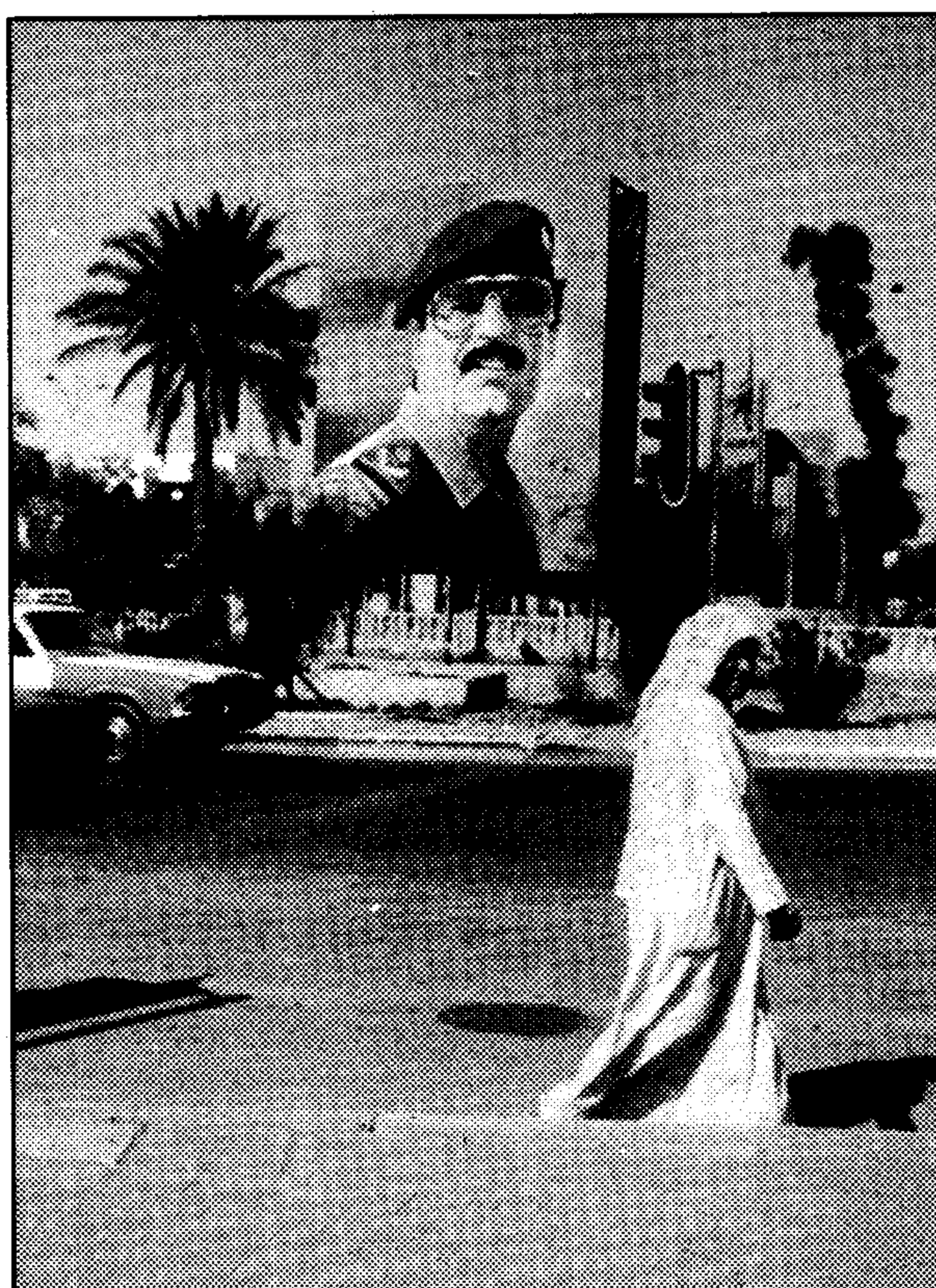
It was the UN – under American pressure – that *withdrew* all its inspection team. They were not forced out by Saddam.

If Clinton and Blair were serious about simply wanting the Iraqi government to comply with UN resolutions there was a simple solution – call Saddam's bluff and replace the US inspectors with non-Americans.

Why *should* the US be allowed to insist that its personnel have an automatic right to be included in UN teams?

We are not, of course, arguing that the UN has any right to impose sanctions on Iraq and submit its military capabilities to UN inspection. We reject this totally. Sanctions only hit the Iraqi people, who bear the brunt of Saddam Hussein's brutality. Control over Iraqi weapons establishments is victors' justice pure and simple.

The Gulf War did not bring about a New World Order: it simply reasserted, as we argued at the time, the old imperialist order.



Nor have there been any demands for the ending of the Indonesian military occupation of East Timor. Robin Cook's supposedly 'ethical' foreign policy doesn't even stretch as far as vetoing contracts for military hardware signed under the Tory government.

The use of these weapons to maintain the illegal occupation of East Timor and to crush the rising opposition in Indonesia is of far less concern than defence of capitalist business practices.

While the US and British governments have demanded access to Iraqi military installations, they have made no such demands in relation to Israel's nuclear weapons sites. Nor have they protested about the continued detention of Mordechai Vanunu whose 'crime' was to reveal to the *Sunday Times* details of Israel's secret nuclear programme.

Subsequently Vanunu was lured from London to Rome, kidnapped by Israeli agents, drugged and bundled on to a plane, smuggled into Israel and given a long jail sentence. Presumably Robin Cook considers

openly pro-Palestinian rhetoric.

The support of the Chinese Stalinists for the Gulf War was always rather luke-warm. However cravenly they are now pursuing capitalist policies in parts of China, they still have to distance themselves to some extent from the US – especially if they are to retain any attraction in the so-called Third World.

The current crisis has also allowed Moscow to reassert itself as a major player on the world stage. The compromise brokered by Boris Yeltsin has increased Russian prestige, particularly in the Arab World.

Moreover, the lack of enthusiasm by the French government for military measures reflects a developing crisis at the heart of NATO. Differences emerged at the NATO summit at Madrid in July between Clinton and the European leaders, especially France and Germany.

The Americans had their way on expansion of NATO by bringing in only three new countries, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The Europeans also wanted to include Rumania and Slovenia. American opposition was partly over costs but was also an assertion of American predominance.

Further differences exist over control of the various sub-commands in Europe. The Europeans demanded the Naples command: Washington was opposed because it would have meant running the risk of losing dominance in the alliance in its most decisive strategic sector, the Mediterranean.

Independent line

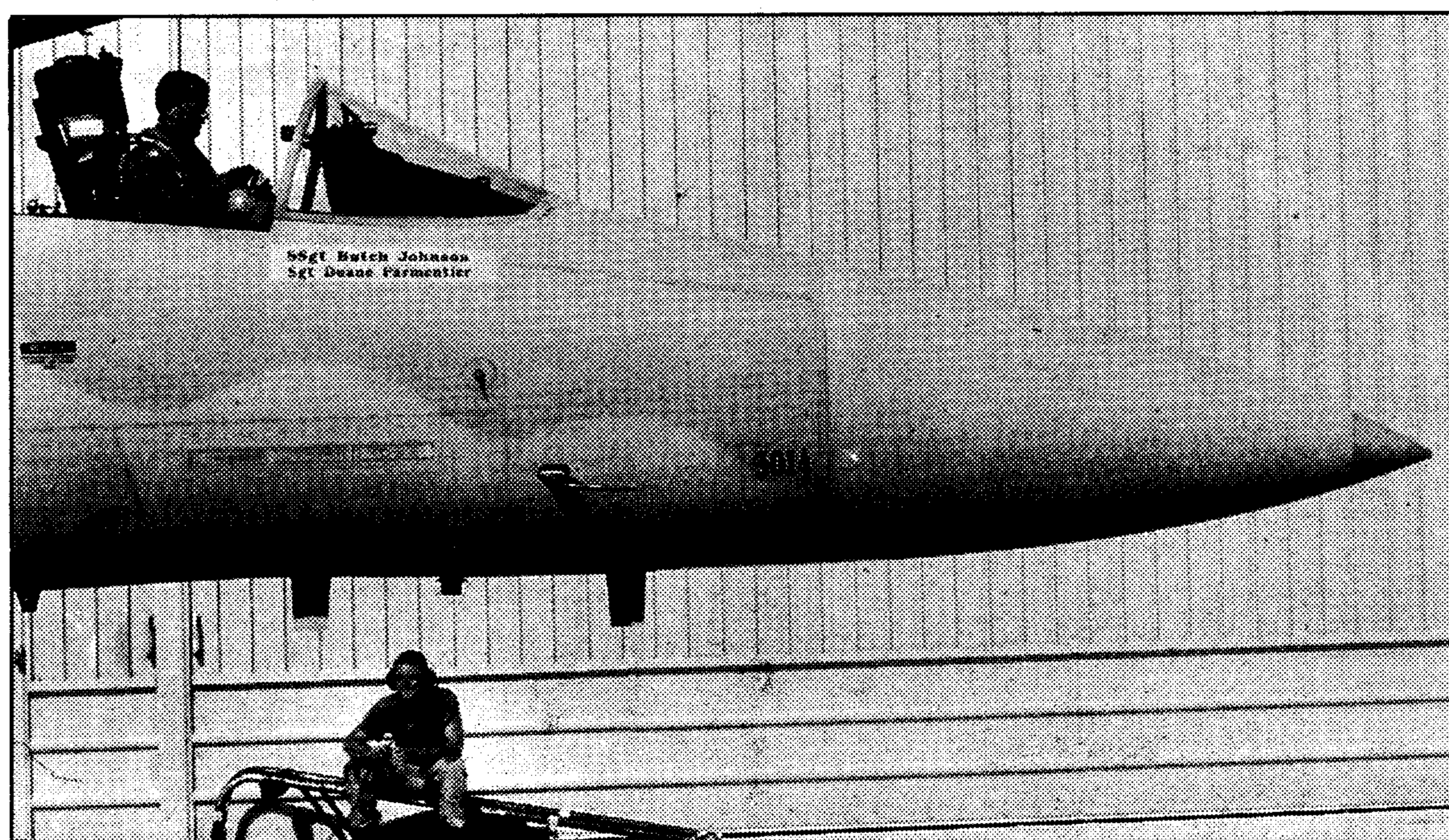
Moreover, France and Germany are looking increasingly to further European military integration – as evidenced by the Franco-German agreement signed at Nuremberg in 1996. Euromarforce – a grouping of air and naval forces set up in the same year by France, Italy, Spain and Portugal – shows further inclinations towards European independence.

None of these moves immediately challenge the existence of NATO: nor do they pose a threat to American domination. And they certainly don't remove the threat imperialism poses to the overwhelming majority of the world's population.

They are manifestations of growing imperialist rivalry, particularly in relation to who is going to dominate eastern Europe.

But they do reflect real and growing tensions within the Atlantic Alliance between the US and the major European states, which find an expression in European caution over military measures against Iraq.

Significantly, for all his pro-European rhetoric, Tony Blair has like his predecessors tied himself firmly to the coat-tails of the US President on these matters.



All tooled up and nowhere to go: the US military build-up against Iraq is designed to reinforce US dominance over the United Nations. Blair's support for Clinton echoes the miserable record of previous Labour governments.

This is confirmed by the way in which the US government responded to the recent crisis. Clinton, followed faithfully by Blair, was not interested in finding a peaceful solution.

The main aim was to reassert the right of imperialist states to do what they want with impunity; semi-colonial states must do as they are told. Clinton's bellicose rhetoric also helped divert attention briefly from Whitewater, Paula Jones and other pressing domestic problems.

Hence neither Blair nor Clinton has demanded sanctions – let alone made military threats – against Turkey, even though Turkish

troops have occupied areas of Iraqi Kurdistan as far as the Iranian border.

At the very time Clinton has been threatening war with Iraq, Turkish planes have been constantly violating Iraqi air-space.

Kurds repressed

But the Turkish government is, after all, a member of NATO and can, therefore, do whatever it likes – so long as this doesn't clash with US interests. And everyone knows that Kurds are only oppressed by Saddam Hussein – so Turkey's brutal war against its own Kurdish population can be passed over in silence.

such actions by the Israeli secret service to be 'ethical'.

The break-up of the anti-Saddam coalition, of the supposed New World Order, was hardly unexpected. The inability to resolve the problem of the Palestinian people oppressed by the Israeli state was bound to push the Arab states away from the US.

Even during the Gulf War the overwhelming majority of Arabs supported Saddam, whatever their governments may have decided. The failure of the 'Peace Process' – and the threat from Islamic fundamentalists in some states – has pushed the Arab regimes in to more

**Would Bill Clinton allow the UN to monitor the US nuclear programme?
Not a chance! Only Iraq is subject to such measures.**

Exploiting two-faced western policies

How DOES Israel get away with it?

Roland Rance

SEVEN YEARS after the Gulf War Bill Clinton's attempt to repeat the international coalition in support of the US plans to attack Iraq has met with near complete failure, with only Britain and Israel offering wholehearted support.

Even Saudi Arabia has been reluctant to sign up for the US adventure. Why has the US been unable to repeat its 1990 diplomatic and political triumph in 1997?

In 1990, US President George Bush succeeded in building an unprecedented alliance to support his assault against Iraq. This included not only traditional US allies like Britain and Israel, but also the then USSR and most Arab states, including the nominally anti-western Syria.

The 1991 Gulf War, which coincided with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe and left the US as the world's first superpower, was supposed to introduce a "New World Order".

Regional disputes would be settled, unruly states would be disciplined, and capital would be enabled to operate unhindered in nearly every corner of the globe.

For a while it looked as if this vision would be substantiated. The USSR disintegrated, leaving massively weakened and impoverished successor states, in no position to challenge US hegemony.

Meanwhile, the US was sponsoring "peace processes" and agreements in some of the apparently more intractable regional conflicts, in particular in Ireland, South Africa and the Middle East. The world was being made safe for US capital to operate unfettered.

No wonder that Francis Fukuyama could proclaim "The End of History", like an academic version of "1066 And All That".

This 'Pax Americana', however, has not lasted long. Despite the near integration of some regions into the western economy, the collapse of the eastern bloc has not brought many of the hoped-for gains. The break-up of Yugoslavia and the Bosnia War has shown that even in Europe the "New World Order" is unstable and unreliable.

Unravelling

The pinnacle of US diplomatic success, the Middle East "Peace Agreement", is unravelling fast, threatening a calamity for US policy and its allies in the region. Meanwhile, the UN sanctions against Iraq have led directly to the death through malnutrition or lack of essential medical supplies of over one million Iraqi civilians, more than half of them children.

In 1990, the USA managed to buy the support of most Arab regimes with the implied promise of a comprehensive peace agreement, Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Even at the time, it seemed unlikely that the Israeli government would be willing to comply with these promises.

But President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were able to cajole and convince the feudal monarchs, military dictators and venal politicians heading most Arab states to join the anti-Iraq coalition, while persuading Israel (with some difficulty) that its interests would be best served by exercising restraint and not openly intervening in the war.

This balancing act could not last long, particularly without some real movement by Israel towards meeting Palestinian demands and Arab expectations. By a combination of



Oblivious to "peace" deals and protest at home or abroad, the Israeli land-grab forges ahead

careful diplomacy, political pressure and material rewards, Bush and then Bill Clinton managed to bring about the famous Washington meeting and the Oslo accords between Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yassir Arafat. As a result of this agreement, Rabin – a former war criminal – and Arafat

acted on.

The government argues that the failure to prevent the assassination was due to incompetence; the right insists that there was a top-level conspiracy, and that Netanyahu's demagogic speeches against the agreement played little part in creating the environment for the

The truth is that the continued existence of Israel as a major military power, whose interests conflict with those of its neighbours, and which threatens the stability of every regime in the region, is a corner-stone of the US strategic approach to the Middle East.

shared the Nobel Peace Prize with the main architect of the agreement, Shimon Peres.

Although many observers agreed with *Socialist Outlook* that there was little substance to these agreements, which merely confirmed and legitimised Israeli rule over the whole of Palestine, this view was not shared in Israel.

Most Israelis believed that the agreements would necessarily lead in the end to an independent Palestinian state; Israeli society was split down the middle over whether to accept or reject this prospect.

Denounced

Opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu led the chorus of denunciation of Rabin as a traitor; the incitement and fevered atmosphere eventually led to Rabin's assassination by right-wing religious fanatic Yigal Amir in November 1995.

The controversy over responsibility for Rabin's assassination continues. New evidence shows that a Shin Bet double agent, Avishai Raviv, incited Amir, while passing on information about the plot which was never

assassination.

Rabin's successor Peres, although personally committed to the agreements, was widely distrusted in Israel as, in Rabin's own words, "an inveterate schemer". In a vain attempt to establish his nationalist credentials during a closely-fought election campaign, Peres ordered an invasion of Lebanon, in the course of which over 100 civilians were killed while seeking refuge in a UN base.

This failed to win him nationalist support, while alienating many Palestinian citizens of Israel who might otherwise have voted for him, and Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister in 1996.

Netanyahu – a product of American business schools – believes that he has stronger support in Congress than Clinton himself for his forthright opposition to the Washington and Oslo accords. In rejecting and subverting the few concessions necessary to give a semblance of substance to these agreements, he has revealed their essential hollowness.

This has weakened not only Yasser Arafat, whose control of events in the 1967-occupied

territories has grown ever shakier, but also the whole network of alliances and clients established by the USA and used by previous Israeli governments.

Seven years ago, Arab rulers were able to persuade themselves, and argue to their people, that the defeat of Iraq and its military removal from Kuwait would lead to the removal of Israel from the 1967-occupied territories.

This belief is now demonstrably false. It has become obvious that all of the US strictures against occupation of territory by force, oppression of civilians, arbitrary arrests, murder and terror may apply to Iraq, but certainly not to Israel.

The latest US concerns also appear partial. Iraq may indeed be developing nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, which could be a threat to other states in the region as well as to Saddam Hussein's oppressed subjects. But there is no similar ultimatum to Israel, the region's strongest nuclear power, while Israel's recent use of an unknown biological or chemical weapon against a Hamas activist in Jordan has gone unpunished.

Palestinian children continue to die from Israeli "rubber" bullets, civilians are still poisoned by Israeli tear gas, and Israel continues its occupation of Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. Iraq's flouting of UN resolutions is as nothing compared to Israel's record.

Only this week, Israel is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of UN resolution 191, by which Palestine was partitioned. But even this resolution, on which Israel bases its international diplomatic legitimacy, was never implemented, with Israel seizing far more land than it was allocated while expelling the majority of the Palestinian inhabitants.

War-plunder

Israel, of course, has never been threatened with a UN-sanctioned attack to force it to disgorge its war plunder, nor with sanctions to enforce even minimal respect for the situation of civilians living under its military rule.

This is not to argue, as some racists and simplistic analysts do, that Israel controls western foreign policy. This argument – which is also supported by both Israeli and Arab leaders – ignores the reality of US strategic interests in the Middle East.

Israel is by far the biggest recipient of US overseas aid, receiving over \$3 billion a year. It also receives almost unlimited US political and diplomatic backing, despite occasional critical noises. This level of support is not bought by political lobbying or by donations to presidential campaigns.

Unless it were in US interests to support Israel, no amount of money or pressure could gain this support. The truth is that the continued existence of Israel as a major military power, whose interests conflict with those of its neighbours, and which threatens the stability of every regime in the region, is a corner-stone of the US strategic approach to the Middle East.

Those who deny or ignore this fundamental reality can never hope to develop a strategy for Palestinian liberation, for an end to the sanctions against Iraq, or for the replacement of the rotten regimes in nearly every Arab state.

Once again, more starkly than before, the urgent need is posed for the development of a revolutionary strategy in the Arab world, which will achieve liberation and independence for the peoples of the Middle East through a struggle against both western imperialism and its local political and economic allies and clients.

Fighting Thatcherite austerity drive...

Czechs bounce back!

AS WE GO to press, the resignation of Czech Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus has been announced, along with much of his cabinet, amid a major financial scandal stemming from the country's privatisation programme. This article, from our special correspondent in the Czech Republic, HALKA KUDLIKOVA sets the background to the developing political crisis.

ON NOVEMBER 8 more than 60,000 people from the length and breadth of the Czech lands took to the streets of Prague.

With a population of 10 million, this is proportionately equivalent to more than 350,000 in Britain. People have had enough of the government and its policies of the past few years. There is no longer any "ra-ra-ra, give us capitalism". People have begun to wise up.

The turning point came with the government's currency floatation crisis in May (an almost automatic whopper devaluation of 15 per cent) and subsequent austerity package, which included huge tax increases on workers and lower and middle-tier professionals.

In part this was to pay for the massive flood damage in early summer. The underlying factor is the huge trade imbalance, which has grown unremittably since mid-1993 - standing at over \$3 billion for the past year alone.

The government also imposed certain import restrictions. These, however, were quickly abandoned in response to outcries and heavy lobbying from big business.

The top directors and managers are former Stalinist bureaucrats turned born-again capitalists, who are now slamming their beloved Klaus government for its pathetically minimal pro-export policies.

These are mainly due to an ideological ultra-fetish for classical free marketism and thus minimal state 'interference' in the economy - including support to exports!

On the one side this is an aspect of the government's total sycophancy to the EU and on the other, pleadings to multinationals for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) - "the Czech Republic is safe for your cash - look there is no state interference, and we have the workers under control".

As a result of the devaluation and trade figures revelation in May, the government's ideological No. 2, Pavel Dlouhy, Trade and Industry Minister, was chosen as sacrificial lamb (or stinking goat).

Since then, half-a-dozen more ministers have gone down like ninepins or resigned. More critically perhaps, the beginnings of a power struggle have opened up between Josef Lux (leader of the Christian Democrats) and Vaclav Klaus (Prime Minister and leader of ODS - Civil Democratic Party, the main coalition party in the government).

The coalition is very rickety, de-



Good King Wenceslas would have been surprised: tens of thousands braved rain to join the protest in Prague

pendent on a couple of small parties, and a consensus from the social democrats on the essential thrust of the government's programme. Since the recent elections, all manner of ministerial horse-trading has gone on, with the coalition's minority partners demanding more posts from Klaus.

The once invincible and omniscient Klaus is now only hanging on through sustained media support based on the needs of the nascent bourgeoisie, for whom he is a Thatcherite necessity. If he were to fall, a shattering political and ideological crisis would open up.

For now, he's just about got his feet on the ground. However, slowly but surely, the coalition rats are beginning to abandon the fast sinking "Good Ship Klaus and his Free Market Pirates".

Meanwhile, the social democrats, led by Milos Zeman, are allowing the government to hang on, but have now at least been forced to call, or posture for fresh elections next spring or possibly "even" February.

Constitutionally, the government's term extends to June 2000, which the government and media are using as a disclaimer to Zeman's weak-kneed call. The social democrats gained 26 per cent of the vote at the last elections - about equal to Klaus's ODS - with the Stalinists receiving around 7 per cent. Although by default, the

social democrats are likely to do much better if an early election is forced.

Meanwhile, the government is in urgent need of formulating and imposing another mini-budget, which will further turn the screws on workers, state employees in particular. The EU and economic conditions demand it, but political hostility from the unions precludes it.

Recent polls show 60 per cent of the population believe material conditions were better under the pre-1990 "Communist" (Stalinist) regime. The previous artificially cultivated 80-90 per cent "consensus" on the all-out rush to capitalism has evaporated almost overnight.

The till-now cocky Klaus can no longer ridicule the unions with "dinosaurs from the past". Oh, how are the mighty (almost) fallen.

Unemployment

Currently, unemployment stands at more than 4.2 per cent and steadily growing. Levels range from 1 per cent in the capital (pop. 1.3 million) to 10 per cent or more in several hard-hit regions, particularly those traditionally based on heavy industry (steel and coal mining especially).

Huge job cuts have taken place in these - for example from 100,000 miners in 1989 to 60,000 now. Teachers, rail and textile workers have also taken a hammering.

For teachers there has also been an assault on salaries, which are now chronically low - in many cases at the level of a shop assistant, with many posts unfilled, including in universities.

Railways are being geared up for privatisation - in even worse haphazard form than in Britain. The value of state pensions has plummeted, including substantial cuts in miners' special pensions. It is

planned to phase these out, and raise their retirement age from 50 up to 60.

The national norm is 60 for men and 57 for women plus one year less for each child born. Not to be left out, students are also taking a battering, both on the grant front and fees. Most are truly poor.

Amid this, price liberalisation has meant enormous food-price increases. They are no longer subsidised and have shot 3-fold ahead of wage increases since 1990.

There has been a policy of gradual increases of prices and rents in to west European levels, and the removal of a broad spectrum of former social-wage subsidies. The average wage is now \$185 a month - except that two thirds of workers receive less!

Thus, classical wage/salary differentials have clearly opened up, with the gap set to widen yet further.

It is in these conditions that workers mobilised for the mass demonstration in the capital. However, the heavy battalions were not satisfied with a mere protest. In the days leading up to the demonstration, open calls for a one-day general strike rang out from miners, steel and rail workers.

However the union bureaucrats were reeling, and have for now - but not very long - managed to stave off the call. On the march itself, a sea of banners called for a 24-hour stoppage. In unison, the crowd - including thousands of cash-strapped pensioners - demanded the union bosses declare an all-out shutdown.

On the platform, there was competition amongst the union bosses for who could be the most sycophantic to Klaus and the nascent bourgeoisie in their drive for total capitalism.

The award must surely go to Richard Falbr, leader of the Czech TUC, who argued "We are not against the liberalisation, we stand for it, the problem is that this government has shown itself incapable of its successful implementation, thus the economic calamity", (sic!). This was met with spontaneous barrages of, "No to liberalisation, yes to a general strike!".

In the background lies ever growing racism - openly and unashamedly promoted on TV and in the press, with little or no reaction from politicians. This is most visibly directed at gypsies (2 per cent of the population) who now live in continual fear of skinheads and bootboys associated with the xenophobic and increasingly fascistized Republican Party of Miroslav Sladek.

Non-white foreigners, students

in particular, are also targeted for the fascist boot gang attacks. A Sudanese student was stabbed to death by skinheads in Prague the very morning of the demo, but unlike in the past (which has seen 25 or more murders of gypsies) there was more than enough hard evidence to force the racist police into arrests.

The two murderers who were actually caught are expected to receive 15-year sentences.

The impetus of the mass mobilization allowed anti-racists to demand the calling of protests against these atrocities for the very next day.

15,000 turned up at the Prague College of Economics in the heart of a major gypsy community, 5,000 or more in Pradec Kralov, and the same in Liberec where a 1-minute silence was maintained in memory of the Sudanese student - with clenched fists held high in defiance of Sladek's fascist murderers!

Saturday's demo, the strike call and the nationwide mood have now opened up the ground for the sizable core of trade union militants and anti-Stalinist socialists to organise within the mass movement and among students and anti-racists.

This was clear from the 2-3,000 sales of the half-a-dozen or so leftwing and openly (non-Stalinist) socialist papers, which met with no negative or backward response from any section of the demonstrators - a virtual impossibility just a year or so ago.

A shift is now possible from propaganda to organised intervention by activists, and for concrete sector-by-sector agitational demands to be placed on the union leaders.

In the face of stepped-up agitation and the rapidly unfolding events, a main threat from the government - to be echoed no doubt by many of the union bosses - will be to pit Czech workers against (in particular) Polish and Hungarian workers, to harness them to the EU yoke, and to buckle under and compete in the scramble for FDI (Poland now leads the 'league table' in the relatively meagre amounts so far received vis-a-vis the "Asian Tigers" and China, where wage levels are lower still and unrestrained capitalism reigns supreme).

Increasingly, already now for the past few years, various EU governments have remonstrated to the EU Commission over the "dumping" - especially of steel and textiles - by Czech, Polish and Hungarian firms, achieved on the basis of wage costs (10% to 20% lower than EU countries), and in parallel have used it as an excuse to slash jobs and wages among their own workers.

Visits to the country from organisations of EU workers now become vital.

Workers on each side of the former imperialist-Stalinist divide must establish contact and form links, not least among those currently in dispute.

East Asia financial crisis deepens

The wheels come off!

Andy Killmister

THE BANKRUPTCY of Yamaichi Securities, the fourth largest Japanese stock exchange broker and Hokkaido Takushoku Bank, the tenth largest commercial bank in the country represent a further deepening in a seven year financial crisis.

Only three weeks ago another leading broker, Sanyo Securities, the seventh largest, also failed. The view that Japanese capitalism represents a way forward for the United States and Europe seems ever more distant.

At the same time South Korea, Japan's closest follower in economic policy and structure in the region, is now being bailed out by the largest IMF loan in history.

The tough conditions likely to be attached to this loan are expected to push the South Korean economy into recession next year, which will further worsen the region's crisis. Yet what really lies behind the difficulties faced by Asian capitalism?

The roots of the Japanese failures lie in the collapse of the 'bubble' economy of the late 1980s. Reckless lending in property and other speculative ventures, backed up by the use of shares as security for loans, led to disaster when property prices and the stock market both tumbled.

However, Japan was by no means unique in facing such developments at this time. United States banks in this period also built up a mass of risky corporate and household debt, as did banks in Scandinavia, Australia and other countries.

The main reasons why the problems have been so difficult to resolve in Japan are political.

In a capitalist economy there are essentially two ways of dealing with a financial crisis. One is to allow the weakest part of the financial sector to collapse.

This automatically writes off the majority of problem loans and the wiping out of capital in the sector raises the rate of profit on the remaining institutions. The costs of resolving the crisis are borne in this case by workers and depositors in the collapsed banks and by the owners of those banks.

The second approach is for capital in general through the state to assume responsibility for recapitalising and restructuring the banking system. Bad loans are written off and the banks restored to financial health through public subsidy.

The costs of this approach are borne initially by the state and are raised through taxation. This taxation is either raised from capital or from labour. Normally labour bears most if not all of the burden of the crisis but in any specific case this depends on the relative strength of workers and employers.

In the USA in the 1980s both methods were used to deal with the developments in the banking sys-

tem. On the one hand weak banks were allowed to fail leading to a massive wave of merger activity in the sector which has fundamentally reshaped the US financial landscape and is still continuing.

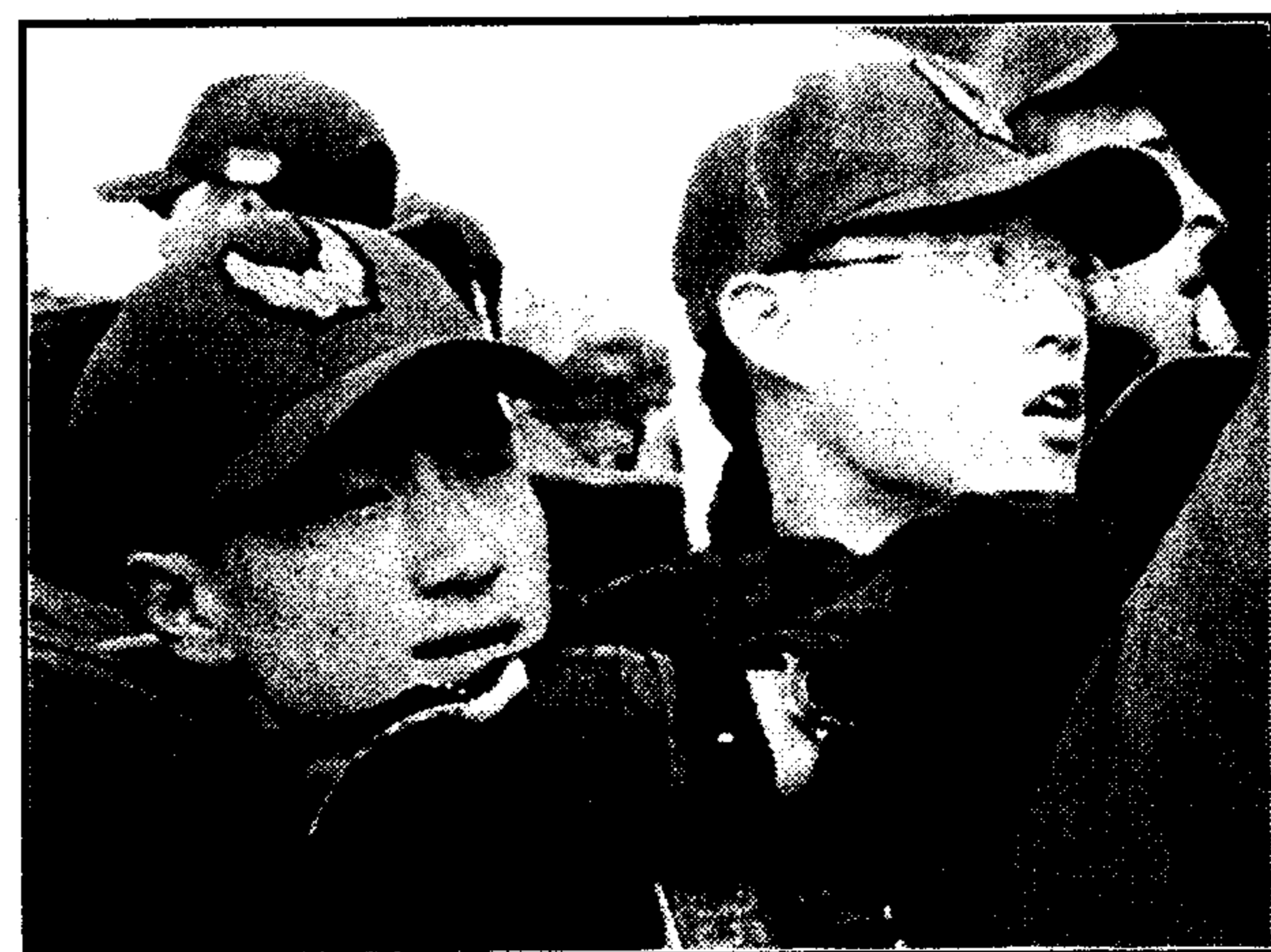
On the other US taxpayers have had to bail out the Savings and Loans industry (similar to British building societies) at the cost of about \$150 billion in present day money. The combination of both these strategies has been to dramatically increase profitability in US banking.

In Scandinavia in contrast the state assumed almost complete responsibility for reorganising the banks in the early 1980s. In Norway, Sweden and Finland banks were either nationalised, restructured or subsidised and are now being restored to the private sector.

The problem for the Japanese government has been that they have not felt able politically to go in either of these directions. Bankruptcy remains rare in Japan and merger activity is low. Japanese capitalism has for years been based on 'managed decline' for troubled industries such as textiles and basic materials.

Using cartels and subsidies this approach has avoided significant upheavals through high rates of business failure. To adopt a different approach to the financial sector would represent a dramatic shift for the Japanese government - one which up until now they have not felt confident enough to undertake.

The government has also felt unable to intervene to restructure the financial sector itself. In a country like Japan where savings rates are very high as a result of low welfare and pension provision, the anger at financial institutions who have



risked people's money with dubious loans is considerable. Any attempt to use taxpayers money to bail such companies out will be unpopular.

During this decade Japanese governments have mainly been weak coalitions and the dominant governing party, the Liberal Democratic Party, is largely based on rural voters and small business people who are precisely those most hostile to the banks. In addition, the Japanese are facing powerful external pressure from the USA to deregulate and remove government influ-



The crisis arrives with a whimper and a bang. (Above) Crying all the way from the bank: Yamaichi president Shohei Nozawa laments the end of the gravy train. (Below) The crisis in South Korea has brought angry punch-ups

ence from the financial system.

As a result of this the Japanese government has been unable for years to decide what to do about the financial crisis. An example of this has been the lengthy argument about the 'jusen' - housing companies set up by the banks in conjunction with agricultural co-operatives.

These are now being bailed out to the tune of \$20 billion of public money, after years of indecision. This indecision has made the crisis considerably worse, as a vicious circle has arisen with the weak state of the financial sector pulling down the stock market, which in turn further worsens the balance sheet of the banks.

The events of the last few weeks appear to indicate that the Japanese government has finally begun to move towards allowing a major part of the financial system to go under. In theory this could allow an eventual resolution of the crisis. But the costs of this will be very severe and

not restricted to the financial sector.

A market based approach to this kind of structural change, with associated high levels of bankruptcy and business failure, will mean the end of the kind of partnership between industry, finance and the state which has typified Japanese capitalism over the last forty years.

It can by no means be ruled out that the government will back away from such a consequence and will shift back towards its former indecision or towards an attempt to rescue the failing institutions. Whatever decision is made, the potential for conflict within Japan over who should bear the cost of the crisis is obvious and the scope for alternative views of the future direction of Japanese society greater than for many years.

The South Korean case is in many ways similar to that in Japan, but has some important differences. The speculative boom in South Korea was more short lived than that in Japan, really only lasting through 1994 and 1995.

However, while in Japan the large manufacturing companies remained largely immune to the worst excesses of financial speculation this was not the case in South Korea. Bad debt in Korea is not restricted to finance and property companies but goes right to the

heart of some of the major manufacturing groups, or *chaebols*.

The IMF is likely to insist on restructuring the chaebols and closing large numbers of banks. This will not simply mean higher taxes but also a major onslaught on job security, working conditions and wages. At the same time the South Korean trade union movement remains the most assertive and well organised in East and South East Asia.

It would be wrong to see the financial crises in East Asia as the end of capitalism in the region. That will not come through developments in the financial sector alone.

But they may well mean the end of a certain kind of capitalism - a kind that has both been fearfully exploitative and has also been taken to be a model by many in the USA and Britain, including some who see themselves as being on the left.

The space opened up by the failure of this model and the need for the ruling class in these countries to manage a traumatic and complex change is bound to open up space for socialist ideas and activities.

The extent to which such ideas are put into action and can affect the resolution of the East Asian crises will be important for left wing forces not just in Asia but throughout the world.

The real "Peace" talks ... in Downing Street

David Coen

TONY BLAIR will meet Gerry Adams on December 11 for the real talks of the "peace" process.

Remember that? Back in September the media were full of the agonising of the Unionists led by David Trimble as to whether they would even enter the talks, which Blair has said must reach a conclusion by May next year at the latest.

Blair eventually persuaded them in, but they have not met with Sinn Fein and have made it clear they don't treat the process seriously. What they have done is try to hatch out a deal through bi-lateral talks with the SDLP and Dublin. Trimble refused to meet Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in Dublin - the meeting was arranged while Ahern was "passing through" London.

The outline of the deal Blair will attempt to sell to Adams has been clear for a long time: a devolved government in Belfast, a clean-up of the sectarian state - Mowlem's proposals on the RUC are part of gameplan - and a parliamentary All Ireland Committee to deal with issues of common interest, for example, tourism and cross border development.

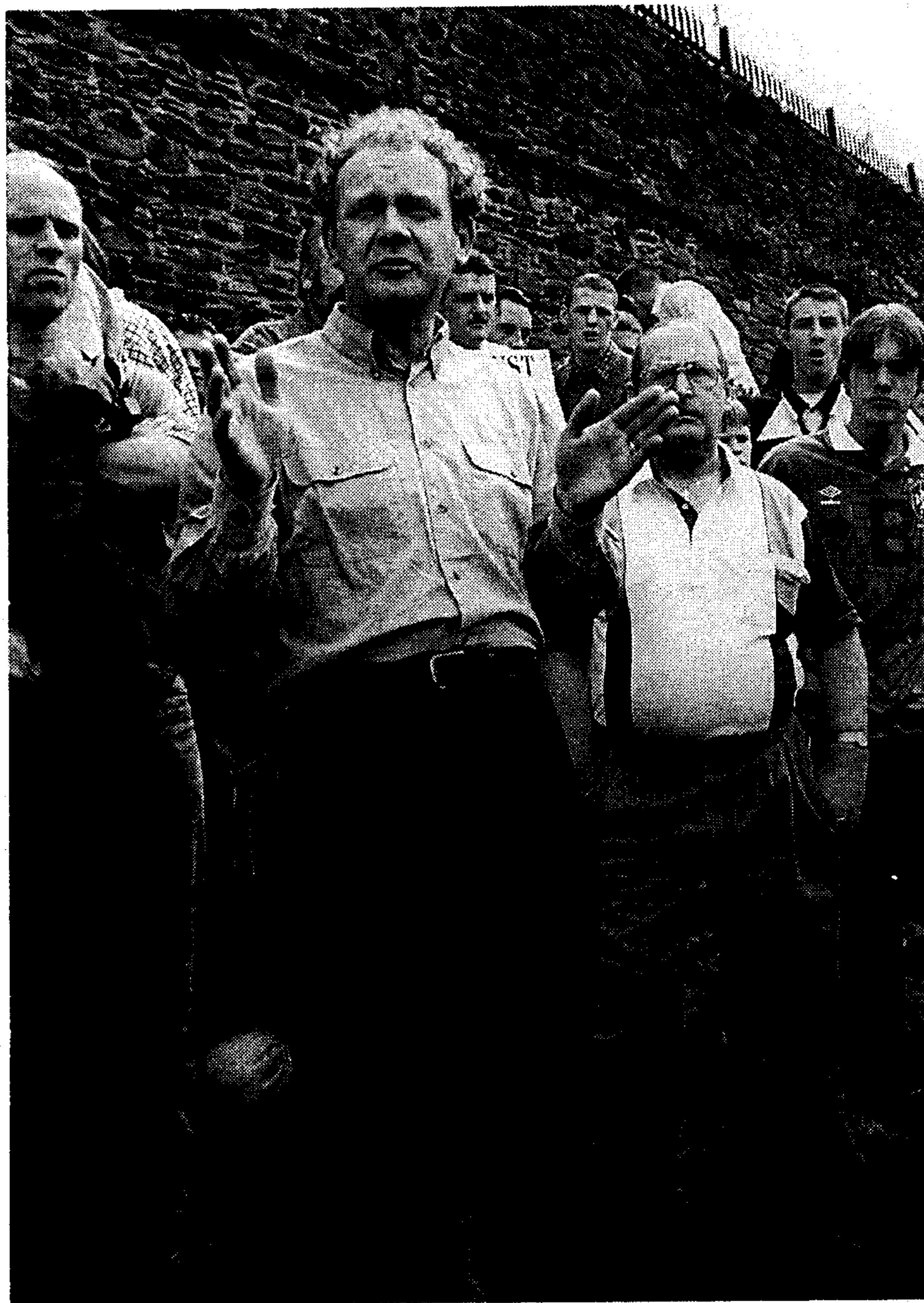
In return for this, Dublin will give up its "claim" to the Six Counties under Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution. The only argument is over the powers of the All Ireland Committee - the Unionists are opposed to it having any power, because that would look like a step towards Irish unity!

Weaker position

Adams' position is much weaker than that of the previous negotiators of partition - the 1921 delegation led by Michael Collins. Despite the war-like noises coming from some sections of the Republican movement, the vast majority realise that the war is unwinnable.

In a way Adams' weakness is also his strength. Whatever the outcome, he knows that the militarists within the movement are not a serious threat because they have no strategy other than a return to war.

He will, no doubt, try to appeal to Blair's "modernising" instincts and sense of justice. He will ask for serious reform of the Northern State and for "parity of esteem" for Nationalists within it, mentioning the chaos which would follow a breakdown of the "peace" process. In support of his position he will cite Bertie Ahern and Bill Clinton.



How will they sell Blair's line to the punters? Sinn Fein vice-president Martin McGuinness

The whole tone of the discussion will be much more "appeal" than "negotiation" because the truth is, Adams has very little to trade.

Many people on the left in Britain have for long argued that militarism was a blind alley and that only mass action North and South would get Britain out of Ireland.

We also criticised the pan-Nationalist strategy because it put the negotiations in the hands of Dublin and Irish America - the very elements who want to defeat Republicanism.

But there is a need to go beyond the politics of "we told you so". Just because the leadership of the Republican Movement are about to give up their historic goal of getting Britain out of Ireland (partly because the military road has failed)

does not mean the same is true of the base of the movement or indeed the majority of nationalists in Ireland.

The Republican leadership may be willing to settle for a revamped

Socialism will not come about in Ireland or Britain without the defeat of the ruling classes and the break-up of the British state which sustains them.

Stormont Government which was abolished after Bloody Sunday in 1972, but that doesn't mean that Blair's aim to modernise partition will succeed.

The first reason is that Northern Ireland is a "failed political entity" - the border was drawn to encompass the most territory which the Unionists could hold with a numerical majority.

The 70 years of violence and discrimination flowed not just from bigotry of the Unionists but was absolutely necessary to preserve the state. It cannot be reformed.

The likelihood is that the new settlement will get the way of the first eventually breaking down in a similar way to the attempts to "solve" the situation in Palestine. The Unionists can make no concessions - how can a state built on discrimination be "reformed"? Any change threatens to bring the whole structure crashing down.

It was the opposition of the Unionists/Loyalists which in 1974 brought down the Power Sharing Executive negotiated by Edward Heath at Sunningdale.

Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party refused to even enter the current talks, while further out, King Rat Billy Wright's Loyalist Volunteer Force is steadily undermining the position of the loyalist parties who have participated, the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party.

The chances are that a large section of Unionists will oppose any settlement, even one with as few meagre concessions to nationalists as Blair will offer.

Finally, any Blair proposals for mild reforms of the Six County State will trigger opposition from a significant section of the British ruling class, and not simply those nostalgic for empire who draw the line after Hong Kong.

Unionism is a founding principle of the British state (opposition to it is an equal test for would be revolutionaries!) and of the Tory Party, which until 1985 was called "The Conservative and Unionist Party of Great Britain and Northern Ireland".

If Blair, with a majority of 179 is frightened to challenge them on foxhunting, think what would happen if he began to reform the Six County state.

The 1974 stand-off between the Wilson government and the Loyal-

the British Army.

As the economic crisis in the South threatened to combine with the political crisis which followed the rise of Sinn Fein, the Dublin ruling class and the British tried to save the "moderate" middle class nationalists of the SDLP by posing Dublin as the protectors of Northern nationalists.

Thatcher moved in 1985 under the threat of the mass movement. Blair will not move in 1997 because there is no equivalent movement, and the threat to return to war does not hold the same menace to the ruling class in Ireland or Britain.

Blair wants to modernise and therefore preserve the British State, not abolish it. He will remove the worst excesses of the sectarian regime abolished in 1972, though the changes will be cosmetic.

The Republican leadership has a choice. It's not between capitulation or a return to war, but whether they want to help Blair restructure the British state or to smash it. Their problem is that even before going into the talks they conceded the Unionist veto - and then found the Unionists won't talk to them. Now they realise that the real negotiations are going to be with the British, hence Adams' visit to Blair.

Republicans should withdraw from the talks and build mass opposition to the whole process, which the British, Dublin and the SDLP saw from the beginning as a way of disarming them.

A focal point will be the proposed referenda on the settlement and on the South's constitution. There is tremendous potential for such a movement.

Even the "respectable" SDLP were shocked by Blair's capitulation to loyalism at Drumcree during last summer's Orange marches, not to mention the blatant sectarianism of the RUC.

The outcome of a referendum in the South is still very much in doubt in spite of the election of a conservative northern nationalist as President.

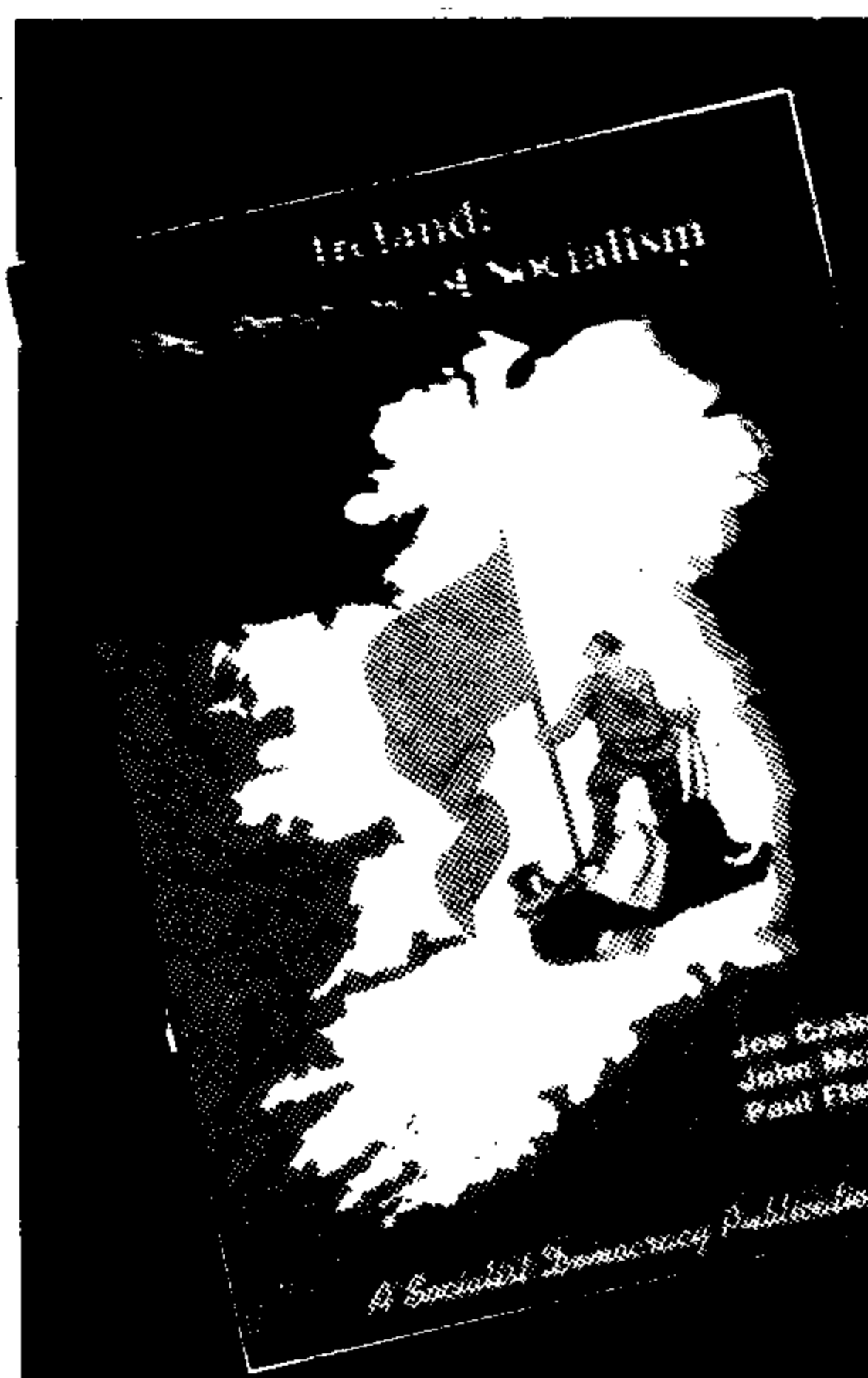
Of course the Adams leadership will not now drop this disastrous line - if only because they've been committed to it since at least 1986. But sections of the Republican Movement have shown their contempt for the strategy by leaving Sinn Fein.

The numbers are not large but in an organisation where loyalty is almost religious, it shows there are large numbers of dissatisfied members looking for an alternative. Neither are those leaving simply reflex militarists.

Socialists are in favour of reforms. Transfer of prisoners, changes to the RUC and others which may come out of the talks should be welcomed as far as they go.

But socialism will not come about in Ireland or Britain without the defeat of the ruling classes and the break-up of the British state which sustains them.

The Republican "rejectionists", whatever the limits of their political positions, are our allies in opposing whatever deal is struck between Adams and Blair.



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Trade union leaders float myths over single currency

Alan Thornett

NO SUCH THING as a free lunch? Not so when it comes to preaching the gospel of the European Union inside the trade union movement in Britain!

Those attending the conference on European Monetary Union (EMU) organised by the South East Region of the TUC on November 29 were offered free entry, a fat package of literature and a sumptuous free lunch. It turned out that the conference was funded by the EU!

The gathering was a object lesson, if such was needed, of the state of much of the trade union movement, particularly those parts of it controlled by the TUC.

The event, which was presented as a "debate", only projected one side of the argument - that of gung-ho support for the EU and the single currency. Its two opening, key-note, speakers

were a representative of the European Commission and a representative of the Engineering Employers Federation (EEF)!

The conference viewed a slide show from the EEF which was not only arguing full support for entry as soon as possible, but listed as the requirements for this the continued reduction of the social wage, the control of wages as such, and the need for continuing and greater "flexibility" in the labour force.

Lengthy introductions from the top table were followed by three three minute interventions from the floor, all against EMU, and then a 20 minute reply from the platform speakers.

In the afternoon the keynote speakers were Dave Felkert from the TUC office in Brussels, who was gung-ho for EMU, and John Edmonds, speaking for the General Council of the TUC.

Later there was a panel of speakers which included a repre-

sentative of HM Treasury!

Edmond's position was reluctant entry into EMU: though he ridiculed any suggestion of not going in. He argued that "hard choices" had to be made, and although there were many problems with entry - not least that unemployment would be increased as a result - there was "no alternative". The right thing to do, he argued, was to go into EMU and fight for full employment.

Edmonds' answer to those from the floor who had pointed to the mass strikes across Europe in recent years against the austerity programmes in preparation to the single currency was: "If I was going to mobilise people across Europe it would not be against the EMU but for full employment."

True this was not the full TUC position - which is let's get into EMU as quickly as possible because it is a very good thing. He



Edmonds: "Do I want EMU? Not for a minute or two, I've only just eaten one"

was, however, doing a very good job on behalf of the General Council.

There was little opportunity for those in the audience of 100 people (probably about a third) who were opposed to EMU to present an alternative or to point out that the two concepts - full employment and the single currency - are mutually exclusive.

The experience underlines the

necessity for a socialist, working class, opposition to be argued across the trade union movement.

A good start was made by the European Marches and good work is being done by Trade Unions against a Single Currency, but the big battle is still to be had particularly as we move closer to an eventual referendum on the issue.

Workers gatecrash EU's Luxembourg "jobs" jamboree

Alan Thornett

50,000 demonstrators, over twice the number expected by the organisers, joined the demonstration, called by the European TUC, at the European Union's so-called Jobs summit in Luxembourg Thursday 20 November.

The European Marches mobilised a delegation of several thousand onto the demonstration, including a bus-load organised by the campaign in Britain.

The demonstrators were protesting about the 18 million unemployed in Europe and calling on EU Heads of State to take action to reduce it.

The Luxembourg "jobs summit" was called by the Amsterdam Intergovernmental Conference last June under pressure from the mass demonstration of unemployed people organised at the culmination of the European marches.

Huge turn-out

The big trade union contingents on the Luxembourg demonstration came from France (including, from the non-ETUC affiliated CGT) Belgium, Germany and Italy. The biggest were from France and Belgium, which were huge.

Charter aircraft also flew in from Greece and Spain. It gave the demonstration a truly international character - similar in that sense to the Amsterdam demonstration, although that had far more young people and this was trade union delegations.

Although the ETUC had called on



With twice as many as expected, the trade union delegations livened up Luxembourg

all its affiliates to mobilise there appears to have no response, from their Scandinavian, Dutch or British organisations.

The demonstration was formally supported by the British TUC, but it failed to mobilise anyone onto it, and the Euromarch delegation was the only representation detectable from Britain. This after the TUC had refused to support the European

marches on the basis that they were not supported by the ETUC!

The demonstration was the first of its kind ever called by the ETUC, and was clearly a response to the Amsterdam demonstration in June. It had previously called for coordinated action in various countries - but had never called on all its affiliates to organise for the same demonstration on the same day in the



same place and at the same time.

Like the Euromarch itself, and the cross borders demonstrations to defend Belgian Renault workers early this year, the demonstration was a sign of the times. A new level of international solidarity is needed to meet an attack on the working class which is itself Europe wide.

The Luxembourg demonstration was colourful and up-beat and demonstrators chanted militant slogans in several languages accompanied by the continuous detonation of firecrackers.

The Euromarch delegation took part on the basis of calling for the 35 hour week, and held its own meeting at the end of the demonstration on the same theme.

Flexibility

Tony Blair attended the summit, of course, and claimed, with some validity, that the summit leaders were moving towards New Labour's

positions of "employability" and "flexibility" as the solution to mass long-term unemployment and social exclusion.

In fact Blair has made it clear that he intends to use the British presidency of the EU, which is the first six months of next year, vigorously to push for the extension of British levels labour market flexibility to the rest of the EU.

This, he has made clear, will be a feature of the Cardiff Summit next June, where he will push the idea of establishing "flexibility criteria" which can be followed through in an organised way.

Counter-summit

This makes the organisation of an international demonstration and a counter-summit at Cardiff even more important.

It may well be not only the last major international meeting of EU heads of state before the introduction of the single currency in January 1999, but the start of an organised campaign to extend Thatcherite employment conditions to the rest of the EU.

As far as the ETUC is concerned we can only hope that the success of its first truly international demonstration will ensure that it is not the last.

50 years of the NHS Act

Why we should still value Bevan's flawed legacy

John Lister

RATIONING is on the agenda as the NHS enters its 50th anniversary year in 1998.

So deep have Tory cash limits bitten into health authority budgets that increasing numbers are openly discussing which types of treatment and care should no longer be funded by the NHS. In West Hertfordshire, health chiefs suggest that "rare and expensive" treatments should be given low priority, implying that local people should make sure they only contract illnesses which are common and cheap.

This type of austerity on health spending in the midst of what we are told is a booming economy is a farcical echo of the genuine economic hardship that prevailed 50 years ago, when the post-war British economy was still restricted by general rationing of consumer goods, and deep in hock to the USA.

New Labour's determination to tighten the knots on the Tory financial straitjacket is in stark contrast with the radicalism which led to the formation of the NHS: and there are grounds to fear that the long-promised White Paper on the reform of the bureaucratic chaos of the Tory internal market system will fall far short of the necessary bold steps to undo the damage done.

The post-war reforms set out to sweep away the anomalies of the Liberal Party's insurance-based scheme of 1911, which had only covered individual workers and not their dependent partners or children. Hospital treatment was excluded from the scheme, as was childbirth.

Labour's plans, driven forward by Aneurin Bevan as the new Health Minister, went further than the Beveridge Report proposals which suggested a comprehensive health care system should be available to all, whether at home or in hospital. Bevan went two steps further: he nationalised the network of voluntary and municipal hospitals, and he established a system which for the first time offered comprehensive health services free to all at point of use – funded from taxation. There was no weekly stamp to pay, and no qualifying period.

The biggest beneficiaries of the new NHS, which was eventually launched in July 1948, were working class women and children, who had not been covered by National Health Insurance.

As one GP, Julian Tudor Hart, has commented: "A huge backlog of gynaecological surgery was shifted in the 1950s, the accumulated discomfort and misery of the neglected pre-war generations of working class mothers."

But although the new NHS was overwhelmingly popular, it had its diehard opponents. Winston Churchill led the Tory Party through the lobbies to oppose each of the Act's three Readings and again in February 1948 to oppose its implementation.

Bevan ridiculed the Tory complaints that the new NHS would effectively wipe out the voluntary sector by eliminating the need to raise money through charitable donations and flag days:

"I have always felt a shudder of repulsion when I have seen nurses and students who ought to be at their work going about the streets collecting money for the hospitals."

"The only voluntary part of the hospital service destroyed by the Bill is the necessity to sell flags and to collect money. Honourable Members opposite, as they represent the party of property, always imagine that the only voluntary act which has any sanctity behind it is



the writing of a cheque."

Rather more difficult an obstacle to be confronted was that of the British Medical Association (BMA), which at that time was heavily dominated by GPs. They (falsely) accused him of attempting to impose a full-time salaried service – although he had been persuaded early on to abandon that long-standing objective of the Socialist Medical Association in favour of a compromise formula in which GPs would remain "independent contractors".

Bevan's early moves to placate the BMA, which included offering a lavish £66m compensation in return for ending the buying and selling of GP practices, could not make much headway against those like Dr Alfred Cox who denounced the new NHS as "uncommonly like the first step, and a big one, towards National Socialism as practised in Germany."

The BMA stuck to its guns, demanding the government drop or revise basic elements of

the family budget of the professional worker more than heavy hospital bills and doctors' bills."

Ironically, subsequent investigations on the widening "health divide" between rich and poor have shown that the more prosperous, articulate and relatively healthy middle classes have been more successful than the poor in gaining access to NHS services.

Bevan had won the public debate: opinion polls showed 69% in favour of the new NHS and only 13% against. Despite BMA polls as late as May 1948 opposing the Act, medical resistance crumbled when the government forged ahead regardless.

By September 1948 93% of the population (39.5 million people) had signed up. 18,000 GPs signed up in the first year. They wrote 187 million prescriptions. 8.5 million patients received dental treatment, and over 5 million were prescribed spectacles – with ophthalmic

Bevan had won the public debate: opinion polls showed 69% in favour of the new NHS and only 13% against. Despite BMA efforts, medical resistance crumbled when the government forged ahead regardless.

the legislation. But the medical profession was becoming divided: some the Royal Colleges swung in favour of the Bill; a majority of medical students announced that they were willing to work in the new service; and the new salary scale offered hospital doctors more than had ever been available before the war.

In February 1948 Bevan arranged for a further Commons debate to endorse the new Act. In his speech he listed some of the concessions he had made to the BMA, which included the provision of private "pay beds" in NHS hospitals; and allowing GPs and consultants to have private patients.

Bevan also made a prophetic observation on the value of the new system for middle class families: "There is nothing that destroys

services costing a massive 22 times the expected £1 million.

Overall the NHS cost £402m in its first year – more than double the allocated sum of £180m. Had Gordon Brown been around, he would no doubt have wanted to put a stop to this spending, which was a clear indication of the level of unmet need from previous years.

As we celebrate the survival of the NHS for its first 50 years, however, we must remember not only a Labour government unlike today's – one prepared to rest on public support to carry through radical reforms – but also the compromises which were made by Bevan in the process, many of which continue to dog the NHS to this day.

Bevan's concessions to the doctors left a

continued space for private medicine, which re-emerged from almost total eclipse in 1948 to mount a fresh expansion from the 1970s onwards. NHS pay beds are now seen by private health firms as a cheap and profitable option, and the problem of NHS consultants exploiting part-time contracts to "moonlight" in the private sector lingers on.

The vexed issue of the status of GPs, too, remains as difficult today as it was in 1945. The last Tory government deliberately stoked up fresh divisions by its promotion of GP Fundholding (which pumped extra cash and resources into the larger practices, effectively creating a two-tier NHS) and the obscure notion of a "primary care led NHS" (as a pretext for cutting hospital budgets) which seems likely to be echoed in New Labour's White Paper.

The structure of the NHS was also seriously deficient: Bevan opposed the election of local or regional health authorities, arguing that they had to be responsible to him, as the minister answerable in Parliament. The opposite view was argued by Herbert Morrison, who argued for control to be handed to local government, warning that the new quango boards of appointees would be "mere creatures of the Ministry of Health with little vitality of their own." In fact many of the old hospital boards of governors simply stepped into appointed positions in the new NHS, creating an inglorious tradition of unaccountability which continues 50 years later.

The buildings, too, were seriously inadequate. Bevan nationalised 3,500 hospitals with 150,000 beds. But almost half of them were already 50 years old, and 20% had been built before 1861. 80% of GP surgeries in working class areas were 50 years old or more. The new NHS had no plan and no resources to develop on this crumbling base. The 1950s – mostly under Tory rule – saw the slowest growth in hospital building for over 100 years. Only in the decade 1962-1972 was serious capital injected into the NHS, until the Heath government slammed on the brakes.

The NHS Act also left a loophole for the imposition of charges for some aspects of the service. This led to a cabinet row and Bevan's resignation when Labour introduced charges for spectacles and dentistry in 1951.

The Tories weighed in with prescription charges, and these three areas have seen a massive escalation of fees under Thatcher and Major governments. Prescriptions have risen from 20p per item in 1979 to £5.65 today, with New Labour allegedly checking out the chances of foisting these charges on pensioners and others currently exempt.

The Tory years have seen the NHS eroded through the effective privatisation of much continuing care for the frail elderly.

The Tories have also succeeded in getting Labour to implement their disastrous "Private Finance Initiative, allowing private firms to build, own and run NHS hospitals for profit.

The NHS has suffered the imposition of "market" style financial pressures and cash limits, leading to large-scale rationing, first through the ever-rising waiting list, and now through the plans of health authorities to restrict access to certain treatment.

But rumours of the death of the NHS have been massively exaggerated. Even with its faults, the deal secured by Nye Bevan in those years of austerity is a historic gain stronger and more appealing than the feeble echo from today's timid Blairites. 50 years on, the main threat to today's NHS no longer comes from the Tories: the fight to save it is still on.

Dramatic truth

"Welcome to Sarajevo", directed by Michael Winterbottom

Reviewed by Tim Johnson

THIS LATEST film from Michael Winterbottom of "Jude" fame does not aim to offer a solution, or even any political direction, to the war in Bosnia.

What it sets out to do is show the effects of the war on the people of Sarajevo, and of the journalists covering it. In this it is far better than any other that this reviewer has seen.

Like many films of its type it suffers from being made from the standpoint of an outsider, the journalist.

When asked about why he had not made it from the standpoint of a Sarajevan, the scriptwriter, Frank Cottrell Boyce, said that he was opposed to the way that films dealt with the effects of the Vietnam war on Americans, but that he could only get finance for a "compromise".

Thus the story is about journalists, who were continuously in danger, and their relationship with Bosnians.

It is based on a book by Michael Nicholson who is played excellently by Stephen Dillane. One wonders whether the makers were pressurised into taking Woody Harrelson as a crowd-puller, as he looks out of place.

In reply to criticisms that have been made of its historical accuracy, Boyce said that he had reasons for changing the order of events, in order to show effects.

For example he shows a convoy carrying children away from Sarajevo. He also shows an earlier convoy as having been bombed, thus

killing two children. In reality this took place later, but he wanted to show the danger the children were in.

In other words he was not intent on total historical accuracy, but on trying to display reality.

This is not a made up film, nor is it a straight documentary: but it is dealing with what really happened, and is still happening. It shows the brutality of the Serbian Chetniks at work; documentary film, of the death camps for example, is effortlessly woven in.

It shows the dark side of the besieged: The gangster element, "how could you afford such a car?" says a small girl; the prostitution: "where did you get an American cigarette?" asks a mother.

Much of this was obviously enhanced by the presence of reporters, and the UN forces, as sources of petrol and cigarettes and so on.

Despite the fact that as one of the Bosnians says "the siege is everything", the people still manage to be positive, to make a feast out of three eggs, to plan and hold a concert, to try to continue some

normality in their lives. But the whole film is about the way the war is destroying their lives, and how the world looks on.

We see the cynicism of Western leaders; criticising Karadzic, then sitting down with him. The refusal of humanitarian aid to orphans is another example. What is not dealt with however is the UN embargo on arms for the Bosnian Government forces, at a time when the Serb nationalists had all the heavy weapons.

The western media reporters are shown as vultures. The problems for the reporters themselves are

shown when they start to care about the people massacred, or the orphans. The editors, and the proprietors don't care.

On the day of one of the massacres the main news headline was of the break up of the Duke and Duchess of York. Reviewing the film in the *Observer*, John Sweeney says that paper, for which he reported, didn't carry a single word from him in the week that Fergie's toe sucking story broke, and 3000 shells landed on Sarajevo.

What makes this a great film is how real the reactions of the people are. The father who gets news

of his son in a camp, gives the reporter a drink, and a piece of pie. Afterwards when he is on his own he breaks down.

This is the reality; these orphans exist, their parents have been exterminated. One can only come out of this film angry. It is a film that must be seen.

As socialists we felt we had an answer, to end the arms embargo on Bosnia, to fight for class unity, and working class solidarity actions throughout Europe. But the problem was always complex and difficult. This film shows the question in as dramatic form as you will see.



Dashing for cover: Henderson (Stephen Dillane) and cameraman caught in the line of fire. (Above) Emire Nusevic has a central, moving role

Put Socialist Outlook on your Gift List!

IT'S the end of another busy year: December is the month in which most of us are under pressure to dig deep into our

pockets to give generously to those nearest and dearest.

But while you're at it, why not spare a thought for political principles – and add *Socialist Outlook* to your list for a gift?

Over the last year we've done plenty to deserve your support and respect. We and our readers have been deeply involved in the European wide campaign against unemployment, cuts and social exclusion.

We were central to organising the British leg of the European Marches, building for the Amsterdam demonstration and getting people to last month's demonstration in Luxembourg.

Through this work we have deepened our links with workers in struggle, particularly with the Liverpool Dockers, the sacked Magnet workers and the courageous Hillingdon women.

We have strengthened our involvement in unemployed action groups and activity against the JSA, Project Work and Labour's misnamed 'New Deal'.

All this work must go on. In 1998 we will need resources to build a demonstration and counter-summit to take place in Cardiff at the time of the Intergovernmental Conference in July.

Without help from you, our read-

ers, we will not be able to give this crucial mobilisation the person-power or publicity it needs.

Despite our heavy involvement in this campaign, we have not neglected other areas of activity.

We have fought cuts and closures in the NHS, social services and local government. We have supported and built the campaigns of students against tuition fees, and of women fighting for the defence and extension of abortion provision.

We have been involved in campaigns against the racist policing of the black community and for justice for victims of racial attacks.

We have fought for the closure of detention centres in which asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their countries of origin have been imprisoned and brutalised.

We have fought for class struggle policies, action and leadership within the trade unions. We have been relentless critics of Blair's New Labour policies.

We have sought co-operation with other socialists and activists to strengthen our common fight and win new forces to our causes. We have tried to struggle against the sectarianism on the left which so often dissuades new militants from any

sustained involvement.

We have done all this and more on the shoestring budget on which the left always operates. Sadly we have no Bernie Ecclestone to offer us £1 million a time.

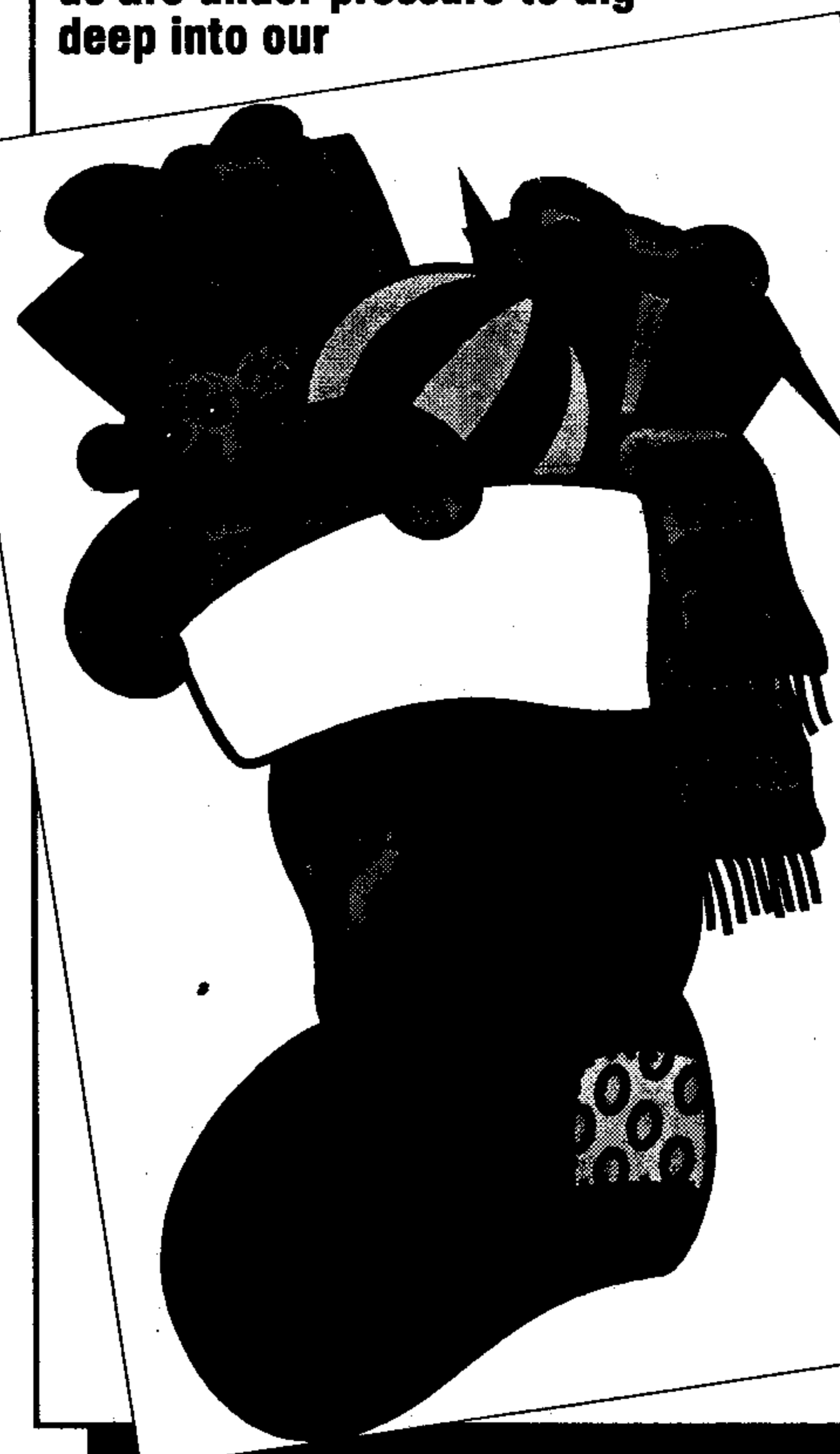
Our policies don't tend to attract millionaires. Rather we are dependent solely on the generosity of ordinary working people, often low-paid, some unemployed.

We desperately need to upgrade our equipment so that we can produce better publicity material around the issues we are working on.

We need to boost our travel budget so that we can better resource some of our smaller groups of supporters. We also need money to refurbish our building which needs some major repairs.

If you like what we do and are interested in what we say, then please consider sending us a donation – however large or small. Cheques should be made payable to *Socialist Outlook* and sent to Po Box 1109, London N4 2AA and marked 'Xmas appeal'.

Even better, why not consider making us a regular monthly donation? Standing order forms are available from your *Socialist Outlook* seller, or from the above address.



Ken Loach assesses Thornett's new book

Who controls the past controls the future



Car workers in struggle: if workers are always sold out, there's no way you can create the conditions to end capitalism and achieve socialism

LAST MONTH we carried a review of Alan Thornett's forthcoming book *Inside Cowley*, which will be published on January 8. In this issue we reprint the foreword that Ken Loach has written to the book.

We do so not only because we want to persuade our readers to buy the book, but because Loach's words deserve reprinting in their own right.

In the last weeks the Foreign Office has withdrawn its offer to print a biography of Loach in his own words as a representative of the British film industry. This is perhaps no surprise when these words pointed out Loach's twin struggle against the evils of stalinism and social democracy!

What the Foreign Office discards we are happy to publish.

"WHO CONTROLS the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." George Orwell's oft-quoted dictum was never more appropriate.

Fascist propaganda says that we all, whatever our social class, share the same interests, that those who can find work should identify with their employer, that all political parties, especially "New Labour", support Business.

The market is omnipotent and it will work, or can be made to work, for the benefit of all. Those who control the present, the large industrial companies and their political hacks, tell us so.

History is written to prove this. Revolutions lead to tyranny. Strikes are provoked by militants and end in violence. Wars of liberation are fought by terrorists. Until their leaders do as they are told, when they

are released from prison and become statesmen.

As I write, it is the anniversary of Russia's October Revolution. The sound-bite histories on the news programmes reduce that huge event to a mere blip in the progress of "freedom".

French lorry drivers are on strike. We are told nothing of its cause, nor is there any suggestion that drivers across Europe may face similar problems and might show solidarity with the strike. The only issue is that "our" lorries might be stranded.

So, on a grander scale, the Spanish Civil War was seen by Labour politicians as making difficulties for British shipping.

It was in this tradition that Alan Thornett was described as a "mole" by the *Daily Mail* for his efforts as a union activist. An unrepresentative group of strike-breakers were congratulated by Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson.

Fortunately, there are those who will swim against the tide. The workers' struggle has always produced those who will lead it, and those who will record it. Alan Thornett has done both.

I first met Alan in the late 1960s, at meetings of the Socialist Labour League (SLL). After a long period of Conservative government, it had become apparent that Wilson's Labour Party would make no significant changes.

Many people were looking for a party that would analyse the contemporary situation in the light of a historical process and provide a leadership for current struggles. The SLL was good on the former but woefully inadequate on the latter.

Nevertheless, for a few years there was a strong sense of what was possible. There was an education in political history that marked all those who took part.

Clarity

Amongst the groups who were most active were car workers from British Leyland, in particular from Cowley in Oxford. Alan was prominent in this company. A dark-haired, compact figure, he spoke to the point with clarity and precision.

He had, and has, that ability often denied to academics and intellectuals, of an eloquence that comes from clear thinking and simple language. An argument is built up from a concrete situation that is immediately recognisable, and the audience is taken, step by irrefutable step, to the conclusion the speaker intends.

In his book, Alan has captured the details of the industrial struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. It shows how we came to exchange the possibility of secure jobs for casual labour.

That in itself is shown to illustrate the fundamental flaw that runs through society like a geological fault line: the essential, undying and inevitable conflict between employers and those who sell their labour.

It is a conflict fought out in thousands of workplaces day after day, on building sites, in dockyards, mines and on the factory floor, at airports, on railways, even in broadcasting studios and on newspapers.

Wherever a product is made or transported, or a service provided, someone is thinking about cutting labour costs and someone else is wondering how long this job will last.

The detail of that struggle, the day-to-day step forward or back, the changing balance of forces, the tactical ingenuity, the weaknesses and strengths of comrades and adversaries, all this can rarely have been captured with such precision as in this story.

It should be in the library and on the reading list of every course in modern history, politics or media studies.

The principles that have guided Alan throughout his political work were expressed by him in a documentary we made in 1984.

The film (*A Question of Leadership*) was prevented from being broadcast by an alliance of his political opponents, but his words stand as a witness to lifetime's struggle.

The film concerned a familiar theme, the failure of union leadership to understand or represent the interests of working people: "I think it's perfectly possible to have socialism," said Alan, "in other words a socialist economy in which we get rid of the employers, in which production takes place for need and not for profit and at the same time to have a democratic structure in which those from below can control those at

the top.

"That's why I'm a socialist. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't have struggled all my life for socialism.

"How do we get it? Now the point is, it's connected with the other question: How does the working class develop its consciousness? When it is in struggle trying to defend its conditions, improve its conditions and therefore pit itself against the employers and the government.

"How do you achieve socialism? It seems to me that if you don't have a policy in which you can confront the evils of capitalism, which is mass unemployment, falling standards of living, wars and so on ... if you haven't got policies that can confront capitalism and you don't follow those policies and fight every day to defend the working class, then there's no way that you're going to achieve socialism, because it's in the course of that fight that you're going to create from the working class the people that can achieve socialism.

"And if they are continually sold out and continually dispersed and they're never allowed to unite, never allowed to get at the main enemy, never allowed to get at the government, never allowed to seriously get at the employers, then you can't create the conditions in which you can end capitalism and establish socialism."

However the economies of the world evolve, and the fashionable jargon of politics changes, this underlying truth remains.

OUT JAN 8!

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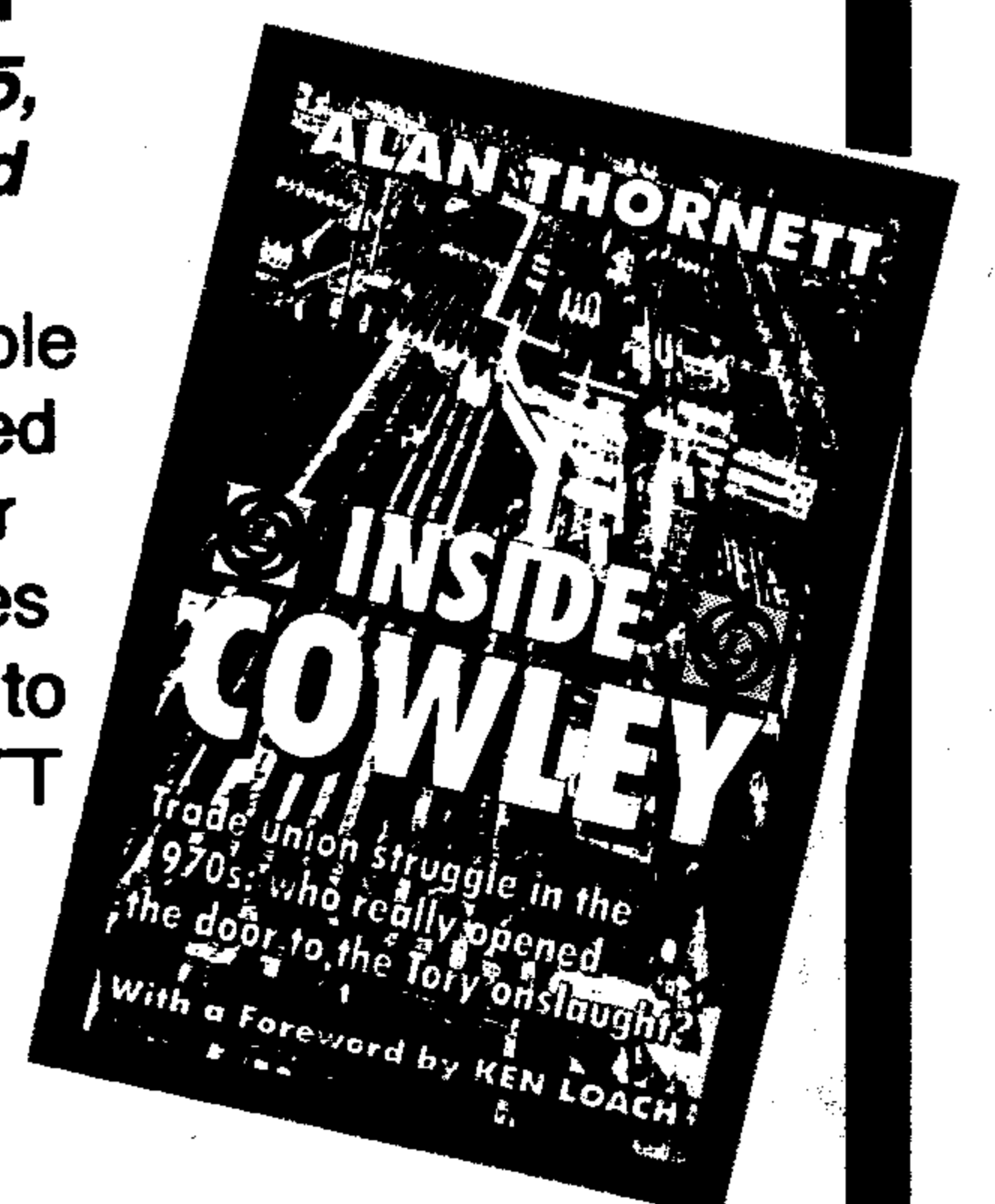
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Socialist OUTLOOK

Where we stand

IN THE NINETIES millions of women and men have taken part in mobilisations against the evils of capitalism and the bureaucratic dictatorships. This reflects the fact that humanity faces widening dangers. Ecological, military, social and economic devastation faces millions of people.

Many more people recognise the barbaric nature of capitalism. In a situation where the inability of the social democratic and communist parties to provide socialist solutions is becoming clearer the task of creating new leaderships remains ahead.

Socialist Outlook is written and sold by socialists committed to this struggle. We are the British supporters of the world-wide marxist organisation, the Fourth International. We stand for the revolutionary transformation of society and a pluralist, socialist democracy world wide.

The overall goal which we pursue is the emancipation of all human beings from every form of exploitation, oppression, alienation and violence. Socialism must be under the control of ordinary people, democratic, pluralist, multi-party, feminist, ecologist, anti-militarist and internationalist. It must abolish wage slavery and national oppression.

The working class is the backbone of unity among all the exploited and oppressed. The working class and its allies must uncompromisingly fight against capitalism and for a clear programme of action in order gradually to acquire the experience and consciousness needed to defeat capitalism at the decisive moment of crisis.

The movements of women, lesbians and gay men and black people to fight their particular forms of oppression make an essential contribution to the struggle for a different society. They are organised around the principle "None so fit to break the chains as those who wear them".

The whole working class needs to fully commit itself to these struggles. Furthermore we fight for a strategic alliance between workers and these organisations which respects their legitimate autonomy.

By simultaneously building revolutionary organisations in each country and a revolutionary International we aim to guide and encompass the global interests of the workers and oppressed. By building a united struggle against exploitation and oppression we aim to ensure the survival of the human race.

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- You can send us letters or articles by e-mail: Outlook@gn.apc.org
- Look up our Web page. You can find us at: <http://www.gn.apc.org/labournet/so>

Christmas Appeal from sacked Magnet workers

MAGNET workers in Darlington face their second Christmas on the picket line and don't expect that local MPs Tony Blair or Alan Milburn will be joining their picket line party.

Instead they need our help to maintain this vital dispute. A recent leaflet explains:

"To maintain our present level of hardship payments over the Christmas period, we need financial help to support us during

this very hard time.

Can you organise raffles or bucket collections or have one of us to speak to generate donations?

We have over 200 children to provide with Christmas toys. Our children's ages are from 9 months to 16 years.

Can you help? Clothing vouchers would be most welcome. Get your thinking caps on and find a way to help us through the holidays.

The support we had last year was fan-

tastic and the Christmas Day celebrations on the picket line were not to be missed. It would be a smack in the eye for Magnet to repeat that experience and show them we are not giving up."

* Send letters of support and donations to The Magnet Family Hardship fund, c/o 109 Jedburgh Drive, Darlington, Co Durham DL3 9UP.

Catch us on the internet www.gn.apc.org/magnetstrikers/

Stop locking up asylum seekers!

Close Harmondsworth Detention Centre!

**Picket Saturday 13th
December 1997,
11.30am-1.30pm**

BRING Christmas Gifts for the detainees: soap, phone cards and pre-paid air mail letters.

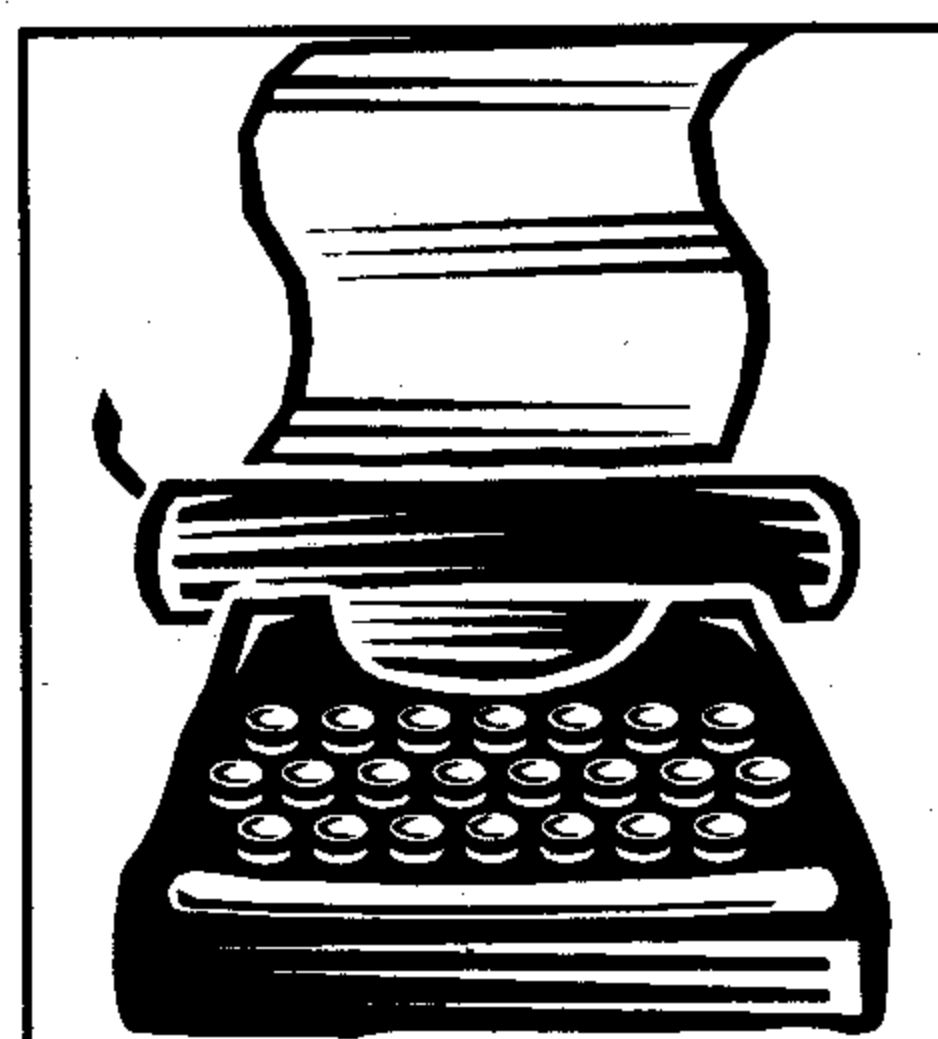
The picket will take place outside the detention centre on the Colnbrook By-pass (A4). Transport: Bus 81 from Hounslow West tube or Bus U3 from Heathrow Airport bus stop.

Last year all of the 90 detainees received something from the picket thanks to the generosity of supporters. This gesture of solidarity was very much appreciated.

Please bring these gifts along to the

picket or send cheques to reach us before the picket indicating whether donations are for gifts to the inmates or donation/affiliation to our Campaign.

Cheques should be made out to Slough Trades Council, and sent to the Campaign c/o 10, Endsleigh Rd, Southall, Middx UB2 5QL.



FEEDBACK

Send us your letters on any topic, to PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU. Letters over 400 words may have to be edited for length.

WHAT'S ON

Saturday Dec 6

Network of Socialist Campaign Groups AGM, 10.30-5.30 Swarthmore Education Centre, 2-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds.

Campaign for a Fighting Democratic UNISON conference, 10-4, South Camden Community School, Charrington St., London NW1.

Open meeting for supporters of the Euromarch, 1p.m. Bread and Roses pub, 68 Clapham Manor St., London SW4 (Clapham Common/Clapham North tube stations).

National Abortion Campaign AGM 1 pm - 5 pm, The Print House, 18 Ashwin Street London E8 3DL

Saturday Dec 13

Picket of Harmondsworth Detention Centre, Colnbrook by pass (A4) 11.30 am - 1.30 pm. Bring Christmas gifts for the detainees: soap, phone cards and pre-paid air mail letters.

**Saturday 10
January**

Welfare State Network Steering Committee, Birmingham.

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Specialist OUTLOOK

A monthly marxist review * New series No. 11 * December 1997 * 50p

As Labour's cuts slash single parent benefit

Get tough on Harman - and on the causes of Harman!



1997 will be remembered as the year that Tony Blair's New Labour Party finally ditched any commitment to the welfare state and to the poorest people in society.

Time and again we have been told that increasing benefit rates will not help those living in poverty. Instead we are supposed to believe that cuts in benefits - or even their complete withdrawal - are in the interests of those affected!

Such a twisted sense of humour will be no consolation to single parents seeing their benefits axed or to people with disabilities who are being threatened.

Disabled people have been increasingly squeezed by draconian rules and tests for incapacity benefit. Now plans are being explored to time-limit that benefit to 13 weeks or to tax disability living allowance (DLA) and attendance allowance.

The most 'radical' suggestion is that DLA will be abolished all together and the £4.4 billion budget passed to local authorities to spend on community care for disabled people.

Lorna Reith, Director of the Disability Alliance has reacted to the rumours that benefits will be taxed by asking: "Is a government with a manifesto commitment not to raise taxes

going to break it first by taxing disabled people?"

Some commentators have noticed that as opposition to these measures has mounted, Harriet Harman has been coming in for a fair amount of stick.

Unfair, some of her defenders have cried, Frank Field doesn't get this kind of flack - why pick on poor (!) Harriet. Actually it's a fiction that Field has escaped criticism for his own assaults on the welfare state.

Any government with such a huge majority cannot with any credibility claim that its hands are tied.

Unusual as it is for this paper to argue this however, Field does have one quality which marks him out from boss Harman. Field's hideous opposition to decent public services and his scapegoating of those at the bottom of society is not a new approach.

He is implementing today in government the very ideas he put forward (to the delight of Thatcher and others) when the Tories were in office, and when he himself was not in favour with the Labour Party hierarchy.

Harman, in contrast, criticised the

cuts to lone parent benefits as recently as April of this year - when the Tories proposed them.

Then she said "The abolition of (One Parent Benefit) will make working lone mothers worse off and discourage work among this group. Lone Parent Premium recognises that lone parents face additional costs in bringing up their children..." She was right.

Now she is in office, singing a different tune, her crocodile tears for the hard choices she is being "forced" to make by the spending limits laid down by her predecessors cut no ice with anyone, let alone those driven further into poverty by her assault.

Any government with such a huge majority cannot with any credibility claim that its hands are tied. Any individual who acts in such a callous and two-faced way cannot claim any integrity.

Of course Harman has not done a complete about-turn. She sent her children to grant-maintained and grammar schools long before the General Election. In October last year she refused to make a commitment to increase pensions in line with inflation.

This prioritising of privilege over principle marked her out to those who were paying attention as someone who could not be trusted.

She has long been a dedicated supporter not only of Tony Blair but of Chancellor Gordon Brown, whose proposals to abolish family credit in the mini-budget deepen her own assault on women.

It seems that opposition to the assault on lone parent benefit is mounting within the Parliamentary Labour Party. Pressure needs to be mounted to ensure those MPs who are rightly hostile stick to their guns and vote against the government.

They must not be intimidated into abstaining, as many critics have done on other attacks such as the imposition of tuition fees.

What happens in Westminster will not however be decisive. A massive campaigning effort must be mounted to stop these attacks on women and disabled people. Trade unions and Labour parties must do far more than pass critical resolutions.

We need a programme of imaginative action on the streets that can involve the greatest number of people.

These attacks must be halted, and the sentiment of working people to defend the Welfare State given a coherent voice. If Harman feels insulted in the crossfire, she has only herself to blame.