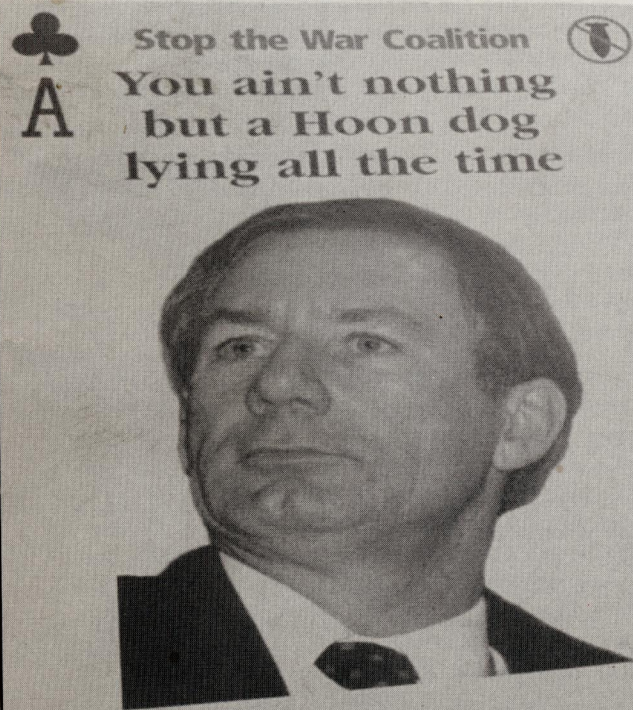


# Workers ACTION

No. 23  
October 2003

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## Is New Labour finished?





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Cover: Demonstrators outside the Hutton inquiry in London in August  
Photo: Molly Cooper

## Workers Action – what we stand for

Workers Action is a Marxist tendency in the labour movement.

In the present situation, after two decades of defeats, with strike action at a very low level and a leadership all too happy to accommodate to the pro-free market climate, Workers Action believes that the most important task is a struggle to renovate the existing labour movement, politically and industrially, so that it can fight effectively in its own interests.

This means a struggle in the labour movement as it is, with all its problems and weaknesses. Most workers continue to support the Labour Party in elections or by union affiliation. At present, attempts to get round this political fact by mounting electoral challenges to Labour are, in most cases, futile and sectarian, and are likely to lead to greater demoralisation. Most importantly, they represent an abandonment of any serious political struggle against the Labour leadership. Workers Action supporters are therefore active in the Labour Party as well as the trade unions and political campaigns.

Capitalism condemns millions to exploitation, poverty, disease and war, so that when its leading international bodies meet, they have to do so behind lines of police. However, Workers Action believes that the relative importance of the anti-capitalist movement over the last few years is a sign not of the strength of the left, but of its weakness and marginalisation. The new free market world order is based on 20 years of defeats for the international working class. Protests outside the conferences of organisations such as the WTO are important, but must not be a substitute for building a socialist leadership in the working class.

Workers Action supports all progressive national struggles against imperialism, without placing any confidence in the leaders of such movements. Neither bourgeois nationalism, nor petty-bourgeois guerrillaism, nor religious fundamentalism can advance the interests of the oppressed workers and peasants. We are for the building of a socialist leadership on an international scale.

The collapse of Stalinism in 1989, compounded by the move to the right of the Labour Party and the European Socialist parties, has resulted in an ideological crisis for the left. Some, like the SWP, deny that such a crisis exists – indeed, they claim that this is the best period for a generation in which to fight for socialism. Others question whether the socialist project, fought for by the working class and its allies, is still viable. Workers Action believes that it is, but that to rebuild a fighting left relevant to the concerns of workers means rejecting the methods of sect-building and self-proclaimed vanguardism.

However, Workers Action has a non-dogmatic approach to this crisis of the left. We see it as an opportunity to evaluate critically many of our previously held conceptions in the light of experience. Marxism is a critical ideology or it is nothing. Socialists cannot march into the 21st century with their programme frozen in the 1920s.

If you are interested in joining us or discussing further, write to us at PO Box 7268, London E10 6TX or e-mail us at [workers.action@btinternet.com](mailto:workers.action@btinternet.com)

# Blair on the back foot

Continuously in office for longer than ever before, a whopping majority in the Commons, inflation and unemployment lower than they've been for decades – how Tony Blair and the New Labour clique must have longed for this moment! But historians may well mark 2003 as the year when Blair's New Labour project fell apart in ignominy and disgrace.

Labour Party members and trade unionists who had bitterly opposed the war on Iraq know that they were right all along, and those who were prepared to give Blair the benefit of the doubt now feel utterly betrayed, as the Hutton inquiry, originally conceived as a crash pad for the mounting concern about the basis for the war, in fact lays bare the amoral and squalid culture of dishonesty at the heart of New Labour. The saga of the 'dodgy dossiers' has been called Blair's Watergate, but as George Galloway has pointed out, nobody died at Watergate.

In the meantime, the Iraqi people, supposed to have been 'liberated' by this murderous adventure, have no water, no electricity, are not being paid (assuming they have jobs to go to) and are terrified to walk out of the door. In this issue of *Workers Action* we look at the increasingly desperate and brutal efforts of the US to stabilise its Iraqi colony, and examine the factors both within the USA and in Iran which will determine whether or not that country will be Bush and Blair's next target.

On September 14, the WTO talks in Cancún collapsed because of the stand taken by the G21 countries against the aggressive trade policies of the USA and Europe. For the poorer countries' representatives, no deal was preferable to a bad deal. On the same day, which turned out to be a bad one for elites, voters in Sweden defied the political and economic establishment, and gave a decisive 'no' to the Euro. Both these developments, and their implications, will be analysed in future issues of *Workers Action*.

While Cancún is where the new world order is being enforced economically, and the Middle East is where the drive for US hegemony is being imposed militarily, we look in some detail at Latin America, where the combination of neo-liberal economics and authoritarian government was first tried out, and where, just possibly, a sustained fightback may be underway.

Opposition to the war within the labour movement has started to crystallise much of the previously fragmented and half-hearted opposition to PFI, the privatisation of the public sector, the great pensions scandal, and the anti-union laws into something broader, and bolder.

The extent to which New Labour has become a tainted brand is illustrated by the defeat of candidates openly identifying with Blairism in elections in Amicus, the TGWU and the GMB. Equally significant is the fact that some of the so-called 'awkward-squad' are not really awkward at all by instinct, but are seen as left-wingers because compared to the Blairites they are, and because they feel under pressure to articulate the anger and anxiety of their members.

Postal workers are the latest group of public sector workers to come into conflict with their management and, by extension, the government, and in this issue of *Workers Action* we analyse the set back to their pay campaign following the recent narrow vote against strike action, as well as looking at the broader question of how rank-and-file opposition to the government can be built in the unions, to put pressure on the leaders to go further than seaside speechifying. We also report on the successful campaign for regrading carried out by nursery nurses in east London.

At the TUC conference in Brighton at the beginning of September, Brown got the rough ride he deserved. Blair was, as ever, more slippery, boasting for the benefit of the right-wing press that at a dinner with trade union leaders he had been more aggressive than was actually the case. So much for the death of spin! Blair and his allies still have boundless belief in their ability to persuade, patronise and dupe their growing number of opponents in the labour movement into submission, but, to paraphrase Bill Clinton, it's the politics, stupid!

Especially following the loss of Brent East in the September 18 by-election, which we cover in depth in this issue, the Labour Party conference promises to be the most turbulent for years – anything but the US-style rally into which it has degenerated. Of course, if some of the far left had their way there would be no left-wingers at all in the Labour Party because they would have all resigned. In *Socialist*

*Worker* No.1867, Chris Harman tells us that it is mistaken to cling to the hope of a 'miraculous change at the top of the Labour Party'.

It is difficult to know where to start with this! No, socialists in the Labour Party do not believe in miracles, but they do believe in practical politics. They see that the votes of those disenchanted with Labour have gone to the Greens, the Lib-Dems or, in Wales and Scotland, Plaid Cymru and the SSP respectively. Where they have not gone is to the Socialist Alliance, currently little more than an electoral front for the SWP. Almost without exception, its votes are minuscule, despite the huge unpopularity of the war. Why? Because sectarianism tends to flourish in periods of defeat and fall apart in upsurges.

Harman refers to the difference between now and the 1960s and 70s being the 'sheer scale of potential support for the forces to the left of Labour'. Apart from being historically inaccurate, this remark is also meaningless. There is a 'potential' for large-scale support for forces to the left of Labour in the same way that there is 'potential' for a socialist revolution. Potential has to be realised however, and the way to do this is not by proclamation.

*Socialist Worker* and the Socialist Alliance seem to forget the oft-repeated truism that when trade unionists and socialists want to fight, they look first to their traditional organisations, and that is what is starting to happen now. It is possible to detect a new feeling among Labour Party left-wingers that now is not the time to tear up the party card.

Organisations such as Save the Labour Party and Welsh Labour Grassroots are springing up, and resolutions on Iraq, foundation hospitals and the attacks on the public sector are going to conference. The leadership will resort to all sorts of manoeuvres to rule these out of order, or neutralise them, but Blair is more vulnerable than he has ever been. Apart from the discovery in Iraq of a cache of WMDs, what Blair wishes for more than anything else is that all those socialists in the Labour Party would go away.

The important thing is for the party membership in the constituencies to link up with the unions and attack New Labour on every front. The propagandist-in-chief Campbell has gone. The odious Geoff Hoon is a dead man walking, politically speaking. But these two did not start the war on Iraq or privatise the public sector on their own. To use a well-worn phrase, they were only obeying orders. Members of the Labour Party and affiliated trade unions who want to take back their party must demand nothing less than the resignation of Blunkett, Straw and Blair.

## Comment

# Is New Labour finished?

Workers Action assesses how damaging the summer's events have been to the architects of war with Iraq

The fallout from the war in Iraq has been unremitting and unrelenting for the Blair government. The Hutton inquiry, whose terms of reference were deliberately framed to draw attention away from the main charge against the government – that its justification for war was a tissue of lies and forgeries – has proved to be less easy to keep to the narrow remit of investigating the death of Dr David Kelly.

Instead, despite the mounds of contradictory evidence and the minutiae of who e-mailed who and who leaked what, the damage limitation exercise has backfired. The main impression left on the public is the dominance of a culture of cynicism, spin, arrogance and dishonesty in the inner circle around Blair. Whatever comfort the government gained from Alastair Campbell being exonerated by the Joint Intelligence Committee chair, John Scarlett, of 'sexing up' the Iraq dossier quickly evaporated when Dr Brian Jones, a senior Ministry of Defence intelligence analyst, told the inquiry that Downing Street had 'over-egged' claims of chemical weapons and described the 45 minutes claim – sourced to an Iraqi defector with an interest in gaining influence – as 'nebulous'.

Over-egging or sexing up? Who cares about the finer distinctions? What is absolutely clear is that senior figures in the cabinet pressed for the firming up of evidence, that in most cases was flimsy and in others tainted or non-existent, so as to justify a decision for war that had been agreed between Bush and Blair months before. Indeed, Hutton has caused more evidence to emerge of Downing Street urging intelligence chiefs to trawl the files for anything that could be pressed into service. Further damaging revelations came from the Downing Street Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, who warned Blair last September that Iraq could not be construed as an 'imminent threat', only to be contradicted a week later when the dossier claimed precisely that. Then it emerged that in February this year Downing Street had chosen to ignore the Joint Intelligence Committee's warning that: 'Any collapse of the Iraqi regime would increase the risk of chemical and biological warfare technology or agents finding their way into the hands of terrorists, including al-Qaida.' In other words, what Blair claimed to be acting against he was recklessly helping bring about.

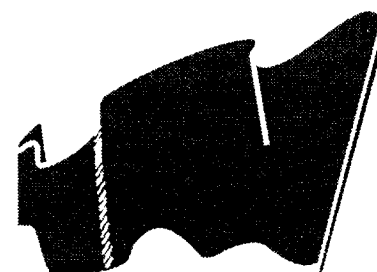
## Empire

Almost Blair's only ally in all this has been the Murdoch empire, desperate to discredit the BBC, remove its status as a public corporation and its funding through the licence fee so as to get its dirty paws on an

even greater percentage of the media. Even senior Tories, forced to find a way of distancing themselves from their support for the war, have found themselves echoing the arguments of the anti-war movement. The disgraceful witch-hunt of BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan, and the forensic poring over of every word in every sentence of a radio broadcast he made at 6am is a measure of the desperation at the heart of the Blair team.

## Contradictory

Despite the personal tragedy involved, the evidence relating to Dr Kelly has seemed strangely anti-climactic. He is described as a very private man, and yet it would seem quite a contradictory one. One the one hand, he was a highly experienced weapons expert, yet for someone used to going toe-to-toe with the Ba'athist regime he was highly sensitive. A former senior figure at Porton Down, he was a member of the esoteric Ba'hai faith. His suicide was foreshadowed by an aside that if Britain went to war with Iraq he would be found dead in the woods. Yet an article in the *Observer* showed that while he assessed Iraq as only a 'modest' threat, he appears to have supported the goal of regime change by force. He was worried about his professionalism being compromised, yet he held a naive belief that as a civil servant he had a right to leak highly sensitive information. In fact,



**Socialist  
Alliance**

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had he been serious about obstructing the road to war, he could have resigned his post and gone public. Kelly would have held all the aces, and no amount of spin about him being a Walter Mitty character would have done the government any good. But he worried about his pension. Almost everyone has a breaking point, and David Kelly buckled under the threat of exposure as Gilligan's source. Yet those in government who have been sanctimoniously queuing up to pay their respects have put Andrew Gilligan under many times the pressure Dr Kelly faced.

The Hutton inquiry has highlighted a peculiarly English knack for straining on a gnat while swallowing a camel. Millions have been spent on divining the precise chain of events leading to the death of one man. Meanwhile, by mid-September, according to the authoritative website [www.iraqbodycount.net](http://www.iraqbodycount.net), between 6,131 and 7,849 Iraqi civilians had been killed since the conflict began, with at least 20,000 injured.

Blair has clung stubbornly to the wreckage of the dossiers' claims – from the existence of active nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programmes, to the claim that Saddam had the ability to deploy WMDs threatening the West within 45 minutes, to the amateurish forgery used to back the claim that Iraq was procuring uranium in Niger. Having staked his reputation on the dossiers, he had little choice. But it marks him indelibly as deceitful, whatever the findings of the Hutton inquiry. These perceptions are highly important when set against the centrality for the New Labour project of presenting itself as safe, reliable and professional. And at the heart of New Labour spin has been the emphasis on Blair as a man of firm moral convictions who is above all trustworthy. Blair's regular appeals to 'trust me' are becoming more and more counter-productive. Large parts of the electorate don't any more.

### Problems

Such has been Blair's presidential dominance of those round him, that damage to Blair's reputation spells deep problems for the team as a whole. It is a team that in any case has gaping holes in it. Robin Cook resigned just before hostilities began, Claire Short just after, and Michael Meacher has been rediscovering his conscience after losing his post in a reshuffle. Prince of Darkness Alastair Campbell has left to spend more time with Burnley FC. Geoff Hoon, after his contradictory evidence to the Hutton inquiry, looks as if he's on the way out. Even Jack Straw seems to have wobbled over whether to commit troops. Anji Hunter was buried by bad news after

9/11. Loyalists Peter Mandelson and Stephen Byers cannot be resurrected in this climate, and 'future leadership contender' Alan Milburn gave up the ghost earlier this year. The trade union leaders have been thoroughly alienated, and they are almost unanimous in their opposition to the continued occupation of Iraq. The intelligence agencies are obviously deeply split, with sections angry at being misused and discredited by the whole Iraq affair.

The phrase doing the rounds at the TUC and echoed by sections of the far left is that New Labour is finished. Whether it's meant as a prediction or an aspiration, it should come with a health warning. First of all, what is meant by New Labour? The Blair leadership? The project? Or the party as a whole?

### Discredited

Most obviously, New Labour as a brand is damaged and discredited. The Labour heartlands are abstaining in droves in local, parliamentary and assembly elections, or protesting by voting Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru, SSP and BNP. The party's membership is in decline, but those who are staying put are up in arms. The main assets Blair has right now – apart from a huge parliamentary majority – are the relative stability of the economy and Iain Duncan Smith's leadership of the Tory party. Never underestimate the incompetence of a quiet man.

New Labour the project remains in most respects dangerously on course. Blair pressing the flesh of a few union leaders and Brown lecturing the TUC on the great gains workers have made in the last six years may reflect nervousness, but as Blair emphasised it does not mean a change of

direction. There is no U-turn on Iraq, nor is there on PPP/PFI, pensions or public sector wage policy.

New Labour the tendency has been seriously weakened, but it remains in control of all the reins of power in both government and party. The attrition of leading lights makes any smooth handover highly problematic. Only Gordon Brown rates as a comparable public figure, and Blair shows less inclination than ever to abdicate in favour of him.

Despite the haemorrhage of protesting Labour voters, come the next general election a Labour victory looks, if not certain, highly likely, even if it's with a reduced majority. Short of a smoking e-mail of cataclysmic proportions, Blair is not likely to resign in the short term. Only when his closest colleagues regard him as an outright electoral liability will they move against him – and having invested so much politically in the project it's a step few will relish. Defeating New Labour means more than simply removing Blair, however central he appears. It means fighting the whole pro-war, pro-privatisation, neo-liberal consensus at the head of the party.

There is nothing automatic about finishing off New Labour. It is a task, not a given in this situation. Much will depend on moving the trade union leaders on from largely verbal to active opposition. At the same time, however, the conditions for rallying a wide layer of trade unionists and Labour Party members against Blair and his followers have steadily matured. Iraq will not go away. It will come back to haunt Blair again and again, as the lies that justified war in Iraq unravel and the costs of maintaining military occupation spiral.

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**Brent East by-election**

# Blair's policies lead to defeat

**Pete Firmin**  
Brent East Labour Party

Labour's first by-election defeat in 15 years, the loss of a 13,500 Labour majority, a 29 per cent swing to the Liberal Democrats – this was Labour's 'achievement' on September 18.

One thing should be made absolutely clear – this was a campaign dictated by the national Labour Party, politically and organisationally. The local CLP had next to no input. Politically, the material from the Labour Party could have been aimed at a local council election; it was all about graffiti, street crime and 'anti-social behaviour', with nothing about the national and international issues which MPs are expected to legislate on.

The Labour Party campaign was run by Jim Fitzpatrick MP, who was appointed by the national party. Fitzpatrick, currently with a job in the Whips' office, was obviously selected because of his success in running Frank Dobson's campaign to be Mayor of London against Ken Livingstone. Organisers were brought in from around the country to run each ward, MPs and their assistants were seen canvassing, hundreds of party members and Labour students came to work, and media appearances were organised for John Prescott, David Blunkett and Charles Clarke, though hardly anyone noticed. Blair himself stayed away, perhaps fearing association with defeat. Most local party members were not, however, involved – while they received letters appealing for them to help, these were without political motivation. Some offers of help from local party members were ignored.

No doubt through gritted teeth, Ken Livingstone was allowed to campaign for Labour, but this was too little and too late to counteract the overall nature of the campaign.

How did the Liberal Democrats manage to win? Most of their election material (they probably delivered more than all the other parties put together) was also about local issues – like Labour, they even produced leaflets aimed at the residents of one street or block of flats. They actually began campaigning *before* Paul Daisley, the incumbent MP, died, knowing that he was seriously ill and had only been given a few months to live. From the start they claimed that they were the only party that could defeat Labour, a claim that took on a momentum of its own, having initially appeared to be bravado. The Tories showed little interest in fighting the seat, eventually coming up with the excuse that it was not 'natural Tory territory' – despite the fact that they came second to Labour in the general election, hold several council seats in the constituency (unlike the Liberal Democrats) and have controlled Brent Council in the not-too-distant past. The real

reason is more likely to be due to the infighting within the Tory party and their lack of resources.

While the Liberal Democrats did not say much about national and international issues, they gave the impression to those who wanted to see it that they stood to the left of Labour. Thus they said that their candidate, Sarah Teather, had 'marched with hundreds of Brent residents against the war' (unlikely, since no-one in Brent knew of her before the election campaign), but they did not make much of the war and said nothing of the current situation in Iraq, presumably in an attempt not to alienate Tory voters who might vote for them as a protest against Blair.

Of course, many Labour voters did not vote for the Liberal Democrats, but stayed away out of disillusionment, and some Tory voters will have voted Liberal Democrat to give Blair a bloody nose.

For the early part of the campaign Labour claimed that the war was not an issue on the doorsteps. They may have been right, but this changed with the efforts of various 'fringe' parties, and in particular of Brent Stop the War, which toured the constituency on several days with a bus and leaflets calling on people to think of the war when voting (without endorsing, or otherwise, any candidate). Labour canvassers later in the campaign reported that Iraq was very much an issue, with many voters saying they would not vote Labour because of the war.

## Labour pays price for George Bush's war

Statement by the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs issued on September 19

Last night's disastrous by-election result in a safe Labour seat shows a total breakdown of trust between the party and its supporters. People feel utterly betrayed by the government's invasion of Iraq and its domestic political agenda. The issue is not one of presentation. There must be a fundamental change of direction.

Listening is not enough. We demand that the Labour government now drops its policies on foundation hospitals, top-up fees, privatisation and Thatcher's anti-trade union laws. These relics of New Labour ideology must be abandoned before it is too late. This battle will now be taken on to the floor of the Labour Party conference so that the whole movement can decide our way ahead.



Labour's candidate, Robert Evans, was a severe disappointment even to those who had not expected much of him. Because it was a by-election, the Labour Party bureaucracy was also in charge of the selection (with a minimum of input from local party officers), presenting party members with a shortlist of four to choose between.

Knowing they couldn't get away with shortlisting only total Blairites, they allowed two ever-so-slightly more critical candidates onto the shortlist – Evans and Shahid Malik, a well-known maverick. At the hustings, Malik argued passionately against the war. However, members with slightly longer memories pointed out that Malik sits on Labour's NEC and had never voiced this opposition there (nor, for that matter, opposition on any other policy issue). In fact, at last year's Labour Party conference he had been a keynote speaker in support of the leadership's resolution against opposition to the war. Against this, Evans, although a cold fish, was able to point out that he had, more substantially, voted against the war (and the Labour whip) in the European parliament. Evans won the selection narrowly over Malik with the two outright Blairites sharing only 14 per cent of the votes cast.

Although we knew of Evans's rather supine record (he was one of the MEPs who, having signed a statement against the abolition of Clause IV, retracted under pressure from the Labour leadership), it was hoped that he might at least make known that he was against the war. He might have done so occasionally on the doorstep (who knows?), but it certainly didn't get said as part of the campaign. Evans failed to assert himself at all in the campaign, leaving Fitzpatrick to do his worst. This reached ridiculous proportions when Fitzpatrick substituted for Evans at a hustings meeting organised by Brent Stop the War and not only defended the government's position, but claimed not to know Evans's opinion!

Thus Evans was the candidate because of his opposition to the war, but then refused to make an issue of it!

Clearly the war itself was not the only issue which led to Labour's defeat; there was the wider one of lack of trust in the government, exemplified by the war, and a whole raft of policies where they have turned off those who previously supported them.

The official national Labour Party response to the by-election defeat has been that these things 'happen' mid-term and voters will 'return to the Labour fold' come the general election. When 'these things' happen is, of course, not determined by the calendar, but by the political background. The expectation that Brent East will auto-

matically return a Labour MP at the general election is typical of the arrogance with which the New Labour leadership treats traditional Labour voters. It should not be forgotten that Simon Hughes won a 'traditional Labour seat' in Bermondsey and has held it ever since.

There is no guarantee, of course, that if – big if – Brent East Labour Party had been allowed to run a campaign critical of the war and government policies it could have retained the seat. Voters would still have been wary because you cannot escape the national picture, but the local Labour Party could, at least, have begun to re-establish a relationship of trust with working class supporters.

Whether Labour can win back Brent East, and, for that matter, how it does in the country as a whole, depends on a whole number of factors. But what Brent East makes clear is that the future is in the hands of the Labour Party – it can't count on the

weakness of the other parties.

Blair never ceases to tell Labour Party and trade union members pressing for change that the only alternative to his policies is a Tory government. Apart from the riposte 'who could tell the difference?', we now have to make clear that it is Blair's policies which lead to defeat, not the left's alternative. Brent East could provide the spark to drive that point home.

While the left likes to see the New Labour leadership getting a bloody nose, we can take no great delight in the Brent East result. The Liberal Democrats, seen by some as a 'left' alternative to Labour, are neither socialist nor rooted in the organised working class. Their record in local government, such as in Islington where Sarah Teather is a councillor, shows just how reactionary they are. The Brent East result will tend to reinforce the idea that they do represent some kind of progressive alternative to Labour. **WA**

## On the fringe

The Brent East by-election saw a total of 16 candidates, including Aaron Barschak, famous for gate-crashing the royal birthday party at Windsor. Some made a greater effort than others. The local Green Party, for instance, did not want to stand, but was instructed to do so by the regional party. Its candidate, Noel Lynch, got 638 votes.

Kelly McBride stood on the single issue of the murder of her brother, Peter, by the British army in Belfast and the reinstatement (and promotion!) of the two soldiers found guilty. While getting only 189 votes – and probably never expecting to do much better – the campaign established many useful contacts for the future.

The BNP did not stand, and it is heartening to see the UK Independence Party perform so badly, with 140 votes. Brent East, one of the most ethnically mixed constituencies in the country, was hardly fertile territory for the far right. There was, however, an Afro-Caribbean candidate, Winston McKenzie, who campaigned to 'close the gates of Brent' to asylum seekers, and received 197 votes.

There were four 'socialist' or 'left' candidates: the Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Labour Party (not known to have any supporters in the area), Fawzi Ibrahim, the national treasurer of Natfhe and a local lecturer, and Harold Immanuel, a Labour Party member (at least until he stood in this election) who stood in protest at Labour's policies. Immanuel had not, however, been active in the Labour Party for about nine years, and Ibrahim has little contact with the local labour movement, despite some involvement in the anti-war campaign. Immanuel got 188 votes, Ibrahim 219 and the candidate of Arthur Scargill's SLP, Iris Cremer, 111.

The Socialist Alliance was the most serious of these left candidates. They stood Brian Butterworth, secretary of Brent Unison, a Socialist Workers Party member known to many (although perhaps not quite so well known as the Alliance claimed). They did a lot of campaigning, bringing in people from around London to back up the local branch. That they came ahead of the other left candidates reflects this work, but the fact that they only got 361 votes (1.7 per cent) indicates that, however much work they put in, they cannot overcome the futility of the exercise – even aggregated, the 'left' candidates only got around 5 per cent of the vote.

It was always the case that the main beneficiaries from distrust of Blair or anti-war feeling were going to be the Tories or Liberal Democrats (in the event, the latter). It was only late in the day that the Alliance actually produced any campaign material arguing that the Liberal Democrats are not an alternative. One gets the impression that some in the Alliance welcome the Liberal Democrat victory, further indicating their lack of a coherent strategy.

Trade unions and Labour

# When bureaucrats fall out

Simon Deville

This year's TUC conference saw union leaders more prepared than ever to speak out against government policies. Unison's Dave Prentis launched a scathing attack on foundation hospitals and privatisations, and Tony Woodley, the newly-elected general secretary of the TGWU, called on Blair to resign over the illegal war in Iraq and his responsibility for the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians. While journalists like to describe these two as part of the 'awkward squad', neither Woodley nor Prentis are part of any radical opposition but are life-long, time-serving bureaucrats, representing the more conservative wing of British trade unionism.

The fact that such figures have squarely and publicly set themselves against the policies of the Labour government only serves to underscore the distance between the Labour Party and the trade union movement's respective bureaucracies. While the two were all but interchangeable a generation ago, New Labour has led the party into an unprecedented situation.

The historical role of British trade union leaders has been to dampen down the militancy of their members, arguing that they are able to deliver reforms through negotiations and by having the ear of a Labour government. They have at most points been able to win the majority of their members behind them on the basis that they have been able to deliver real material gains through a combination of government reforms and concessions wrested from the employers.

The relationship with the Blair government is a different matter altogether. The New Labour 'project' was developed out of the perceived inability of reformism to stand up to the neo-liberal offensive. Even 'old style' social democratic governments around the world have capitulated to the domination of neo-liberalism – to privatisation and the multi-nationals. In other European countries this has occurred at a slower pace and to a lesser degree, but it is hard to think of a government anywhere in the world whose overall direction has been to nationalise or socialise industry or the country's infrastructure, or where the balance has been tipped away from the rich and powerful and in favour of the poor and oppressed.

The Labour government has made a virtue of its ties to big business, re-inventing the term 'modernisation' to mean adapting to the whims of business. At the same time, the government has done all it can to distance itself from the labour movement, relishing the chance to be seen to be 'taking on the unions', and boasting of having the most repressive anti-union laws in Europe. In the debate over European integration, New Labour has stood up for our 'right' to work longer hours for less pay, and acts as an advocate both for the USA's neo-liberal economic agenda, such as on GM crops, and its

military agenda, as in the Iraq war.

The fact that a reformist programme has been pushed off the agenda hasn't gone unnoticed by the majority of trade union members. For the first time almost in living memory in the West, each successive generation is faced with worse conditions than the previous one, being expected to work longer and harder for a smaller slice of the cake. The government's suggestion of solving the pensions crisis by making everyone work longer before retirement, and their refusal to look at the 'bleedin' obvious' solution of a properly funded state pension, starkly highlights this point.

The result of this change inside the unions has been a situation which was almost unheard of a few years ago: in union after union, sitting general secretaries have been losing their seats to virtually unknown candidates to their left. With the exception of the teaching unions (which aren't affiliated to Labour anyway), New Labour has lost almost every close ally it had in the leadership of the union movement. Almost the entirety of the *elected* union leadership has either been replaced, or has got the message and moved significantly to the left. To admit to being a Blairite is the kiss of death for anyone standing for election in the unions.

But being prepared to oppose the government publicly is only the first step. Even in their opposition the unions are not very consistent, with general secretaries speaking on public platforms defending union policy, while sending representatives onto Labour's NEC who vote with New Labour, and against their own union.

The important thing, however, isn't just for the union leaders to oppose the government, but for trade unionists collectively to devise a strategy that will improve the conditions of working people, that will prove an alternative pole of attraction to the Blairites inside the Labour Party, and that will convince the growing section of the workforce that aren't in unions that they should be.

Much of the liberal press has been argu-

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ing for partnership agreements in Britain, as exist in many other European countries. The union leaders have been bending over backwards to form partnerships with anyone who'll have them – even going to the lengths of inviting Digby Jones of the CBI to lecture TUC delegates on why we should stop sticking up for workers' rights and outdated notions of that kind, and concentrate instead on ensuring higher quality training.

In relation to the government, the unions have prolonged a very one-sided partnership with it, to be slapped down at every turn. At the same time, they have shown themselves more than willing to stump up more cash whenever the Labour Party is in financial difficulties.

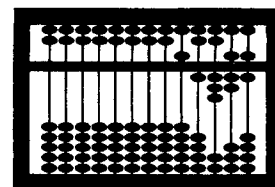
Most union leaders are beginning to realise that this cannot continue, although few have any answers as to what they should be doing. Most by instinct would like to get back to the old-style partnership with the Labour government. But the government's offer to include the unions in policy-making decisions rings particularly hollow coming less than a month before the annual party conference at which the leadership wants to silence any opposition, and when ministers are telling TUC conference delegates that the government isn't prepared to budge on foundation hospitals or PFI schemes.

The danger is that union opposition will amount to little more than showcase speeches at TUC, at individual union conferences, or even at the Labour Party conference, which will then be forgotten until next year, when the situation will be even worse.

The unions' inability to offer an effective challenge to the direction of government policy must be a substantial reason for the decline in trade unions over the past period. It cannot all be explained away by the changing nature of the workforce. The movement as a whole needs to start campaigning on key issues that will radically transform society – foundation hospitals, privatisation, pensions, trade union rights, war, immigration and asylum. Every major trade union has progressive policies on all of these issues, and there is a high level of agreement on them. If the unions were to mobilise their members around such issues – collectively building mass protests, demonstrations and industrial action – they could place themselves at the centre of a serious challenge to neo-liberalism, could start showing their relevance to the generation that has grown up viewing unions as some kind of anachronism, and could transform the Labour Party and the government. It needs much more than a few speeches at the annual trip to the seaside to achieve this.

The left can't just wish this into existence. Despite its more militant tone today, the trade union bureaucracy continues to represent a

## FIGURING IT OUT



**MARRIAGE:** Four in ten marriages in the UK currently end in divorce, with divorce rates hitting a seven-year high last year. Meanwhile, the number of people getting married has fallen to its lowest level since 1897, with only 249,227 getting married last year. The average age of those getting married has risen from 25 in 1897 to 35 today.

**WORKING HOURS:** New European working time regulations came into force in August. At 43.6 hours, Britain has the longest average working week in Europe. The EU average is 40.3 hours.

**TRADE UNIONS:** Growing trade union membership has failed to keep up with the growth of the workforce, and the proportion of British workers who belong to a trade union has dropped from 29 per cent in 1995 to 26.6 per cent in 2002. However, last year the number of working days spent on strike rose to 1,323,000, the highest since 1990.

**DEBT:** Since 1997, average household debt has risen by more than 50 per cent, while average income has gone up by 23 per cent. The average family now has debts of £37,500 compared with £24,500 in 1997.

**LONDON:** The number of people working in the manufacturing sector in London has fallen from 1.5 million in 1961 to 250,000 today. Average gross annual earnings for full-time adult workers in Greater London in 2002 were £34,760, and in the City of London £59,000, compared with a national average of £24,500.

**INEQUALITY:** Under Margaret Thatcher, between 1979 and 1990, the poorest fifth of the population had their share of post-tax national income cut from 10 per cent to just 6 per cent. Over the same period, the richest fifth increased their share of post-tax national income from 37 per cent to 45 per cent. Under John Major, from 1990 to 1997, this increase in inequality was marginally reduced. Under Labour, up to 2001-02, the share of the bottom fifth has slipped back to 6 per cent, while the share of the top fifth has moved up to 46 per cent.

**POVERTY:** Even though the numbers of registered unemployed has fallen under Blair, the percentage of jobless households has changed little, from a peak of 18 per cent in 1997 to 16 per cent in 2002.

**LABOUR MARKET:** The number of people employed in the manufacturing sector has dropped by 129,000 between 2002 and 2003. Manufacturing jobs fell to 3.51 million in the three months to June compared with 3.64 million a year earlier. Nearly 100,000 call centre jobs in Britain are also under threat over the next five years as employers move to cheaper locations like India. However, the overall number of people in work reached its highest ever level in the second quarter of the year. Employment rose by 63,000 to 27.92 million in the three months to June. Of these, 47,000 were full-time and 16,000 part-time. Between March 2002 and March 2003 employment in public administration, education and health industries went up by 157,000, over half of it being in the public sector. The largest number of new jobs was in the NHS, where employment rose by 61,000. There are now 5.3 million state employees – about 1 in 5 of the total workforce. However, as a result of Tory privatisations, this figure is still 2 million less than 20 years ago.

**FAT CATS:** The average boss of a FTSE 100 company earns £1.678 million when pension benefits and perks are taken into account – up 23 per cent on last year. This increase was over seven times the national average. A total of 190 executive directors earn more than £1 million, compared with 136 last year.

'Empiricist'

distinct layer with its own specific interests that are separate from the rest of the class. Its main aim is to have a quiet life, and not to rock the boat. The existence within its ranks of individuals such as Mark Serwotka or Jeremy Dear, who have a grounding in revolutionary socialist politics, does not mean that the nature of the bureaucracy has

changed. The union leaders will only mount a challenge when the rank and file is organised and militant. Socialists must assist in building this militancy within the unions, and in giving it a political direction that demands a fight from the trade union leaders in the class struggle and within the Labour Party.

WA

# Royal Mail steps up offensive

Pete Firmin  
CWU West End Amalgamated  
branch

The media predicted an overwhelming 'yes' vote by postal workers in their ballot on industrial action over the national pay claim for an 8 per cent increase. The *London Evening Standard* even put a figure on that majority. The postal workers' union, the CWU, made no such prediction, although it was optimistic.

The media could not have been wider of the mark. Action over the national claim was turned down by 48,038 (50.9 per cent) to 46,391 (49.1 per cent), on a 60 per cent turnout. Although narrow, this defeat is a major setback for postal workers, given Royal Mail's counter offer of a higher increase which is phased in over 18 months and dependent on productivity strings accompanying the introduction of the Single Delivery System (SDS).

While the union has accepted SDS in principle, negotiations were still going on at national level over the details after conference passed many amendments to the draft agreement. The union wanted pay dealt with separately from reorganisation, management wanted them agreed as a package. Management's propaganda for their offer talked of 30,000 jobs to go, saying 16,000 had already gone. Apart from the fact that the 30,000 is an unagreed figure (and local managements have also been producing back-of-the-envelope predictions on the number of jobs to go under SDS), the 16,000 is also in dispute. After complaints by the union, a parliamentary committee is now investigating whether Royal Mail has been 'massaging' the figures, as well as checking its claims for the profit and loss made by different parts of the business.

The problem is that, to many members, the union appears to be quibbling over the details rather than the principle. And what if the parliamentary committee says Royal Mail's figures are correct? Does that undermine the union's case?

Management say that postal workers are queuing up to take redundancy (although they won't admit this is because the job is low-paid and crap), yet if the deal does go through these members will be disappointed at the terms (if any) they are offered. Most job losses will probably be achieved by natural wastage. But the national union has failed to tackle this issue head on by pointing out, at the very least, what the work would be like after this level of job losses.

The CWU countered Royal Mail's claims about the offer with arguments for a straight increase on the basic wage (to a massive £300 per week!), and the ballot was solely over whether to take strike action in support of the claim, not on whether members accepted Royal Mail's offer. Any pay settlement has to go to a further ballot. What was missing was a clear indication that the union had a strategy to meet management's

insistence that not only was theirs the 'final offer', being all a loss-making business could afford, but that if the dispute went ahead it would run into next year. In the background was the threat that the government would lift Royal Mail's monopoly on letter delivery (several years before it is due to do so anyway), allowing competitors to step in during a strike. What was hardly reported was that these competitors, who already have licences for other, niche, aspects of postal delivery, have barely dented Royal Mail's share of the business, and do not have the infrastructure to compete in general letter delivery. In fact Royal Mail's 'master plan' to defeat any strikes, revealed on the eve of the ballot result, was . . . to ask people not to post anything!

The narrow defeat for industrial action over national pay was only partially offset by the overwhelming vote for action – 11,417 for, 4,316 against – on the London weighting claim. Obviously a mandate for long overdue action (London branches were at one stage preparing to take unofficial action when the national union seemed to be prevaricating over a ballot), this is not quite so straightforward in the light of the national ballot result. There has already been considerable tension between different regions in the union over the London claim, and this could worsen if London members were to achieve a substantial increase and others didn't.

Following the announcement of the national ballot result, some sections of the media (such as the *Mirror* and the *Guardian*) appealed to Royal Mail, in the light of the narrowness of the result, to show restraint in their redundancy proposals. They also apparently believe in Father Christmas.

Royal Mail management showed their true colours when they called the CWU to a meeting the day after the result was announced to demand that the union sign the 'final agreement' (i.e., their offer) on pay and major change immediately, and accept that no further offer would be made on London weighting. They announced that they would be presenting the CWU with a new proposal on industrial relations in the next two weeks. The meeting lasted all of ten minutes, with the union side saying they were still discussing the outcome of the ballot.

To those who didn't realise, this shows that the new management of Royal Mail, who have recently awarded themselves nice fat bonuses, mean business, and intend to use the setback in the ballot to push ahead with their plans.

The response from the union needs to be an unequivocal rejection of these ultimatums, if necessary calling a further ballot quickly for action against them. The alternative is for the CWU to become toothless.



# Location, location, location

PCS activist **Richard Price** looks at the implications of the Lyons Review for the capital's civil servants

In his budget statement in April, the chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, announced the establishment of a review headed by Sir Michael Lyons with the aim of transferring up to 20,000 civil service jobs out of London. This, he claimed, would both 'benefit our regions' and 'benefit the whole country'. Unlike most reviews, the findings of the Lyons Review appear to have been made in advance, and its remit seems to be to fit the facts around them.

On the face of things, the chancellor might seem to have a case. Almost one in eight of the United Kingdom's population lives in London, while slightly less than one in six of UK civil servants works in the capital. But these figures only tell a part of the story.

The idea that dispersing jobs out of London involves moving work from wealthier to poorer parts of Britain is misleading. The truth is that London has greater extremes of wealth and poverty than many parts of the country, with boroughs like Newham, Tower Hamlets and Hackney high in the league tables for social exclusion. The summary of the recent report *London Divided* produced by the mayor of London with the assistance of the Department for Work and Pensions states:

London is unique among the regions of Great Britain in that it contains concentrations of both high and low income households. Polarisation between rich and poor is far more marked in London than elsewhere and the implications of such a divide are serious. Poverty rates are particularly high for some minority ethnic groups, and with half the entire minority ethnic population of Great Britain living in the capital, income inequality in London has a strong ethnic dimension. The spatial aspect of deprivation is also strongly marked, with inner London – an area of nearly three million inhabitants – registering rates of income poverty for children, working age adults and pensioners which are far higher than in any region of Great Britain.

Although London does have high-earning jobs in banking and finance, jobs in manufacturing industry have steadily declined (down from 1.5 million to 250,000 in the last four decades), while a growing proportion of Londoners work in low-paid service sector employment. The main alternative to McJobs for many Londoners is the public sector.

The chancellor's statement gives the impression that London is awash with civil servants. In fact, the number of civil service posts in London and the South-East has been in decline since New Labour took office. Between 1997 and 2002, 4,680 civil service posts were lost in London and the South-East, while the proportion of civil servants working in London declined from 18.2 per cent to 17.7 per cent over the same period. Large numbers of civil servants who work in London aren't able to live there, and are forced by the exorbitant cost of housing in the capital to commute in from other parts of the South-East.

These days it seems that almost every government initiative comes branded with a commitment to valuing, embracing and celebrating diversity. One of the less obvious effects of dispersing civil service jobs is the negative effect it has on equal opportunities, given that few parts of Britain are as diverse as London. According to the 2001 census, 45 per cent of the minority ethnic population of the UK lives in London, and 29 per cent of the capital's population is non-white. One in five London civil servants is non-white.

Dispersing jobs from London runs directly counter to the Race Relations Amendment Act, which places a duty on public bodies as employers and service providers to ensure that their policies do not have an adverse effect upon different racial groups. *London Divided* goes on to state:

The public sector has an important role to play in addressing ethnic minority unemployment. One in five London residents – over 700,000 individuals – work in the public sector, mainly in healthcare, education, public administration and transport. With this kind of leverage, public sector organisations can adopt employment practices that have an impact on the groups most at disadvantage in the Labour market.

The real motivation for moving work out of London is cost. As the *Guardian* reported on April 10, 'new measures are being prepared to break national pay bargaining and link public sector pay to local markets and economies' – in other words, the rhetoric of regional development is a trojan horse for regional pay. A public sector that can pay National Health Service managers £200,000 – to promote 'excellence', naturally – apparently cannot afford the £2,100 London differential that some London civil

servants exist on.

A significant proportion of the higher costs of London is self-inflicted. Unlike many other governments, the British government rents much of its property, locking itself into the spiralling cost of office space in the capital. By withdrawing from the social housing market over the last two decades, it has played its part in fuelling rampant property inflation.

The vast majority of civil servants cannot uproot themselves and their families. At the very least the proposals mean loss of opportunity because of fewer posts; at worst they mean a direct loss of jobs. PCS members in London have every reason to campaign and organise against the Lyons Review.

■ A shorter version of this article appears in the PCS London and South East magazine *Eye to Eye*. **WA**

## Case against PCS activist collapses

Readers of Workers Action will be familiar with the attempt by the Department for Work and Pensions management to victimise PCS activist Chris Ford, one of the main leaders of the long-running health and safety dispute in 2002 ('Defend Chris Ford!', Workers Action No. 19, December 2002). In the course of the strike they collected 100 'complaints' nationally against pickets for alleged 'misconduct.' Of these, they only pursued investigations in seven cases, all relating to the Brent strike, led by Chris. Of these seven, it was only Chris they proceeded against.

In contrast, no scab was ever the subject of an investigation, despite complaints of abuse, threatening behaviour and physical violence, including driving cars into pickets and causing injuries. PCS members took strike action in defence of Chris last November, but in March this year he was found guilty of assault and disciplined.

On appeal, however, management's case collapsed. It emerged that their main witness, a security guard, had been arrested and deported for holding a forged passport and working under a false identity in May 2002. Management had known of this in July last year, yet had withheld this and other evidence from Chris's solicitors.

The action taken by PCS members proved to be a key factor in defeating the attempted victimisation and winning this important case. Well done, Chris!

# Nursery nurses strike back!

Tower Hamlets Unison nursery nurse steward **Lizzy Ali** reports on a significant victory for trade unionism

Nursery nurses in Tower Hamlets, in London's East End, returned to work this term after a highly successful three-week strike at the end of the summer term which resulted in the winning of a major claim for regrading.

The dispute arose out of demands to have our posts regraded to reflect the growing number of professional duties that nursery nurses are expected to undertake. Many of these duties are comparable to those carried out by nursery school teachers, but while teachers have a profession structure, nursery nurses have traditionally been low paid with no career structure.

Over 100 nursery nurse members of Unison voted overwhelmingly for action when Tower Hamlets refused to honour the results of a job evaluation exercise which found in favour of the nursery nurses. With the exception of the London weighting campaign, few of the strikers had any previous experience of industrial action. But throughout the dispute, nursery nurses maintained a lively campaign of rotating mass pickets, and lobbies of both the Labour-controlled council and the Education Authority, organised through a strike committee. They spoke at other education union meetings to gain support and make sure that other staff in schools did not cover their jobs while they were on strike.

## Support

A crucial element in the dispute was the mobilisation of support from parents of nursery-age children, including large numbers of parents from the local Bengali community. Bengali-language leaflets were important in ensuring that many parents with their children took an active part in a 500-strong lobby of the Education Authority, alongside members of Tower Hamlets Unison and other trade unionists. Over 2,000 parents signed a petition in support of the strikers, and letters were sent in support of the strikers to all councillors and to Education management.

It was the determination of the nursery nurses, together with the support we won locally that was decisive. Even Acas, which has been the graveyard of many disputes, proposed a formula favourable to the strikers. Although we did not achieve regrading to Local Government Scale 6, we did win regrading to Scale 5. This has pushed the maximum on the nursery nurse pay scale from £16,700 to £21,400 – a rise of 28 per cent. Attempts by the Education Authority to pay the higher grade, but only for the 39 weeks of term time, were also defeated.

This victory has implications for nursery nurses in the rest of London and throughout the country. We hope they will take up the challenge to end the low paid, low status work in education for good.

■ In Kirklees, a further 140 nursery nurses have recently won a regrading claim after nine days' strike action. They have won increases of about £2,000 per year and have also retained 52-week contracts.

In Scotland, a dispute involving 5,000 nursery nurses continues. After a strike ballot in which over 90 per cent voted yes, a rolling campaign of industrial action has been sustained since May. Donations and messages of support should be sent to: Joe Di Paola, Scottish Nursery Nurses Campaign Fund, Unison, Douglas House, 60 Belford Road, Edinburgh EH4 3UQ.

WA

## Attack on social services jobs

**Mike Calvert**  
Assistant Branch Secretary,  
Islington Unison (personal  
capacity)

Highbury Resource Centre is a council-run day centre for adults with learning disabilities. It has been the major day centre in the London Borough of Islington for many years and is a valued community resource which caters for 55 adults. During the recent London weighting dispute the Unison members at the centre were on selective strike action for two weeks, which led to a skeleton service being run by managers and agency workers.

In the middle of this strike, a consultant who was a member of the branch resigned from Unison because of the supposed 'suffering being caused to the service users'. She then produced a review of day services in Islington which created a new £35,000-a-year managerial post; got rid of one cook and two of the escorts who bring

people to the centre; and made all staff members re-apply for their own jobs on worse terms and conditions – less pay, more late shifts and more weekend working. She then applied for the job she had created, was the only candidate on a shortlist of one, and was appointed to the post!

The council is now attempting to implement the recommendations of the review. Senior social services managers have organised individual 'one-to-one' meetings with each worker, which ended up being two or even three managers to one worker, and where Unison members were denied the right to have a union official attend with them. They have held consultations with the service users' families at which they have blamed Unison for all the faults in the service and claimed that there is no threat to the escort jobs.

The council has consistently told staff that there will be no redundancies. But if they don't pass the interviews they will have to go through a 12-week council 'redeployment' process, and will not be guaranteed a post at the end of it. That means over 20 Unison members could be made jobless.

A meeting of Highbury Resource Centre Unison members voted 13 to 2 in favour

of being balloted for industrial action in the event of negotiations with the senior management team breaking down and the council proceeding with the plan to interview staff for their own jobs. Such a ballot would be conducted by the London region of Unison.

In general, relations between the unions and the social services department are extremely tense at the moment. As well as being in favour of continued privatisation, Islington Council's Liberal Democrat majority takes the line that only senior officers can negotiate with the unions, which means that social services managers are very reluctant to engage in a discourse with the trade unions about anything at all.

WA

## From Syndicalism to Trotskyism

Writings of Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer

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# The great pensions rip-off

Charli Langford

Stopping working while keeping an adequate income is the worker's dream. It drives the lottery as it used to drive the football pools. It is a very unusual dream in that most workers do manage eventually to achieve it, albeit in a very limited form, when they retire and become eligible for a pension.

Or at least they did until about 1980. Up to that time the basic state pension remained at a more or less consistent percentage of average earnings, and Serps (State Earnings-Related Pensions Scheme), introduced in 1975, provided an earnings-related component. The basic pension was barely adequate, as was recognised by the government's magnanimous sporadic payments of an extra £10 for fuel supplements in particularly cold weather, but at least it maintained its level of inadequacy. Over half the workforce was also in company schemes which guaranteed an annual pension based upon final salary and how many years the worker had been with the company.

Today there is a pensions crisis. The government warns that people are likely to have to keep working beyond normal retirement age in order to avoid poverty in old age. There has been steady erosion of the state pension and many workers have 'contracted out' to private pensions. Many company schemes have been closed to new entrants, replaced with less beneficial schemes, or even shut down altogether.

The roots of the current crisis lie in the Thatcher era, when the anti-welfare state ideology led to the cutting of state benefits and an emphasis on private sector pension provision. The Social Security Act (1980) shifted basic state pension indexing from earnings to the consumer price index (which failed to reflect the price growth of staples such as food and rent since it over-represented sectors such as electronics). The Social Security Act (1986) reduced Serps benefits and gave workers the right to opt out of Serps and employers' schemes and into private pensions. This led to the scandal of rapacious personal pensions commission-based salespeople encouraging workers to leave company schemes and take out far inferior personal pensions. The effects of this mis-selling will be hitting people for years to come.

Meanwhile, company pension schemes were cut back. British Telecom, Thatcher's first privatisation, serves as an example. Post-privatisation BT operated a pension scheme where workers contributed 6 per cent of salary and received an annual pension of one eightieth of final salary per year of service (up to a maximum of half-salary) which was index-linked, plus a lump sum of three times annual pension. This was closed around 1990 because BT was worried by inflation rates – then running at around 8 per cent. The replacement scheme was based on sixtieths but with no lump sum and an

index-linking cap of 5 per cent was introduced. These schemes were all final salary schemes (also known as 'defined benefit') – so-called because the annual pension is a known percentage of the final salary. Finally, BT abandoned final salary schemes entirely and adopted a system of matching employee contributions on a 'defined contributions' scheme – so-called because although you know how much you pay in, what you receive depends on what happens to the shares your fund is buying, so you are subject to the ups and downs of the market and you can never predict the value of your eventual pension.

These company machinations are all about minimising the cost of the pensions scheme. In a final salary scheme, the pensions contract is that the company makes up any shortfall in the pension fund; any contribution the company has to make comes off pre-tax profits. This offers guarantees to the pensioners and employees that their retirement income will be as expected no matter what happens to the pension fund stocks and shares – always provided that the company doesn't go bankrupt (last year 40 firms did, and workers found their pensions cut in some cases to a quarter of what they were expecting) and that no-one is robbing the pension fund (as Robert Maxwell did at the *Daily Mirror*). This is obviously a risk the companies would rather not take, so the tendency has been to decrease expected benefits, and if possible to get out of the contract entirely.

Defined contributions schemes allow the companies to dump all responsibility for pensions. The entire risk of a failing stock market falls onto the pensioner, rather than the company. At present interest rate levels, defined contributions schemes cost the employee about three to four times as much as final salary schemes for a comparable pension. Employees paying 4 per cent or less of their salary into such a scheme are probably throwing their money away because their eventual pension will be less than the social security benefit they would receive if they had no pension at all.

Changes in patterns of work and pay have also had a knock-on effect on pensions. Pay has steadily less of an annual increment basis and a much greater productivity bonus component. The bonus is unconsolidated, which means that it is not part of basic salary. While workers are pacified by impressive-looking bonus figures, the consolidated amount – which determines pension, as well as base pay for next year's increment – remains low.

There is also a greater tendency for workers to move between companies than before. This has two effects. First, as company schemes for new entrants get steadily worse, workers are becoming new entrants more frequently and have to accept the company pension of their new employer on their start-

ing date, rather than maintaining the older and probably better scheme from their previous company. Second, the worker's final salary on the date of leaving their previous company – possibly increased as a result of index-linking – is used as the base rate for calculating their pension. Had they remained at the original company those early years would add to the multiplier on their final salary on their eventual leaving date and (so long as their pay rises have been more than the index-linking would produce) would generate a higher pension.

There are also demographic changes. People are living longer and therefore drawing their pensions for longer. The post-war baby-boomers decided in the 1970s to have their children later, so there is now a smaller number of workers in their 20s and 30s having to support a larger number of pensioners, and the baby-boomers themselves are now coming up to retirement age – some will have taken early pensionable retirement – so the problem will intensify rather than diminish. A smaller number of workers are paying into pension funds while a much larger number of pensioners are drawing from them.

Finally, there is the fat cat factor. Company directors on astronomical salaries find themselves getting up to 66 per cent of that astronomical salary as pension. Inland Revenue rules allow companies to offer directors extra pensionable years at twice the rate they can offer other employees, so it may take a director 20 years to reach full pension when a normal worker takes 40. There are also rules related to profits which can increase a director's pension. But all rules fade into insignificance when a director's pension can be raised simply by raising their salary.

The TUC report *Pension Watch* for this year noted that over 70 per cent of companies had retained final salary pension schemes for their directors, while less than half retained them for employees. Since it is the company directors that make these decisions – answerable only to shareholders who in the main are drawn from similarly privileged layers of society – it would seem reasonable to assume an anti-worker bias.

In 1999 there were two company directors in Britain with pensions over £500,000 per annum; by 2001 there were 7, with 35 on the quarter million mark. Taking as much as several hundred normal pensioners, with these snouts at the trough it is small wonder that the rest of us feel the squeeze.

The trade unions are beginning to make some noise about the looming crisis. Bill Morris of the TGWU, talking specifically about the steel company ASW which went bust last summer leaving its pensioners on a quarter to a half of expected pension, says employers should not be allowed 'to evade

their responsibilities by withdrawing from, or closing down, schemes, with the government watching from the sidelines like a spectator at a football match'. RMT members at the Wilts and Dorset bus company voted 404 to 33 in favour of industrial action to keep their final salary pension scheme open to new entrants. This vote is in fact far more important than it first appears because the workers voted to take action not on behalf of themselves – they would remain in the final salary scheme – but for potential new employees who would not be allowed to join it. And 730 RMT members at Exel are shortly to be balloted on the same issue. RMT's Bob Crow said: 'This is a company that hasn't paid contributions to the pension fund for years. Now they tell us it must be closed to new entrants because it doesn't have enough money.'

The government suggestion has been to impose penalties and heavy winding-up costs on companies wanting to change their pension schemes. Such an idea has a major flaw in that it would be likely to push companies considering wind-up into carrying it out earlier to avoid the new costs.

The traditional view from the left on all this is simple. Pensions are part of a contract of employment between the worker and the company. They are a form of deferred pay. No decrease in agreed pension is acceptable, any more than a pay cut is. New workers in a company may be put for a short time on lower pay, as they learn their job, but long-term differences in conditions between workers are unacceptable, and having some

workers on worse pension schemes than others is just such a long-term difference.

But this does not go far enough. It may be adequate for a worker in a 'good job' – that is, in a well unionised workplace – who has risen to a fairly well-paid position and is on a final salary scheme. But most workers will be on lower grades, on worse pension schemes, or in a less well organised workplace. And there is a huge gulf between these and the vast number of people who have been part-time workers, or unemployed, or those – mainly women – who have spent much of their lives bringing up children or caring for dependants. The current British norm of the employer's scheme providing the basis of pension provision and the state providing an inadequate safety net is an abject failure for most workers.

What is needed is to take pension provision out of company hands and to have instead a universal scheme that is run by the state and financed by taxation. Most of this taxation should be borne by employers, since the scheme would release them from the huge costs of guaranteeing the pension funds of their ex-employees. This would at a stroke remove all the fiddling that companies and their shareholders engage in to minimise the cost to themselves of providing pensions. It would remove the random effect of whether you worked for a good employer or a bad one. It would protect the pensions of workers whose employer went bust, and it would guarantee an equal pension to those who spend their lives caring unpaid for others.

WA

## Benefit and job advice services under attack

The following is the text of a leaflet issued by the DWP East London Branch of the PCS civil service union

The London boroughs of Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham are three of the most deprived areas in the country. Thousands of people rely on services provided by the Department for Work and Pensions, including benefit payments and help to find work. This local service is under attack.

The City and East London Jobcentre Plus District has unveiled plans to close up to 13 out of 19 Jobcentres and Social Security Offices by 2006. It is likely that only one office in each borough will be open to the public. In addition, staffing levels on benefit sections will be cut by as much as 50 per cent. This is the result of severe cuts in government funding for the welfare state.

To attempt to manage the cuts, management want to move work out of Newham and Tower Hamlets and into Hackney, where they expect half the number of people to deal with double the work.

PCS members are struggling to cope as it is. We want to provide a quality service to the public but cannot because the employer is cutting our jobs and your services.

What the union is campaigning for:

- Office closures to be suspended and a full public consultation exercise to be undertaken, involving the public, all MPs, Councillors, the union, welfare groups and representatives.
- No staffing cuts. Extra staff to be recruited in order to provide a quality service to the public and reduce stress on members.
- Local services for people in east London to be delivered by people in east London. Work not to be moved out of London or between boroughs. Jobcentre Plus should employ enough staff in all three boroughs.
- Management to consult with the public, all MPs, Councillors, the union, welfare groups and representatives about the future of services provided in east London.

# Fully occupied

The war against terrorism has run aground. The US-British coalition may have won the war, but it's losing the peace. **Richard Price** surveys the prospects for occupied Iraq

As dark clouds loomed over Iraq last year, former UN weapons inspector and Republican voter Scott Ritter addressed dozens of meetings and published a slim book outlining the case against war. It's worth recalling the key points Ritter made:

- that there was no link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida;
- that Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear capabilities were destroyed in the years after the first Gulf War;
- that satellite monitoring and spying on Iraq would have detected new centres for producing weapons;
- that sanctions had prevented Iraq getting the ingredients needed to make weapons;
- that forced regime change wouldn't lead to democracy.

Ritter was subjected to an intense smear campaign by the Bush administration and sections of the US media. Yet on every point Ritter and the anti-war movement have been vindicated.

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix was also the subject of a smear campaign, portrayed behind the scenes as an incompetent liberal appeaser of the Saddam regime. Blix, now retired, revealed on September 17 that he believed that Iraq had destroyed its chemical and biological weapons capability at least ten years ago.

In the run-up to war, the United Nations itself was portrayed as unwilling and unable to enforce its own resolutions – or at least the resolutions that the Bush administration decided supported its case for war. Crucially, Bush's hawks, with their contempt for alliances in general, made out that the UN was dragging its feet, and that this was itself endangering world peace, and inciting Iraq to launch pre-emptive strikes against the West and invasions of neighbouring states.

Reminding oneself of these crude smears and patently absurd scenarios seems now – barely five months on – like a journey backwards in a time machine. Did the political discourse of the world really revolve around this nonsense in the six months running up to the war?

But it doesn't only seem like a lifetime ago because the main justification for war – Iraq's possession of, and ability to deliver, WMDs – has collapsed so completely. It's also because the scenario that was supposed to accompany regime change has proved so comprehensively wrong. The neo-conservatives in the White House claimed that the majority of Iraqis would support the invasion, and that democracy and civil society would sprout from the ruins of Ba'athism.

It was this part of the package that the pro-war liberals everywhere and New Labour warmongers in particular bought into.

Where the mantra of spreading US-style democracy was just convenient ideological window dressing for neo-conservatives intent on US global dominance, their strange New Labour bedfellows really believed in the civilising mission of missiles and high explosives.

It's little comfort to millions of Iraqis, living without adequate food, shelter, electricity or water supplies. But the anti-war movement can take heart at just how wrong its enemies have been. Rumsfeld, Cheney, Perle, Wolfowitz and the rest of the crazies around Bush operate on the basis that they can ignore the history and culture of Iraq – or anywhere else for that matter. They simply lay down the line and enforce it with massive firepower.

Fortunately for the future of humanity, things don't work like that in the real world. The fantasy that the bulk of the Iraqi population which wasn't directly hooked up to the Ba'athist regime would welcome invasion and occupation ('Operation Iraqi Freedom') shows how far removed from reality is Team Bush.

Although Workers Action doesn't have quite the same resources as the Bush administration, our perspective has proved rather more robust. As the war began, Workers Action No.21 (April/May 2003) predicted:

- that the balance of forces and the nature of the Ba'athist regime ruled out any large-scale struggle by the Iraqi military;
- that military occupation would however create the conditions for widespread popular resistance;
- that a war between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds was unlikely;
- that a struggle for secession by Iraqi Kurds was equally unlikely.

The absence of democratic institutions in Iraq, and the lack of enthusiasm for them, is not a perverse national trait. It is a structural condition of the country, produced by its history. Iraq is criss-crossed by political and religious fault lines that cannot be papered over, least of all by a foreign power or group of powers. Both as an Ottoman province, and subsequently as a British-controlled kingdom, and then a relatively secular republic, a Sunni Arab minority has ruled over a Shi'ite Arab majority and a Sunni Kurdish minority. A further five per cent of the population is made up by Turkomans and Assyrians.

The national divide between the Sunni Arab-dominated centre of Iraq and the Kurdish north, and the religious and political divide between the centre and the Shi'ite-dominated south, predisposes Iraq to a disunity that can only be held in check by a military strongman. Having fulfilled its initial role as galvaniser of Arab nationalism, this was essentially the function of

Ba'athism. Saddam Hussein was not an evil accident. On the contrary, the reason he was for so long the United States' preferred option was that he held the country's centrifugal tendencies in check, and kept the lid firmly on militant Islam.

The implications of this are only beginning to dawn on the US-British coalition. The problems of how to put into place an Iraqi leadership which is credible, capable of holding power, Western-friendly and yet not openly the puppet of the US are insuperable.

Without US troops, there is every possibility, given the ethnic, political and religious mosaic, that Iraq would break up into its constituent parts – something the US, in the interests of pro-imperialist regional stability, wants to prevent at all costs. This means that the US must be prepared to tough it out for a long time to come. Just supposing a US-sponsored bourgeois democratic regime managed miraculously to sink roots into the central region around Baghdad, there is no reason to imagine that this would lessen the division with the south. On the contrary, the Shi'ites of the south might well be pushed into the arms of Iran.

But this is running a long way ahead of the chaotic present situation. The initial aim of the occupation was to isolate and destroy opposition from supporters of the Ba'athist regime. The US game plan aimed at creating a ruling bloc resting on support from the Kurds in the north, the Shi'ites in the south, and important sections of the urban middle class.

Coalition propaganda portrays resistance as only representing 'the remnants of the Ba'athist regime'. In fact, the occupation has produced a range of oppositions. Ba'athist loyalists and *fedayeen* are probably the most significant element in the daily attacks on US forces that are killing an average of 3-4 soldiers per week. But there is also growing evidence of Islamist opposition, including strong rumours of Arab Islamist fighters entering the country to fight coalition forces. The bomb that killed the Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim and 125 others at the end of August was said to be the work of forces loyal to Saddam Hussein. However, in the huge demonstrations that accompanied his coffin's procession and burial, the US was blamed for the lack of security and widespread calls made for an end to the occupation. The Ayatollah, who had close links with Iran, had played a cautious role up to that point, and his brother sat on the Iraqi Governing Council – the hand-picked puppet administration in waiting. Shi'ism, however, is far from uniform, and there are more militant trends, such as Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf, who has called for the US

to be driven out. There have also been clashes with US forces in Sadr City, a Shi'ite district of Baghdad, while a suicide car bomb in the mainly Kurdish north doesn't look like a Ba'athist method of struggle. Then there are armed criminal gangs who have moved into the post-Saddam chaos to profit from shortages.

Even those who had reason to hate the old regime and hoped something good would come out of its removal are alienated. Power cuts, food shortages and contaminated water supplies have infuriated those who initially took a wait-and-see approach. By disbanding the Iraqi army, the coalition has created a reservoir of tens of thousands of angry unemployed young men with military training. The coalition has also carried out a purge of the professions, extending to many purely nominal members of the Ba'ath party, further alienating the middle class. The Governing Council looks every bit as insecure and illegitimate as its US-installed counterpart in Afghanistan.

At present there are 140,000 US troops, 11,000 British troops, a 10,000-strong Polish-led division including troops from 21 countries operating in southern-central Iraq, and a further 3,000 troops drawn from nine countries supporting the British in and around Basra. The coalition is recruiting a further 60,000 Iraqi soldiers, while 5,000 Iraqis have been hired by a South African-owned security firm to guard oil installations and pipelines.

But in spite of these large numbers – one foreign soldier for every 135 Iraqis – attacks on coalition forces, electricity lines and oil pipelines have continued on a daily basis. Some military analysts have put the figure of troops needed to subdue Iraq as high as 500,000. The situation has been compounded by American forces committing a series of public relations disasters, most recently with the shooting of ten Iraqi policemen in Falluja.

The costs of the occupation are enormous. The US alone is spending \$4 billion per month. It now claims the support of 32 countries. But most of this support is purely nominal, and it's not so much a 'coalition of the willing' as a coalition of the bribed – hence the relative prominence of eastern European countries, keen to earn brownie points in return for investment and Nato membership.

With the economy in tatters and much of the population un- or under-employed, massive investment is needed to return the country even to pre-war standards. But international donors are proving just as unwilling as they have been in Afghanistan to pour money into a country which remains so unstable. NGOs have drawn similar conclusions and withdrawn large num-

bers of aid workers.

These factors explain why the US, having treated the United Nations with contempt in the run-up to war, has done an apparent about-face, and proposed greater UN involvement in Iraq. But there is little or no chance that key players like France and Germany are going to foot the bill for policing and reconstruction under US command. In any case, the UN is scarcely a less tainted brand than the US in Iraq, after a decade of sanctions. Few outside of those working with the coalition mourned when a massive car bomb blew up UN's Baghdad headquarters in August.

There are clearly tensions within the US administration. Given the scale of ongoing opposition in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon is wary of becoming over-extended. But Bush chooses this point to present Iran with the kind of ultimatum he used in the past with Iraq.

The Blair government's slavish subservience to Bush is causing it major problems at home. If anything, those facing Bush in the months to come could be even greater. With the US economy in the doldrums, sections of the electorate are making the connection with the huge cost of occupying Iraq. If only for opportunist reasons, the Democrats are beginning to realise this and raise criticisms of Bush's previously unassailable 'war against terrorism'. The American public, accustomed to winning wars with single-figure casualties, is waking up to regular fatalities in a country it cannot control, and which it was led to believe longed for US-led liberation. Bush's poll ratings are falling, and next year's presidential election may prove to be anything but a foregone conclusion.

Both the US and Britain are locked into a situation they cannot ultimately win, and will have enormous problems even sustaining at its present level. The solution lies as much with the anti-war movement in both countries as it does with the Iraqi people.

WA

## Anti-war contacts

### Stop the War Coalition

PO Box 3739, London E5 8EJ

[www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk)

tel: 07951 235 915

email: [office@stopwar.org.uk](mailto:office@stopwar.org.uk)

### Labour Against the War

PO Box 2378, London E5 9QU

tel: 020 8985 6597

fax: 020 895 6785

email: [latw@gn.apc.org](mailto:latw@gn.apc.org)

Affiliation/sponsorship of LATW is £10 for organisations, £5 for individuals



# US hands off Iran! Down with the Islamic Republic!

Nick Davies

While the dust and smoke was still hanging over Baghdad, and Bush and Blair were congratulating themselves on their rapid military victory, the question the whole world was asking was 'Where next?'. Syria, an early favourite, was rapidly displaced by Iran.

Iran seemed an obvious candidate for the destructive attentions of the Pentagon: one of the three founder-members of the 'axis of evil', supporter of anti-Israeli organisations branded as 'terrorist' by Washington, and, allegedly, attempting to acquire nuclear weapons. The rhetoric emanating from Washington has its own power to intimidate and terrify. A number of judiciously leaked Pentagon documents have discussed the development of a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons – mini-nukes – and the circumstances in which they might be used. Without mincing words, the message from Washington is 'Do what we say, or we'll bomb you. Fight back, and we'll nuke you'.

With 'peacetime' in Iraq proving more dangerous than wartime, al-Qaida members entering the country by the busload, and not a single WMD having turned up, the next casualty of the 'war against terrorism' is more likely to be Geoff Hoon than Ayatollah Khamenei. But the situation in Iraq has provided Iran with only limited breathing space. The USA has seized on the contents of a report by the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) to demand that Iran be subject to sanctions for its alleged violation of its non-proliferation obligations. Relations with Britain, which was until recently a conduit between Iran and the USA, which do not have diplomatic relations, have taken a dive, partly because of the arrest of the former Iranian ambassador to Argentina, wanted in connection with a bomb attack on a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994, but principally because of Blair's support for Bush on the nuclear issue.

## Power struggles

What will happen in Iran depends on the results of two power struggles: that in Washington between the realists and the neo-cons, and that in Iran between the reformers and the hard-line supporters of the Islamic Republic. The most reactionary and aggressive factions in both camps feed off each other. The neo-cons say that Iran is close to developing nuclear weapons and is supporting al-Qaida; they allege that the masterminds of the bombings in Saudi Arabia in May are being harboured in Iran. The hard-liners of the Islamic Republic are using the belligerence from Washington to reinforce their own position in the state apparatus at the expense of the reformers headed by President Mohammed Khatami.

The state media has been broadcasting messages from Ayatollah Khamenei urging loyalty and vigilance, and warning that reformist politicians were serving the interests of the USA. Suggesting that the reformists were acting as a fifth column, Khamenei warned that 'the enemy is confronting Iran from within'.

Young Iranians in the forefront of the summer's demonstrations against the regime are less worried about an imminent American attack, particularly as the Iraqi fiasco has forced the Washington neo-cons onto the defensive, than the exploitation by the police and militia of the US pressure to justify a crackdown on demonstrators, 'decadence', and the press and media. They have been proved right. Recent weeks have seen a stepping up of harassment and repression of the media by the state, with a wave of arrests of pro-reform journalists.

## Banned

Newspapers and magazines are acting more and more as substitutes or proxies for the independent political parties that do not exist. One weekly, *Nameh-yi-Qazvin*, was shut down for 'promoting depravity and publishing lies', and the owners of three other dailies appeared in court in August. In the last four years, 90 newspapers and magazines have been banned. Journalists are regularly put on trial and jailed, although the delicate balance of power between the reformers and the hard-liners means that frequently the intervention of a sympathetic member of parliament or government minister gets them released, or their sentence reduced. There are signs that some journalists are becoming impatient with the snail's pace of reform. On August 16, the Journalists' Association called for the resignation of the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ahmad Masjedjamei, and the Tehran public prosecutor, Judge Mortazavi, who have been behind the recent crackdown on journalists, intellectuals and students.

And what of the reforms and the reformists? President Mohammed Khatami is suffering the fate of timid reformers throughout history: too radical for the hard-line reactionaries, and too cautious for those who want real reforms. But to be fair to Khatami, his project of liberalising the Islamic Republic without subverting its basic theocratic premise, and re-establishing relations with the West in order to attract investment into the oil and gas sectors and at the same time diversify the economy, was always going to be one of the great political tightrope walks of modern times. The IMF seems to like his attempts at privatising parts of the economy, and his introduction of private banks. However, he

has failed to satisfy the aspirations of Iranian youth, students and the intelligentsia who have given him two thumping election victories. A student leader, speaking to the BBC, summed up the frustration: 'Unless reformist parliamentarians and politicians are ready to pay the price of fighting for freedom of speech and the rights of the people, we will not repeat the blunder we committed six years ago of taking to the streets.' In other words, we won't risk our lives in support of Khatemi's vacillating half measures. Khatemi himself obviously feels the pressure building up behind him. When two government bills adopting UN conventions of discrimination against women and the elimination of torture were, unsurprisingly, rejected by the hard-line Council of Guardians, he apologised to the people for failing to fulfil his promises, and announced counter measures against election supervisory committees organised by the Council.

### Squeezed

While Khatemi is between the hammer and the anvil at home, he is also being squeezed on the world stage. Khatemi has done his best to use the theological and political differences between the Islamic Republic and the former regime in Afghanistan to take the heat off Iran, by offering support in the US war against the Taliban, but to no avail. Within months, Bush made his infamous 'axis of evil' speech, and despite reports from Iran of al-Qaida attacks on Iran having being foiled and its operatives put under arrest, the Bush regime continues to allege that they are being harboured, because Iran will not hand them over to the US. The problem for Iran is that whether the pretext for war is valid or not, if the USA wants a war and can fight one, then there'll be a war.

What about the WMDs? Unlike Iraq, which denied having nuclear weapons, Iran makes no secret of its nuclear programme, but claims that it is for peaceful purposes; Russia is helping Iran build a civilian nuclear reactor. Again, the regime is walking a tightrope. A glance at the map shows that Iran is surrounded. To the east, there are Pakistan and US-occupied Afghanistan; to the north, the Central Asian Republics, full of US military bases; to the west, Iraq, and Nato member Turkey; and to the south, Saudi Arabia and the pro-US Gulf sheikhdoms. To the Islamic Republic, a nuclear weapon could be the 'great equaliser'. On the other hand, the more advanced the nuclear programme, the greater the pressure from the USA. Moreover, the EU and Russia, two powers that Iran would like to rely on as a counterweight against the USA, are lobbying Iran to sign the additional 1991 protocol to the non-prolifera-

tion treaty, which would require Iran to allow short-notice inspections of declared and undeclared sites. Evidently, Iran's representative on the IAEA, Ali Akbar Salehi, is in principle in favour of signing, but the hard-liners in the leadership are not. It is not necessary to be a supporter of the clerical regime, or of nuclear weapons, to see the hypocrisy in all this: why should the USA and its allies, including Israel, be the only states allowed to have nuclear weapons, when the USA treats the non-proliferation treaty with contempt when it suits it to do so?

### Divisions

The divisions in the US leadership were highlighted by its response to the street demonstrations in Iran that took place over the summer. Colin Powell described these events, and the ongoing struggle between the reformists and the hard-liners, as a family quarrel in which America should not intervene. By contrast, George Bush openly supported the demonstrators. As cynicism goes, this is jaw-dropping stuff. It was the CIA which, in 1953, put an end to the only democratically elected government Iran has ever had, and when in the 1970s the workers and students of Iran petitioned the Shah for democracy and human rights, the weapons which cut them down were made in the USA. The prospect of the USA intervening in Iran has enthused the motley collection of monarchists and right-wing republicans currently in exile. They want the Islamic Republic to be overthrown. They haven't the resources, or the support, to do this themselves. They certainly don't want the Iranian people to overthrow the Islamic Republic. They are intelligent enough to know that with the Islamic Republic defeated and the people on the streets, it is highly unlikely that Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah, will be invited to form the next government. The fact that in Iraq Chalabi would be forced to run for the airport but for the presence of the US army is making this right-wing project look increasingly far-fetched.

### Repression

Surveys have apparently shown that a majority of the public in Iran favours restoring diplomatic relations with the United States. This majority must include many of the young people who took part in the demonstrations. It is easy to see why young Iranians who have never known anything other than the repression of the Islamic Republic see it rather than the distant United States as the cause of their country's problems. Their attitude towards the USA shows the influence of illegally watched satellite channels, and contact

with the Iranian diaspora in the USA and Canada. Lack of hostility towards the USA, as a sign of opposition to the isolationism of the Islamic Republic and a desire to engage with the rest of the world, is one thing. Inviting the US army to come in and choose the next Iranian government is, of course, quite another.

The street protests in Iran are bolder and more frequent than ever before. Any opportunity to rail against the regime – the prosecution of a writer or reformist politician, or the success, or failure for that matter, of the national football team – is taken. The latest protests this summer started in the universities and spread rapidly onto the streets of Tehran. Significantly, one of the causes was opposition to privatisation. The demands of the protesters were more direct and more militant than ever before: for freedom of expression, against repression, and, for the first time, for an end to the Islamic Republic. This last demand shows how the demonstrators, who six years ago rallied in support of Khatemi's reform project, are now losing patience with it.

### Unveiled

Women were prominent in these demonstrations. In the Islamic Republic, to go on the streets unveiled, or with too much arm or leg showing, invites a beating from the revolutionary guards. In tearing off the veil and burning it, women risk flogging and imprisonment, but on the summer demonstrations they were doing it. These demonstrations were taking the opposition to the Islamic Republic to a higher, more militant, and more direct level. Demanding the end of the Islamic Republic involves demanding the right to decide what to wear, what to watch, what to read, what to believe, and how to behave in public. The opposition movement is therefore potentially massive in its scope.

The working class, defeated and smashed in 1979-80, needs to build organisations capable of resisting the regime's privatisation projects and fighting for the leadership of the opposition movement. Unfortunately, the hard-liners of the Islamic Republic will not be dislodged by demonstrations. They will not meekly hand over power, wishing the new administration well. The overthrow of one of the twentieth century's most repressive regimes will involve a struggle, but it is a struggle that is underway. If it is successful, then those who have won will not politely hand the country over to oil companies and US generals. Whatever the Ayatollahs might say, the overthrow of the Islamic Republic by the workers and oppressed represents the stronger safeguard against the designs of US imperialism.

Ariel Sharon

# Fifty years a war criminal

In October 1953, Unit 101, commanded by Ariel Sharon, carried out a horrific massacre at Qibya. **Richard Price** surveys the blood-soaked record of the Israeli premier

As the roadmap to peace is predictably obliterated under a hail of Israeli missiles and Palestinian suicide bombs, Ariel Sharon, the embodiment of unrelenting oppression of the Palestinians, remains in command.

'Butcher of Beirut' Sharon is nothing if not a survivor. In a political and military career spanning six decades he has again and again committed, or been party to, acts of barbarity and provocation against the Palestinians. His role in the 1982 invasion of the Lebanon and the events leading up to the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila camps in West Beirut is well known (see 'The massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila', *Workers Action* No.20, Feb/March 2003). On September 28, 2000, Sharon, accompanied by over 1,000 troops and police, staged the deliberate provocation at the Al-Aqsa mosque that sparked the second Intifada. He was subsequently deeply implicated in the massacre at the Jenin refugee camp and is identified with the policy of executing Palestinian leaders without trial.

Less well known in the West is Sharon's early career. He was born Arik Scheinerman in 1928 at Kfar Malal in British Mandate Palestine into a Labour Zionist family. At 14 he joined Gadna, a paramilitary organisation for high school students. Still at school he joined the Haganah, the underground pre-state Labour Zionist militia. In 1945 he enrolled in an officers' training course, and in 1947 became an instructor of Haganah police units. At the beginning of the war in 1948, he became a platoon commander, and his platoon was incorporated into the fledgling Israeli Defence Force (IDF) after the state of Israel

was proclaimed. In 1949, he became a military intelligence officer based in the north, where he collected information on *fedayeen* based in Syria and Lebanon.

In 1952, Sharon, who was apparently considering an academic career, was appointed head of an airborne brigade. Shortly after his appointment, he organised the ambush and murder of three Palestinian women at the village of Qatama in north-west Jerusalem as they made their way to the village's well to collect water. The pretext was that the women had crossed the border with Jordan in violation of Israel's 'territorial sovereignty'.

In June 1953, Sharon led a reprisal raid against the village of Nabi Samu'eli. In August 1953, he was asked to set up 'a special forces unit that would operate behind the armistice lines in reprisal and preemptive strikes against the Arabs'. (Benziman Uzi, *Sharon: An Israeli Caesar*, 1985, p.42.) Unit 101 was established with the task of carrying out attacks against Palestinian villages across the borders with Jordan and Syria, and against refugee camps in Gaza under what would become the well-worn cover of 'retaliation'. It was an elite force whose sole purpose was to carry out state-organised terror.

On the night of August 28-29, Unit 101 carried out a raid on a refugee camp at al-Bureig, south of Gaza, killing, depending on the source, between 20 and 43 Palestinian refugees, including seven women, and wounding 22 others. UN observer Vagn Bennike reported that 'bombs were thrown through the windows of the huts in which the refugees were sleeping and, as they fled, they were attacked by small arms fire and automatic weapons'. The attack, it was claimed, was 'retaliation' for 'infiltration'. It should also be noted that most 'infiltrators' at this time were refugees trying to look after property they had been driven from in 1948-49.

In September 1953, Sharon led an attack on Bedouins at Al-Auja, situated on the Negev-Sinai frontier. The area had been declared a demilitarised zone as part of the 1949 armistice. Four thousand members of the Azzaama and Tarbin tribes were driven across the Egyptian border. This and other raids were ethnic cleansing, pure and simple.

On October 13, 1953, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion met with Yitzhak Lavon and Moshe Dayan to discuss retaliation against the killing of a Jewish woman and her two children in a grenade attack. The killers had no connection with the village of Qibya, and as Moshe Sharrett admitted in his diary, Jordan had gone out of its way to co-operate with Israel in tracking down the perpetrators. Nevertheless, as Sharon later confirmed in his diary, 'The orders

were utterly clear: Qibya was to be an example to everyone.'

Israeli historian Avi Shlaim takes up the story:

The order to attack was given by the acting defence minister, Pinhas Lavon, following the murder of an Israeli mother and her two children by infiltrators who had crossed the armistice line near Qibya. Lavon did not consult the cabinet and only casually informed Sharrett of the order. At the meeting of the MAC on 13 October, the Jordanian representative denounced the murder, promised full co-operation in tracking down the perpetrators, and conveyed Glubb's request to Israel to refrain from retaliation. On hearing this report, Sharrett telephoned Lavon and asked him to call off the attack. Lavon replied that he would consult Ben-Gurion. Lavon later claimed he did indeed consult Ben-Gurion, who agreed with him – and that this meant it was two against one. Ben-Gurion himself later stated that he was on leave at the time and was not consulted but that had he been consulted he would have supported retaliation.

Lavon's order to attack was executed by Unit 101, a small commando unit created in August to carry out special tasks. Unit 101 was commanded by an aggressive and ambitious young major named Ariel ('Arik') Sharon. Sharon's order was to penetrate Qibya, blow up houses, and inflict casualties on its inhabitants. His success in carrying out this order surpassed all expectations. The full and macabre story of what happened at Qibya was revealed only during the morning after the attack. The village had been reduced to a pile of rubble: forty-five houses had been blown up, and sixty-nine civilians, two-thirds of them women and children, had been killed. Sharon and his men claimed that they believed that all the inhabitants had run away and that they had no idea that anyone was hiding inside the houses. The UN observer who inspected the scene reached a different conclusion: 'One story was repeated time after time: the bullet splintered door, the body sprawled across the threshold, indicating that the inhabitants had been forced by heavy fire to stay inside until their homes were blown up over them.'

The Qibya massacre unleashed against Israel a storm of international protest of unprecedented severity in the country's short history. The cabinet convened on 18 October under the chairmanship of Ben-Gurion, who had just completed his three months' leave. Sharrett, horrified by the scale and brutality of the action, proposed an official statement expressing regret over the action and its consequences. Ben-Gurion was against admitting that the IDF carried out the action and proposed issuing a statement to say that it was the irate Israeli villagers whose patience had been exhausted

by the endless murders who took the law into their own hands. The majority of the ministers supported Ben-Gurion, and it was decided that he should draft the statement. In a radio broadcast the following day, Ben-Gurion gave the official version. He denied any IDF involvement, placed responsibility for the action on the villagers who had been provoked beyond endurance, and expressed the government's regret that innocent people had been killed. This was not Ben-Gurion's first lie for what he saw as the good of his country, nor was it to be the last, but it was one of the most blatant.

The official version was not believed, and it did nothing to reduce the damage to Israel's image. On 24 November the Security Council passed a resolution condemning Israel for the Qibya operation and calling on it to refrain from such operations in future . . .

The principal perpetrators of the attack on Qibya, however, remained unrepentant. Lavon told the cabinet that he gave the order on the basis of a cabinet decision in June that empowered him to order reprisals. He also claimed that this reprisal was necessary in order to prevent the murder of more Israelis in the future. Ariel Sharon was well pleased with his handiwork. He thought the operation did a power of good to IDF morale. He also claimed that Ben-Gurion congratulated him on this operation. According to Sharon, the outgoing prime minister said to him, 'It doesn't make any real difference . . . what will be said about Kibbiya [sic] around the world. The important thing is how it will be looked at here in this region. This is going to give us the possibility of living here.' (Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, Penguin, 2001, pp.91-92.)

On October 18, even the US State Department was moved to condemn the Qibya massacre in strong terms, expressing its 'deepest sympathy for the families of those who have lost their lives' and calling for those responsible to 'be brought to account and that effective measures should be taken to prevent such incidents in the future'.

But far from being brought to account, Sharon was promoted. Unit 101 was integrated into the Paratroop Corps, and Sharon made the commander of the joint force. Over the next year, it continued to carry out pre-emptive strikes against targets in Jordan, Egypt and Syria, executing prisoners on at least two occasions.

Sharon's apologists within and outside Israel ignore inconvenient facts, and even the private testimony of Israeli leaders connected with the policy of terror in the early 1950s. HonestReporting.com, for example, recycles the lies Sharon told 50 years ago: 'As the force approached the village, hundreds of Kibya [sic] residents were seen fleeing. The force believed the residents

had fled . . . No one knew 69 civilians were hiding inside the homes. Their deaths were not deliberate. To connect Sharon's actions as Prime Minister to those of a young IDF officer is unfair and misleading.' Why then did Moshe Sharrett privately describe Qibya as a 'stain' that 'would stick to us and not be washed away for many years'?

Others are simply bullish. Articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have described him in affectionate terms as 'feisty' and 'the portly old warrior' respectively. The official history of the Israeli paratroopers boasts of the Qibya massacre that 'it washed away the stain' of previous unsuccessful raids. An article in the *New York Jewish Post* about the latest book by 'distinguished military historian' Uri Milstein describes Sharon as 'a genius of military creativity'. Oblivious to irony, it gushes that Unit 101 'turned out to be a legend. Its members became national heroes . . . They became models of heroism and improvisation to be copied . . . [Units] 101 and 890 shaped the future of the Israeli army. They became its soul, its spirit, its set of values'.

In a very real sense they are right, although not in the manner they intended. Qibya did set a benchmark for future operations against the Palestinians. Unit 101 set new standards of indiscriminate violence against civilians, demolition of Palestinian settlements, collective punishment, wildly disproportionate retaliation under the cover of defence and barefaced lying in the face of international uproar. These are the values of Ariel Sharon, war criminal at large, and ally in the 'war against terrorism'. **WA**

## London weighting action to continue

Unison members employed in local government in London have voted in favour of further industrial action in pursuit of their claim for an increase in London weighting allowance. The result of the consultation ballot was 14,463 (80.7 per cent) in favour of action and 3,455 against, on a turn-out of 31 per cent. Andrew Berry, a member of Unison's London Region Local Government Executive, spoke to Workers Action in a personal capacity on September 22, the day the result was announced:

'This marvellous result shows that members are angry and still prepared to fight. The original ballot took place over 18 months ago and although the turn-out was about 1 per cent down this time, nearly 2,000 more members voted yes. Members have backed the region's strategy, which is for a one-day strike of all members – likely to be held on October 16 – followed by a stepping-up of selective action. We await the national leadership's endorsement of this strategy, although it will be hard for them to do anything else given the result.

'The employers, who are generally represented by council leaders, will be surprised by this result. They were expecting a no vote, as has occurred with the two smaller unions in local government, or at worst a yes vote with a very low turn-out. Some of them will find out the news today, because Dorothy Macedo, the Unison representative on the Labour Party London Region Board, will be informing the London Labour leadership and reminding them that London Labour Party policy is to support our claim for £4,000 London weighting. Labour has a majority on the employers' side and could settle the dispute now.

'Unison was the only union that campaigned for a yes vote in its consultative ballot. We will be holding a demonstration on the day of the strike and hope to be able to co-ordinate with other unions likely to take action over London weighting, such as the CWU and the FBU, as well as Unison members in the 'old', pre-1992 universities and AUT members, who have relaunched action in pursuit of their claims this week by striking on registration days. We've had reports that this has got off to a very successful start.'

### London Labour Left Meeting for Labour Party members

#### Where now for Labour after the party conference?

Wednesday October 8  
7pm

Friends Meeting House  
Euston Road  
London NW1

Speakers include:

Diane Abbott MP  
Ann Black  
Christine Shawcroft  
Pete Willsman



# Can the truce hold?

**Bob Wood** looks at the background to the long-running civil war in Liberia

Shortly after he became president, George Bush was asked whether he would have sent troops to intervene in Rwanda had he been president at the time of the genocide. After a moment's reflection, the ever mentally nimble George replied: 'No, the United States has no strategic interest in Africa.' Whilst this cynical assessment remains largely true, there are signs that leading circles in America and Europe are becoming increasingly concerned about the degree of instability on the African continent, which is extending in waves to include ever wider areas centred on west Africa and the Great Lakes region, especially the Congo. For a short time in August, this concern was reflected in the press, as events in Liberia received wide coverage in the media, sometimes meriting front-page articles in the broadsheets.

The Republic of Liberia owes its origins to the repatriation of freed slaves from the United States. The first settlers arrived in 1822 and an independent state was declared in 1847. Like other settlers in Africa, the Americo-Liberians had little but contempt for the indigenous 'heathen savages', and governed the country through a system of indirect rule much like colonial regimes in other parts of the continent. Based in the capital, Monrovia, the settlers maintained their ascendancy for more than a century through a property-based franchise, exercising a political monopoly on power via the True Whig Party.

## Prospered

In 1944, William Tubman was elected president, and ruled the country for nearly 30 years. He opened up the economy to international capital, and the elite prospered as rubber, iron ore and timber were exploited. Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters of the population benefited hardly at all, relying for their livelihood on subsistence farming.

Tubman's death in 1971, and his succession by William Tolbert, coincided with an

upsurge in political activity. Students returning from the United States, no doubt inspired by the protests against the Vietnam war, looked for more justice and democracy. In these circumstances, an army coup, led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, was at first welcomed by the various radical movements and the left. But within a few years Doe had ditched these supporters and had come to rely more and more on American aid. The ascendancy of the corrupt and brutal Doe, a member of the Krahn tribe and hailing from an area near the border with the Ivory Coast, meant the effective end of the dominance of the Americo-Liberian elite and the entry of the peoples of the interior onto the political stage.

In 1989, Charles Taylor, a former civil servant with some revolutionary pretensions, launched an armed rebellion, and Doe was killed the following year. But in a situation where a series of armed groups competed for control, Taylor was unable to establish any absolute superiority.

## Peacekeeping

Then, as now, Nigeria held the franchise from the United States for regional peacekeeping in west Africa. In 1990, the Economic Community of West African States (Ecomog) cobbled together a 'peacekeeping' force under the leadership of Nigeria, known as the Ecomog Monitoring Group (Ecomog). In response to the orgy of looting indulged in by this force, the inhabitants of Monrovia proved that they had kept their sense of humour in adverse circumstances, quickly translating Ecomog as 'every car or moving object gone'. In 1994, Nigerian troops dismantled and exported industrial equipment worth \$50 million from the port of Buchanan.

Finally, in 1997, presidential elections were held. Taylor's rival was a returned exile and the candidate favoured by the 'international community', Ellen Sirleaf Johnson. In probably the fairest elections ever held in Liberia, Taylor got three-quarters of the vote on a turnout of 80 per cent. Ever since, the West has refused to accept the verdict of the Liberian people, and actively worked to destabilise the Taylor government, using whatever instrument lay at hand. Taylor has been indicted by the United Nations-backed Sierra Leone war crimes tribunal, his government subjected to UN sanctions and undermined by repeated attacks by armed groups.

## Well armed

The main rebel group currently operating is Lurd - Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. Although based in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, it also operates from the Ivory Coast. Lurd is well

armed and convoys carrying military equipment leave its headquarters in Conakry on a regular basis, with the connivance of the Guinean government. Although the ultimate source of Lurd's funding is not clear, it is worth noting that Guinea has received substantial US military support since 1993. The group is led by Sekou Conneh, a Mandingo, but many of its supporters are Krahn, like the late President Doe.

Also involved in the opposition to the Taylor government is a rebel group based entirely in the Ivory Coast, Lurd-Model - the Movement for Democracy in Liberia. This also has a significant Krahn element, and includes in its leadership an uncle, a cousin and a nephew of Doe.

## Marines

Taylor finally succumbed to international pressure, and in July this year agreed to step down. A small Nigerian contingent of the Ecomog peacekeeping force established a presence in Monrovia on August 4, with American marines located offshore, and on August 11 Taylor went into exile in Nigeria. A cease-fire has been agreed by the main armed factions, and for the time being Taylor has been replaced by his former vice-president, Moses Blah. In October, Blah is due to be replaced by Gyude Bryant, a businessman, Episcopalian and chair of the Liberia Action Party. He will head a government which will include representatives of the two main rebel groups as well as supporters of Taylor, and has said that his priority will be working with the UN to hold elections and demobilise fighters.

## Turmoil

The prospects for peace and stability remain remote. The region as a whole is still in turmoil. The crisis in the Ivory Coast has not been resolved, there are dissidents in Guinea, and the underlying causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone have not been removed. In the short term, the immediate authority of any new government is unlikely to extend much beyond the boundaries of Monrovia, and most of the country will probably remain under the sway of warlords, even if the actual fighting becomes less intense for the time being.

For the future, much will depend on whether the suggested UN force of 15,000 soldiers materialises and whether this force can provide a breathing space for the emergence of a stable government. Liberia's immense problems will not, in the long term, be solved by interference from the USA or Europe, or by their local west African or UN surrogates. Only the people of Liberia can devise an adequate response to their predicament, and they should be allowed to do so.

# Front line against neo- liberalism

Introduction to a Workers Action  
special feature on Latin America

September 11 is truly a day of infamy and shame. It was on this day in 1973 that the elected socialist government of Chile was violently overthrown in a coup led by the armed forces, but organised and financed from the USA. It is an illustration of how, when socialists try to play the game by the rules devised by the ruling elite, they cannot be allowed to win.

September 11, 1973, was also, in many ways, the day on which the present world was brought into being. As we show in 'Test-bed for Thatcherism', the violent destruction of the workers' movement gave the right-wing, free-market fundamentalists of the Chicago School the perfect laboratory to carry out their neo-liberal experiments, emulated, in similarly brutal conditions, in Uruguay and Argentina, and, a decade later, in Peru. This experiment was judged to be such a success that its economic fundamentals, and some of its repressive aspects too, were imported into Britain by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, and emulated all over the world by right and 'left' governments alike. So, it can be argued, Latin America, long regarded by the USA as its backyard, was where it all began.

## Textbook

As we show in 'Missed opportunities', Argentina is almost a textbook example of how the destructive economic policies of the 'Washington consensus', accepted without question by Blair as well as his fellow 'socialists' in western Europe, can so hollow out a supposedly wealthy country that there is almost nothing left to pawn. Colombia is being reduced to a military colony of the United States, controlled by right-wing paramilitaries who bump off trade unionists, all in the name of the 'war against drugs'. The Bush government hinted that had Evo Morales, who champions the rights of coca growers, won the

Bolivian elections (he came second), Bolivia would have been declared a 'drug-terrorist state'. In Nicaragua, the reformist era of the Sandinista regime must seem a long way away, as a recent 'structural adjustment' programme imposed from Washington included the imposition of school fees. In virtually every country in Latin America, the already huge gaps between rich and poor have got bigger and, apart from those of the elite in their gated suburbs, living standards are in freefall.

The liberalisation of capital markets, a result of Thatcher-Pinochet scorched earth economic policies, meant that in the late 1990s the economies of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay were threatened with destruction by the activities of speculators. But it's possible that in the region where the new world order began, we might be seeing the first signs of a fightback.

## Contrast

In past issues of Workers Action we have reported on Venezuela, known as the 'anti-Argentina' because, in contrast to the politicians in Buenos Aires, the Chávez government has attempted to put the needs of Venezuela's poor ahead of the interests of the IMF. The huge support for Chávez, who has seen off two attempts to unseat him, is largely unreported by the European media which with few exceptions sees Venezuela through the prism of the elite. The presidential election in Ecuador early this year proved that criticism of the IMF is a vote winner. Retired army colonel Lucio Gutiérrez's populist agenda of social justice, his support for Ecuador's indigenous peoples and his description of himself as a 'product of the people's unsatisfied aspirations' propelled him into the presidential palace. In Chile, August 13 saw the first general strike since the 1980s, called by the trade union federation CUT and demanding better pay and benefits. Trade unionists are feeling betrayed by President Lagos, a social-democrat, but in fact a prisoner of the post-1973 economic order. Meanwhile members of Pinochet's family are protesting that the commemoration of the coup is making Allende seem like a 'saint'.

## Symbolism

Most important of all, arguably, are the events in Brazil. As we argue in 'No middle way', the election victory of Workers' Party leader Lula has a symbolism which outstrips both any real, material benefit seen so far, and indeed any commitment which Lula has actually made. Millions of Brazilian voters made a conscious decision not to vote for a member of the elite, ready to do what the IMF and Washington tell him, but for an ex-trade union leader who

stood for Brazil's poor.

We must not run away with ourselves, however. One general strike will not bring back Chile's destroyed welfare state. Within weeks of his election victory, Gutiérrez was seeking IMF approval for his economic policies, in return for a loan. As we argue, the left in Argentina has missed the opportunity, at least for now, to use the crisis in confidence in Argentina's political class, and the widespread revulsion at the effects of IMF-imposed economic policies, to bring about a change in the balance of forces there, which poses the question of building a new leadership of the working class. In Brazil, how will Lula resolve his present political contortion, assuming he resolves it at all, in which he promises social justice, yet refuses to do anything to upset the international money markets and the IMF, whose priorities are the biggest single cause of injustice and poverty? And assuming revolutionary socialists criticise Lula's accommodation to the IMF and the markets, how would we do things differently?

The United States boasts about how it has brought democracy, free markets and good governance to Latin America, sending the generals back to the barracks. But as Latin Americans are getting used to being able to vote, they are discovering, with a mounting sense of outrage, that the governments they elect can't do very much apart from issue a passport. In the region where the neo-liberal order was born, it is just possible that the events of the past year will be seen as the start of the resistance to it.

WA

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Argentina

# Missed opportunities

Nick Davies

In August 2001, a casually attired Tony Blair had his picture taken at the Iguazu falls, one of Argentina's best-known tourist sights. In a joint press conference with the then-president, Fernando De La Rúa, he announced how pleased he was to be in Argentina, and gave his support to the government's 'programme of change'.

Had he strayed from the tourist trail and found some ordinary Argentines to talk to, they would have given his perky optimism short shrift. The neo-liberal economic policies of which Blair is a leading advocate had already cast millions of Argentines into poverty. If there is anyone who is still taken in by the waffle from Tony Blair, or Claire Short for that matter, about how globalisation is a 'force for good', they had better take a trip to Argentina.

All through the 1990s, Argentina had been held up by the IMF as a textbook example of economic 'liberalisation'. In fact, it is a textbook example of how the neo-liberal economics of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO – the 'Washington consensus' – can reduce a relatively wealthy country to abject poverty. Under the Peronist president Carlos Menem, elected in 1989, the Argentine elite followed to the letter the injunctions of the IMF, handing the public sector over to US and European multinationals.

## Privatised

At the behest of the Washington 'experts', finance minister Domingo Cavallo dismantled the public sector, making hundreds of thousands of people redundant, privatised everything that wasn't nailed down, and linked the currency, the peso, to the dollar, thus surrendering control over monetary policy to the US treasury. This strangled exports and sent thousands of firms into bankruptcy. By March 2001, civil service salaries and some pensions had been reduced by 13 per cent, and the draft budget for 2002 proposed a spending cut of 18.6 per cent. But this neo-liberalism was ingeniously combined with a Keynesianism

of the rich, as \$40 billion collected by the state from various privatisations went up in smoke, or rather into the foreign bank accounts of the elite.

By December 2001, the people, 20 per cent of whom were unemployed, and 14 million of whom were living below the poverty line, had had enough of the 'programme of change', and a mass uprising forced the resignation of the finance minister, and then President De La Rúa himself, and then saw off three more presidents in the space of a fortnight. The final straw had been the international pressure to service the external debt: \$750 million had been due by the end of 2001 and \$2 billion by the end of January 2002. This enormous debt has been at the heart of Argentina's economic problems for over 20 years. It has its origins in the US-backed military junta which took power in 1976 and which was responsible for the deaths of 30,000 people. The junta presided over a dramatic increase in external debt (from \$8 billion to \$43 billion) and the first wave of 'adjustments' (spending cuts) were to meet the needs of the junta's dirty war and 'national security'.

## Limit

To meet the demands of the financial institutions, on December 1, 2001, the government set a limit on withdrawals from banks, supposedly to stem the 'haemorrhage of capital' from the country. Argentines were prevented from taking out more than \$250 per week in cash, although \$15 billion had been spirited out of the country by national and international speculators. To add insult to injury, the banks charged small savers 40 per cent on transactions in pesos, and 29 per cent on transactions in dollars. The uprising, all the more remarkable for being against not a military dictatorship, but an elected government, started when thousands of desperate men and women, unemployed and without any social security, raided supermarkets for food. The newly impoverished middle classes joined the workers in huge demonstrations, banging pots and pans in the street ('cacerolazos'), and laying siege to the Congress building and the banks that they knew were ripping them off. It was the spectacular corruption as much as the economic collapse that prompted the demand from demonstrators 'que se vayan todos', loosely translated as 'kick them all out'.

This apparent alienation from all political parties awakened a survival instinct in Eduardo Duhalde's caretaker government, which held office, if not power, from the start of 2002 to May this year. It had to look as if it were doing something to stand up to the IMF, and improve living standards. So, in January 2002, the peso was

decoupled from the dollar. With the peso having fallen about 70 per cent against the dollar exports have been boosted and foreign currency reserves increased. In December 2002, the restrictions of withdrawals from banks were lifted. Even these modest measures brought the government into conflict with the financial institutions.

## Poverty

By early 2003, according to the government's own figures, 58 per cent of the population were living on or below the poverty line, while consumer prices had risen by almost 40 per cent, and, in a country with sufficient food resources to feed 300 million, the levels of childhood malnutrition were soaring. There had been a dramatic increase in poverty and an increase in illiteracy from 2 per cent to 12 per cent. Even this was not enough for the hyenas of the IMF who demanded still further cuts. In September 2002, the then US Treasury Secretary had the nerve to complain that negotiating with the Argentinian government had been a 'struggle'.

In fact, despite the government's verbal hostility to the IMF agenda, Congress and the Supreme Court have both attacked the government for being too co-operative with the IMF, with the Supreme Court overruling spending cuts proposed by the government at the IMF's behest. The Argentine media has had no difficulty in identifying the IMF and the Bush administration as being responsible for the crisis. The deputy head of the IMF, Anne Krueger, has attracted particular venom, with *La Nación* describing her as belonging to the 'most extreme hard-line group in the Bush administration.' The newspaper continues: 'Her intransigent attitude follows a specific plan formulated by this group of Republicans . . . This ultra-orthodox group doesn't want an accord with Eduardo Duhalde and is seeking to use Argentina as a guinea pig.'

## Elections

In April-May this year there were presidential elections in Argentina. However, there wasn't much of a choice. All the main candidates were happy to dance to the tune of the neo-liberal *ultras* from New York and Washington who had been dictating the country's economic policies for over 20 years. 'The picture is promising, the three lead candidates have the most sensible economic policies,' declared Martin Uribe of the University of Pennsylvania, who was worried about an incoming government 'murdering the boom' (sic) by increasing taxation (perish the thought!). Carlos Menem, who had the brass neck to put himself forward as a candidate, took the highest number of votes in the first round

(24 per cent), then reduced the contest to a farce by withdrawing from the two-candidate final run-off when it became obvious that he wouldn't win, leaving Néstor Kirchner, less corrupt than Menem, and less of a neo-liberal zealot than Ricardo López Murphy, the winner by default.

However, the election, taking place as did in the midst of an unprecedented economic and political upheaval, gave the left a chance to intervene in the Argentinian political process. The results suggest that while the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy is discredited beyond repair for millions of Argentinians, the socialist response is not in great shape either. There were certainly enormous opportunities. After the crisis of December 2001 the political regime collapsed almost as dramatically as the economy. At the same time there developed a massive grass roots movement of organisations of the unemployed, neighbourhood assemblies, and factory committees which had taken over some 200 firms vacated by their owners. In this context, what the left should have done is to mobilise the democratic consciousness of the masses, which manifested itself in slogans such as 'Everyone must go, general elections now!' It should have developed demands, and a way of fighting for those demands, to help this new and energetic mass movement proceed from democratic outrage to a conscious revolutionary movement aimed at the overthrow of capitalism.

### Foreign debt

This would have involved raising demands such as public ownership of the banks, immediate repudiation of the foreign debt, a massive programme of public works, at union rates and under the control of the organisations of the unemployed, and unemployment insurance for everyone. Police attacks on demonstrations and on factory occupations raised the need for some form of workers' self-defence. A demand for the controlled devaluation of the peso would have helped the economy and would attacked the basis of the government's pro-IMF policies. These demands would have related to the consciousness of the workers and dispossessed middle class, but also focussed their outrage on the need to struggle to end capitalism altogether.

Crucial was the demand for a general election. This would have cut across the attempts to shore up the political establishment by appointing Duhalde as caretaker president. Elections could have brought about a complete collapse of the political establishment, fragmenting the Peronist movement still further, and consigning the UCR, or Radical Party, the main party of the liberal bourgeoisie, to oblivion. Significantly, only when Duhalde had regained

control of the Peronist party, won the trust of the Argentine elite and (despite their differences) the financial institutions, broken off middle-class support for the struggles of the working class, and ensured that the result would be 'safe', did he call elections for president and vice-president.

However, one section of the far left made a fetish of the call for a Constituent Assembly. This might be an appropriate demand in a situation of, say, military rule, as had been the case in Argentina during the collapse of the military junta after the Falklands war. But in 2001-2002 Argentina had a functioning parliamentary system, based on more or less universal suffrage. What was the problem was those who were elected to it. Anyway, who was to call this Constituent Assembly? Who was to be in it? This slogan was obsolete, abstract, and confused everyone.

### Abstention

Another section of the far left combined the call for a 'revolutionary constituent assembly' (surely such a body cannot be 'revolutionary' as a precondition!) with a demand for abstention from the presidential elections, denouncing them as a 'trap', and thus profoundly misreading the political situation, and over-estimating the level of political consciousness among the masses. More precisely, it mistook the unfocussed outrage felt by the middle classes and the petty-bourgeois, expressed as 'kick them all out', for something more coherent. The high level of abstention in the 2001 legislative elections suggested the need for a revolutionary socialist alternative more than a complete loss of faith in electoralism.

Moreover, the left regarded the neighbourhood assemblies, the occupied factories, and the other organisations which had sprung up as a potential recruiting opportunity, or as an arena for turf wars with other left organisations, thus neglecting the opportunities which existed for the development of the mass movement, and legitimising the view of certain elements in those organisations (and their sympathisers in Britain and other countries) that the grass roots movement in Argentina did not need to work with the 'traditional left', which it saw as being just another part of the problem, and did not need to start the process of building a broad, fighting workers' party.

There should have been a fight for a united front, calling for medium-term programmatic agreements based on the need to advance the interests of the movement as a whole, and a fight to unite the organisations of the unemployed, the factory committees and the neighbourhood assemblies into national federations. A call for a general strike demanding a repudiation of

the external debt could have united the unemployed with those in work, and challenged the credibility of all the mainstream parties. It would have represented a challenge to the Peronist leaders of the trade unions who were still supporting bourgeois politicians, and helped to break some sections of the employed industrial workers from their support for Peronism. (If the state of political consciousness was as high as the far left claimed it to be, how come the biggest trade union federation was still able to give public support to Menem?)

The results of the presidential election of April and May 2003 demonstrate the scale of the opportunity that was missed by the left. In the legislative elections of 2001 the proportion of blank or voided ballot papers was a massive 21 per cent. This showed the level of anger and disenchantment felt by voters. In 2003, this was down to 2.5 per cent, which is normal for Argentine elections. Clearly, the call from much of the left for voters to abstain or spoil their ballot paper had been a flop, with voters to a large extent recovering their faith in the political process. The drop in the left's vote, with most protest votes going to Christian-socialist Elisa Carrió (who filled the vacuum left by the UCR), and the decision by many to vote for Kirchner as the least-worst option, instead of one of the squabbling and largely irrelevant left candidates, showed the extent of the retreat of the mass movement and its state of consciousness. That the left had failed to take advantage of the explosive situation of 2001, and then been caught unawares by the stabilisation of 2003 amply demonstrates its own crisis. **WA**

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Brazil

# No middle way

Simon Deville

Brazil is a vast country covering 3.3 million square miles with a population of 180 million. As the world's tenth largest economy it is extremely important both regionally and globally. Whereas financiers have been prepared to allow the Argentinian economy to go to the wall, the IMF rallied round and found \$41.5 billion overnight when Brazil's economic problems threatened to plunge the whole region into recession following the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the Russian bond default of 1998. For international capital, the country has been a model of obedience as neo-liberal policies have further widened the gap between rich and poor in this hugely unequal society.

On October 27, 2002, Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, the leader of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) was elected president with 52.7 million votes, an event whose importance cannot be overstated.

For millions of Brazilian workers and peasants the PT offers the hope of progressive change. Brazil has seldom had even a semblance of democracy throughout most of its history, let alone a workers' party, so to have a government led by a former engineering worker and trade union militant is an incredible step forward. Almost regardless of what the PT actually does in government, its real achievement is to have raised the expectations of the masses so that they could force their way onto the stage of history.

However, Lula appears to be trying to chart a course that delivers reforms through economic growth and stays within the framework of IMF conditions and debt repayment. Immediately after his election Lula assured the IMF that he would not break from any international agreements with the financial institutions, though he also told a journalist who wanted to discuss the drop in the Brazilian stock market that he'd rather discuss more important things such as hunger.

The government has tried to put a halt to further land confiscations, and has voted through a severe cut in pensions. Soon after the election, Lula appointed a former minister under Cardoso to the head of the Central Bank. There clearly is a real danger that capital flight could plunge the economy into deep recession. The Brazilian masses, however, have expressed their desire to break from the neo-liberal policies of the past. Throughout Latin America, neo-liberalism is beginning to come apart at the seams, though a serious alternative to it has yet to be seen. Of the whole continent, Brazil probably offers the best hope, having an enormous working class, an economy that dwarfs its neighbours, and a

significant workers' party formed out of recent struggles.

## Birth of the PT, the CUT and the MST

The PT was formed alongside the emergence of significant mass social movements in the last years of the dictatorship. With many of its leaders drawing on Gramsci's ideas, the PT always saw its aim as uniting key movements across society. The massive and illegal strike wave in the ABC industrial belt around São Paulo (so-called because it incorporates the districts of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo and São Caetano) in 1978-79 transformed the trade unions into genuine workers' organisations, rather than the corporatist organisations that existed previously. This strike wave played a crucial role in the formation, in 1983, of the main trade union federation, the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), saw Lula come to the fore as a trade union leader, and created a form of trade unionism that had not been seen for generations in Brazil.

The Brazilian Communist Party was very much tainted with popular frontism. It argued that 'progressive' sections of the bourgeoisie must play a key role in modernising the country, and constantly acted as a brake upon the workers' movement. Both the CUT and the PT evolved free from the taint of the CP's politics and undemocratic practices.

The Landless Workers' Movement – Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) – was formed in the mid-1980s as landless peasants occupied unproductive land and demanded that the Brazilian government confiscate it for their use. MST activists, organised around the slogan 'occupy, resist, produce', have settled around 150,000 families through militant direct action. In many cases, farmers have used such land collectively and have increased overall production. While this only represents a tiny fraction of the population, it clearly underlines the need for land redistribution, and shows in the most direct way how the masses could take this task into their own hands. While the MST has a more cautious attitude towards the PT, and its members are barred from taking government positions, the PT and the MST have worked as allies over the last two decades.

Key trade union militants and intellectuals formed the PT. In a society where racism is rife, many of its leaders are black, and many are from working class or peasant backgrounds. The history, composition and the very existence of the PT offers the hope of radical change for millions of Brazil's poor.

### Brazil's economy

Brazil has had little in the way of democracy since it was 'discovered' by the Portuguese in 1500. When it gained its independence from Portugal in 1822, it was as a monarchy rather than a republic, led by the Portuguese king's son, Pedro. The Brazilian economy was thoroughly dependent upon slavery – estimates of how many slaves were brought into the country range from 5 million to 13.5 million. Slavery was only abolished in 1888, one year before Pedro's son, Pedro II, was deposed and the Republic of Brazil was established.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Brazil has been ruled by dictatorships and rural oligarchies. Following the Second World War there was a period of democracy until the 1964 US-backed coup which ensured military rule up until 1985, during which time over 20,000 were imprisoned, many thousands more went into exile and press freedom was squashed along with many democratic institutions.

The country had historically depended upon a single product, from sandalwood initially (where the name Brasil comes from) to gold, rubber, coffee and sugar. The military dictatorship promoted the development of industry through protectionist barriers, creating the 'economic miracle' in which growth was sustained for years (reaching 10 per cent throughout the 1968-73 period) for the benefit of the middle classes, and the multinational corporations.

As an oil importer, the oil crises hit the Brazilian economy hard. The generals borrowed from foreign banks to deal with the rising price of oil in 1973 and again in 1979, and the country's debt grew from \$12.6 billion to \$64.2 billion by 1980. Rather than try to limit the IMF conditions imposed on a bankrupt Brazil in the early 1980s, the military accepted their terms, making the country's poor pay in terms of recession and massive cuts in social spending.

In 1985, the generals handed over a country at the beginning of nearly ten years of recession, during which time the foreign debt nearly doubled, inflation went out of control – by 1990, it was almost 1,500 per cent – and the various governments went through six different currencies.

In 1989, Fernando Collor was elected and initiated a programme of privatisation of the large nationalised industries and utilities that the military had established. This programme was continued under his successor, Itamar Franco. The high interest rates and bargain prices made Brazil a significant attraction for foreign investors. While many argued that attracting foreign investment would help the economy to grow, the overwhelming bulk of this investment simply took over existing industries

and siphoned off the profits, thus having the completely opposite effect.

### PT in elections

Lula stood for president in 1989, 1994 and 1998, before finally getting elected at the end of last year. While in retrospect the PT had consistently built on its vote throughout that period (its percentage of the first round votes rising progressively from 16 per cent in 1989 to 46.4 per cent in 2002), at the time party activists consistently predicted victory, only to become demoralised when this failed to materialise. In particular, the 1994 election saw a great deal of support for Lula transfer to Cardoso, as his 'Plano Real' appeared to resolve the chronic inflation of the past decade. However, throughout that period the PT did build up support, and had won a number of city mayoral seats.

After the 1998 election defeat, and amidst internal struggles, the 1999 congress of the PT adopted an explicitly reformist programme and called for an alliance of the PT with various other parties. This marked a clear victory for Lula against the left, with his supporters arguing that the PT could only achieve power through incorporating greater sections of the middle classes.

### At the crossroads

The PT now has to face some fundamental strategic problems. While it's certainly possible to deliver reforms short of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, there needs to be an overarching macro-economic goal. The government will either tip the balance of power in favour of the poor and oppressed majority, or it will help to widen the massive divisions within society. It cannot meet the demands and expectations of the working class and the peasantry and at the same time keep the landowners, the bourgeoisie and the banks happy.

In the current political climate, seizing the assets of the ruling class and carrying out a massive redistribution programme would certainly invite the wrath of the USA. Almost certainly, a government would face a flight of capital, organised bosses' strikes, and attempts to disrupt the economy and unseat the government in any way possible. It would also quite probably invite invasion by the USA. This is something that would be extremely difficult without there being a mass revolutionary party.

Failure to carry out widespread land and wealth redistribution can only serve to prop up the existing order. In a society with the gaping inequality of Brazil there is little room for any middle way – such a course would serve to demoralise the oppressed

masses and at the same time upset the privileged elite.

This leads to two problems for a 'Gramscian' strategy that only sees the role of socialists as manoeuvring to a more favourable position and gradually winning over wider sections of civil society. Firstly, Brazil is not an advanced society in the same way that Italy was at the beginning of the twentieth century. As with many third world countries, Brazil is dominated by more or less unfettered capitalism with little in the way of a safety net for much of the population. Secondly, a 'war of position' can only be taken so far – sooner or later there must be an open struggle to defend and improve the lot of the masses. Despite its impressive origins, the direction of the PT leadership over the last couple of years has been towards an accommodation with the world order rather than a challenge to it.

Even if the PT government does prove to be a damp squid in terms of its ability to deliver radical reform, the experience of workers' parties everywhere else in the world shows that the masses are likely to pin their hopes on it for some time to come. However, as it stands the PT probably still offers the best chance to initiate a break from the neo-liberal straightjacket than anywhere else in the third world, with few serious contenders in the first world.

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Book review

# Test-bed for Thatcherism

**Pinochet in Piccadilly: Britain and Chile's Hidden History**

By Andy Beckett

Faber, 2003, 280pp, £8.99

Nick Davies

One of the more nauseating spectacles of the last few years (and there have been many) was that at the Conservative Party conference of 1999 when Margaret Thatcher, to the acclaim of well-heeled Chileans and right-wing Tories, spoke at a rally held to demand the release of 'Senator' Augusto Pinochet, then being held in Britain while a request for his extradition to Spain to face charges of torture was considered by the courts.

At the time, most of the media took the event at face value. One former right-wing leader was, it seemed, anxious to repay the previous favours of another. Pinochet had, apparently, been very helpful to the British military during the 1982 Falklands war, anxious as he was to settle old scores with Argentina arising from a border dispute in the Beagle Channel in Tierra del Fuego. There was also an argument that it was just plain bad manners for a 'guest' of this country to be held accountable for atrocities committed on his own patch. Back then, Blair's first government was at the peak of its popularity, and the event was seen by most of the media as a symptom of the Tory party's slide into buffoonish irrelevance.

But, as *Pinochet in Piccadilly* shows, the background to Thatcher's plea for clemency is more complicated, and more sinister, than the observation of diplomatic niceties, or a bit of mutual back-scratching. 'Intricate and fascinating' is how Thatcher herself describes the relationship between Britain and Chile in her letter to the author turning down his request for assistance. Using historical research, and the testimonies of those protagonists still living, Andy Beckett traces the tangled history of British-Chilean relations, and unearths some nasty little secrets along the way.

In the sparsely populated northern deserts of Chile, there are still to be found rusting hulks of machinery, the remnants of the short-lived nitrate boom of the 1880s. Chile's

first brush with raw-boned, free-market capitalism was, like the machinery itself, 'Made in Britain'. Like the corporate raiders of today, the British nitrate barons regarded the economy and civil society of Chile as a mere nuisance, to be crushed or bribed, and matters came to a head when, in 1891, there was a brief civil war between the radical nationalist president, José Balmaceda, and the supporters of the nitrate barons. When the anti-Balmaceda navy bombarded the port of Iquique, a British squadron stood by to see 'fair play'! Eventually, the outgunned President Balmaceda fled into the Argentinian embassy and, after making a defiant final address, committed suicide.

Salvador Allende, elected as president in 1970 on a left-wing Popular Unity ticket, knew his Chilean history, particularly that of the doomed Balmaceda regime, inside out. 'Here we go again' must have been the reaction of Allende and his supporters to the efforts of the CIA and the Chilean economic elite to sabotage his government's attempts to redistribute wealth and increase the living standards of the poor. With grim irony, history repeated itself in 1973 with an armed forces coup, led by General Pinochet, but organised and financed this time from the USA, drowning the Popular Unity government in blood. Beckett weaves into his account the testimony of a Chilean socialist, imprisoned and tortured after the coup, who made his way to Britain as a refugee. While it would be idle to suggest that there was no racist hostility against the Chilean refugees who arrived in the months and years following the coup, it is significant that they were able to contemplate the eccentric British habit of eating tins of haricot beans in sweet-tasting tomato sauce from their own accommodation, as opposed to a detention centre. Another indication of the healthier political climate of a quarter of a century ago is the achievement of the trade unionists at Rolls Royce, some of whom are tracked down by Beckett, who kept eight jet engines rusting in their crates in East Kilbride for *four years* rather than let them go to Pinochet's air force.

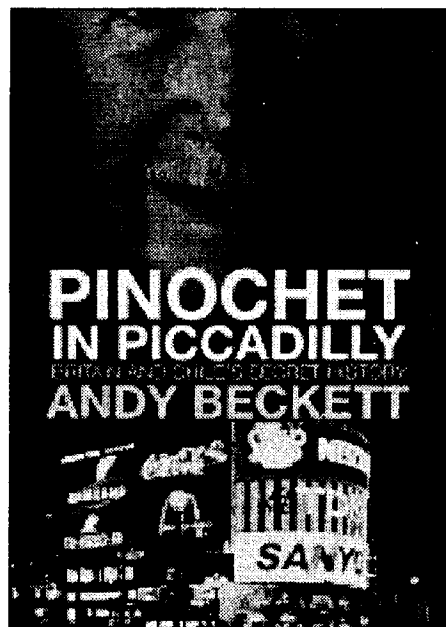
However, there were some powerful and influential people in Britain who thought that what was happening in Chile was really rather splendid. In March 1974, the British miners were on strike, and many trade unionists were prepared to support them, so the Tory prime minister, Edward Heath, called an election, asking the electorate 'who rules the country?' The electorate decided that whoever it was, it wasn't Heath, and a minority Labour government was returned. In a second election that year, Labour obtained a small majority. This Labour government sought to use its links with the trade union leadership to stifle union militancy.

However, many right-wing Tories took at face value Chancellor Denis Healy's remarks

about squeezing the rich until their pips squeaked, and hated Labour's formal commitment to state ownership and the funding of public services by taxation. But neither did those same right-wingers have any time for Heath, who, after ditching the relatively right-wing agenda on which he'd fought the 1970 election, settled for accommodation with the post-war welfare state, combined with fairly ham-fisted attacks on the unions. To the Tory right, Heath became a traitor: too soft on the unions and 'immigrants'. Worst of all, he took Britain into the EEC.

Some individuals on the right of the Tory party, and in the City, and some retired army officers, began to look wistfully at Chile, wondering, at first tentatively, and then more boldly, whether democracy was necessarily always a good thing. Beckett tracks down Brian Crozier, who in the 1970s argued for an 'authoritarian interlude' in Britain. He tries to track down General Walter Walker, but the general is unwell and isn't coming to the door. It was Walker who, in the mid-1970s, became the leader of Civil Assistance, part vigilante group, part strike-breakers. In August 1974, Walker claimed, probably optimistically, that Civil Assistance had 100,000 supporters. Labour's defence secretary, Roy Mason, interrupted his holiday to put out a statement warning of a 'near fascist groundswell', and, with an obvious reference to the use of the National Stadium in Santiago as a prison and torture-chamber, a letter-writer to the *Times* wondered whether Lord's cricket ground might be crammed with political prisoners.

But it was not just Chile's tranquil streets and orderly factories that attracted the attention of the British right – it was also the experiments being carried out on the economy. For years, the ultra-liberal free-marketeters of the economics faculty at the



University of Chicago, headed by Milton Friedman, had been campaigning against the various forms of socially-conscious Keynesianism which informed the economic policies of the western European and Australasian governments (and, in an etiolated form, that of the USA). They were desperate for the opportunity to put these ideas into practice and, after 1973, they had one: a relatively modernised, relatively urbanised country, where the trade unions were in fear of their lives, and where the ruler had no real ideas of his own, but was receptive to new ones.

The 'Chicago Boys', as they came to be known, set about their task in grim earnest. Price controls on local products and tariffs on imports were both abolished, making foreign goods cheap and Chilean goods expensive. Interest rates had reached, by 1975, a staggering 178 per cent, and unemployment had leapt to 20 per cent according to the official figures and, in reality, closer to 33 per cent, while wages collapsed to half their 1970 level. So many firms went bankrupt that the government did not receive sufficient social security contributions from employers to continue to pay unemployment benefit, so that the welfare state established by Allende fell apart. Beneath all the statistics, the simple truth was that Pinochet, assisted by the Chicago Boys, was restoring the dominance of the Chilean elite: making the rich richer and the poor poorer. The firms that had been nationalised by Allende were returned to private ownership, and a new term, 'privatisation', was being bandied around. State enterprises such as the telephone company, the electricity network and the state airline were sold off to members of the elite at bargain basement prices.

### Bigot

Meanwhile, back in Britain, the 'free economy, strong state' faction of the British right had formed the National Association for Freedom, which campaigned on the twin hobby horses of collaboration with apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia, and implacable hostility to the trade union movement. Its first fund-raising dinner was addressed by one Margaret Thatcher. When Thatcher replaced Heath as Tory leader in 1975 she was merely a middle-class racist bigot with a strong dislike of trade unions and nationalised industries. Ideologically, she travelled light; as Heath's education minister she had actually presided over an increase in the number of comprehensive schools. Even her best friends could not claim that she had a deep knowledge of world politics. But she was keen to learn. Among the obsessive, right-wing cranks who beat a path to her door (Crozier was one), a common thread was an admiration of what was hap-

pening in Chile. However, the increasing likelihood of a Tory election victory meant that the British right could realise its aims by counting heads instead of breaking them, and so its more sinister projects were quietly abandoned. The *Daily Telegraph* publishes lengthy obituaries on any former member of the armed forces above a certain rank, but, as Beckett observes, when General Walter Walker finally expired, Civil Assistance earned a mere paragraph.

### Shock therapy

However, Chilean economics were alive and well. Beckett interviews Alan Walters, disciple of Milton Friedman, and Thatcher's economic guru throughout her time in Downing Street. Walters is disarmingly open about his admiration for Chilean economic shock therapy and his frequent visits to Santiago, except when asked about the connection between Chile's economic policies and torture: 'obviously, nasty things went on', he admits, preferring to leave it at that.

So, having exported capitalism, 1880s-style, to Chile, Britain then imported its 1980s version back again. While Thatcher, in an echo of Pinochet's own arguments, preferred to cite 'good housekeeping' rather than economic theories as her influence, it is well-known that the deflationary economic policies pursued in 1979-83, based on the tight control of the money supply, and then the subsequent privatisations, came from the Chicago Boys. The influence of Chile is rather less well known, although in the late 1970s, the British right-wing press was open in its admiration of 'Latin America's best-managed economy', as the *Financial Times* put it. When, by 1981, the catastrophic results of these economic policies had produced riots, open dissent from liberal Tories, and approval ratings of just 23 per cent, it was the Falklands war (as well as the split by the SDP from Labour) which came to Thatcher's rescue. Thatcher's relatively rapid victory in that war was, it seems, assisted by Pinochet. So, not only Thatcher's economic policies, but also her very political survival, were due, in some measure, to this sadistic old brute, whose regime's way of winning hearts and minds was to torture its opponents with electrodes applied to the genitals, before dumping them, still alive, from aeroplanes into the sea.

Beckett quotes Pinochet's telling claim from 1974 that Chileans would have to 'scrub [their] minds clean'. In other words, they should forget about any attempts to create a more equal, freer society, very much as we in Britain were repeatedly told to do in the 1980s and 90s. An embrace of the free-market was 'modernising' and only 'common sense', and anyone who said differently was, in the pathetically banal discourse of

the time, a 'dinosaur'. But events in October 1998 showed that not everyone had scrubbed their minds clean. Pinochet had turned up in London to undergo medical treatment, and also to swan around the shops and eateries of the West End. His arrest, as unexpected to him as it was to his opponents, ignited hope among socialists in Chile, and around the world, that maybe one great cause of the 1970s and 80s would, eventually, be successful.

Even Tony Blair, who made a virtue of a lack of any ideology, told the Labour Party conference that he found Pinochet 'unspeakable'. It was almost as if New Labour's grey-suited technocrats had become reacquainted with their former, more radical selves from the 1970s. Right-wing Tories, hitherto chastened by the recent election defeat, became equally animated, arguing that Pinochet had 'saved' Chile from socialism, and that with double-digit inflation and the unions running the show, what else was a chap to do? The implication was clear. A democratically elected socialist government had no real legitimacy, and its supporters were fair game for arrest, torture and execution.

### Spineless

Thatcher never resorted to the terror-tactics of Pinochet, but then she never needed to. She won an election, ousting, with the support of a significant section of the middle class and working class, a Labour administration that had virtually given up. With the aid of the vacillating and spineless trade union leaders she was able to pick the major unions off one by one. However, the increase in the power of the police, the treatment meted out to the black communities and the mining communities, and the murky goings on of the secret state in northern Ireland suggest that the gushing admiration for Pinochet was more than just chatter. And after all, Chile in 1973, unlike all its neighbours, could look back on many years of functioning democracy. Many Chileans might have told themselves, 'that couldn't happen here'. Tim Bell, Thatcher's PR guru, who ran the campaign for Pinochet's release, summed it up nicely: 'Pinochet got rid of the commies, and that's our argument.'

However, it was a different argument that got Pinochet, and the New Labour government, off the hook. As one prominent Pinochet supporter in Britain said after the arrest: 'He's got to get very ill, very quickly.' And that is indeed what happened. Beckett leaves open the question as to whether Pinochet fooled the doctors, but it gave New Labour, the heir to the Thatcher-Pinochet project, the chance to have its cake and eat it. For neither the first nor the last time under Tony Blair, avowed high principle gave way to shabby expediency. **WA**



## Introduction

Richard Price

We live in an age in which the world's major religions are in an unprecedented state of flux. Although the late nineteenth century witnessed a series of major religious revivals, religion has in general been on the retreat in the face of scientific advance since the Enlightenment. This greatly accelerated in the decades after the Second World War, and in western Europe today, if we measure the strength of Christianity in terms of church attendance, the retreat has turned into a rout.

Catholicism lurches from one sexual abuse scandal to another, while the incontrovertible evidence of its high-level collaboration with fascist and military dictatorships has helped destroy much of its political authority. At the same time, its moral and social hold over younger generations in countries like Ireland, Italy and Spain has been rapidly eroded.

The Church of England together with its British Empire satellites is on the brink of a historic split, the pretext of which may be the ordination of gay clergy, but the roots of which reflect the break-up of its centuries-old state-sponsored pragmatism in doctrinal issues. The mainstream desperately tries to relate to the modern world with a social agenda that in some respects is to the left of New Labour, but which is doctrinally incoherent. Bells and smells Anglo-Catholics want to reverse the Reformation with a dose of aristocratic patronage. And the evangelicals, armed with a literal interpretation of the Bible, want to push back the liberal agenda on every front, whether it's sexual morality, women priests or how to reckon with other religions in a multi-cultural society.

The collapse of organised religion in Britain should not, however, be confused with the collapse of religious belief as such. A host of fringe religious sects and quasi-religious beliefs, from New Age therapies to feng shui, have attempted to fill the spiritual void.

In the United States, we see a very different picture, where the Christian fundamentalist right has for two decades exercised a powerful influence in Republican circles to the point where it enjoys unprecedented leverage in the Bush White House. This is a useful reminder that religious belief is not always reducible to poverty and ignorance. In some ways, it is the United States' economic and military dominance of the world that insulates mil-

lions of its citizens from progressive ideas, and endows its geo-political reach with a divine sanction.

In the East, almost the polar opposite to western Europe exists, with the rise of political Islam and Hindu fundamentalism – ideas that have gained ground as secular nationalism has failed to deliver its promises of the 50s and 60s. If anti-semitism is, as August Bebel remarked, the socialism of fools, then political Islam is the anti-imperialism of obscurantists.

The 'Marxism' of the young Karl Marx evolved in large part out of the criticism of religion. What is remarkable, given the scale of these developments, is how little attention most contemporary Marxists have paid to the interface between the shadowy world of unreality represented by religious belief and the material world. Insofar as Marxists do address the problem of religious ideas, they tend – and the Alliance for Workers Liberty is particularly guilty in this respect – to counterpose reason to irrationality in the manner of eighteenth-century rationalists and nineteenth-century secularists. One of the strengths of the essay that follows is the author's insistence that religious ideas are rooted in an attempt to come to terms with the material world, rather than simply representing a reactionary set of ideas.

Felix Morrow was for many years a leading figure in American Trotskyism, best known for his classic *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*. He joined the Communist League of America in 1933 and, after Max Shachtman's minority split in 1940, served as editor of the Socialist Workers Party's paper, *The Militant*, and its theoretical journal, *Fourth International*. He was one of 18 SWP leaders imprisoned under the Smith Act during the Second World War. In 1943 he formed a faction with Albert Goldman which challenged the SWP's 'orthodox' catastrophic perspective. In one of the most instructive factional struggles in the history of the Trotskyist movement, Morrow and Goldman projected the likelihood of a prolonged period of bourgeois democracy in western Europe and emphasised the need for democratic and transitional demands against the maximalism advocated by the majority. Although he was expelled from the SWP in 1946 for 'unauthorised collaboration' with Shachtman's Workers Party, he didn't join Shachtman, and drifted out of politics to the right. He subsequently worked on both *Fortune* magazine and *Reader's Digest*, making a small fortune of his own. 'Religion – its social roots and role' first appeared in two parts in *Fourth International* in June and July 1944, and was originally delivered as a lecture to the League of Professional Groups in 1932.

## Religion – its social roots and role

Felix Morrow

### Part I

Definitions of religion, like definitions of the state, generally tell us more about the social and political allegiances of the author of a given definition than about the true nature of religion or the state. Loyalties – that is, class interests and class outlook – are transferred into definitions; especially is this true of religion. Typical of such definitions is a theologian's formula for Christianity as 'the synthesis of the highest aspirations of man'. The fact that definitions are declarations of class allegiance and class programmes does not at all mean – as empiricists and pragmatists pretend – that all definitions are therefore of equal validity. On the contrary. Just as Marxists, in controverting 'classless' and other fraudulent theories of the state can point to historical and contemporary class functions of the state as a class organ used by the dominant class; so, too, Marxists are able to confront all apologetic definitions of religion with the actual *social* function of religion.

What are the roots of religion? The most favourite trick of the obscurantists and their allies is to pretend that religion is rooted in the mind. That is how the perpetuation of religious prejudices, creeds, etc, is usually explained. Exposing this falsehood Lenin wrote:

Why does religion retain its hold in the backward layers of the urban proletariat, in the broad layers of semi-proletarians and also in the mass peasantry? Because of the ignorance of the people – replies a bourgeois progressive, a radical, or a bourgeois materialist . . . The Marxist says: Not true! Such a view is superficial; it is narrow bourgeois 'culture-spreading'. Such a view does not probe deeply enough into the roots of religion. In modern capitalist countries

these roots are primarily *social*. (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, First Russian Edition, vol. XI, Book 1, pp.253-254.)

It is precisely because of this social role of religion – teaching submissiveness, summoning all to suffer in silence in return for rewards in the ‘hereafter’ etc, and in this way seeking to dampen the class struggle of workers against capitalists, of peasants against landlords – it is precisely for this reason that Marx designated religion as the ‘opium of the people’, and Lenin branded it as ‘a kind of spiritual corn-whisky’.

To lay bare the social roots and social function of religion is to expose it for what it really is. Which is precisely what the apologists of capitalism and *all* its institutions seek in every way to avoid. It is hardly surprising therefore that one of the most significant gaps in apologetic definitions of religion is the omission of the fact that religion is an institution; the fact that a religion, if it plays any role in a given society, is an *organised* religion. One scarcely need point out, as against this omission of the fact of institutionalisation, that a religion which remains unorganised would not perpetuate itself.

What would an unorganised religion be? It might be enunciated by some individuals and communicated to others. But if these did not organise together, acquire property and funds, endow churches and subsidiary institutions, carry on extensive propaganda, raise up a professional paid class of ministers and administrators, how would the religion be communicated to great numbers? The blood of the martyrs may be the seed of the church, but that the seed sprouts and is perpetuated is due to union with Rome, to the riches garnered by the church, to its position as the greatest of feudal landholders. This is indeed a commonplace, except that it has been so obscured by the English Dissenting tradition which is the main source of American religious thinking.

This tradition of a lower class, once so suspicious of established church and state, and therefore appealing to the direct inspiration of the Word of God, with a lay ministry and tiny meeting-houses, is still reiterated by the descendants of the Dissenters, who are now the ruling class of America, with powerful, enormously wealthy churches, with a clergy whose administrative duties make them as much businessmen as priests, with the fusion of different sects, and the centralisation of church control growing every day more pronounced. The hypocrisy of John D. Rockefeller’s Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick sermonising that the church is not so important as the pure heart is only too transparent – provided one is not wearing blinkers.

This institutional character of religion, glossed over by religious apologists as somehow irrelevant to the religious core of the church, is highly relevant to any serious description and analysis of the function of religion.

In every epoch of history, the existing institutions are bound up with the social relations of production. As the Catholic church was the bulwark of feudalism, so today all churches are part of the arsenal of capitalism, share in its privileges and fortunes. In the class struggles which arise from the antagonisms implicit in the mode of production, the dominant institutions, including the churches, support the ruling classes.

In the epochs before the triumph of the bourgeoisie, the differences between classes were expressed also in different religions; that is, the new classes struggling against the ruling class have also given birth to new religions which wage parallel struggles with the dominant religion. The struggles against feudalism became struggles also against the then greatest feudal landowner, the Catholic church. The peasant wars against the clergy and nobility, in the 15th and 16th centuries, took the form of the Anabaptist, Albigensian, Hussite, Lollard, heresies: In defence of its domains and privileges, the church demands submission to it as the only channel of grace; the peasants counter by proclaiming the central authority of the gospels.

So, too, the revolt of the middle classes of Germany under Luther, which, as Engels has pointed out, takes the form of a demand for a cheap church similar to the later bourgeois and petty-bourgeois demand for cheap government, is also a religious heresy. In the same way, the revolt of the rising bourgeoisie of England against irresponsible monarchy and feudal landowners takes the form of a Puritan and Sectarian struggle against the established church.

### Bourgeois anti-clericalism

It is interesting to note that, as the meaning of the bourgeois revolutions grows clearer to the plebeian revolutionists, the fight against the church grows less and less a fight of one religion against another. Thus, the French Revolution and the revolutions of 1848 no longer obscure their tasks with religious ideology; the class fighting its way upward has no need of seeing its struggle as a religious one. The mists of religion, obscuring the real contending forces, become a hindrance to the class fighting an uphill fight. If this is true of the later bourgeois revolutions, revolutions which serve only to transfer power from one minority ruling class to another, how much more true must this be of the proletarian revolution, which is to do away with

all classes, and whose success, whose very programme of action, is based on the scientific analysis of the nature of social life free of all fetishisms.

Since the Puritan revolt there has been no important example of a class struggle also taking the form of religion. All later religious movements have been reactionary in character. The religious movements among the lower classes, such as the evangelistic sects, like the Baptists and Methodists, were a substitute for secular protest, combining with their wails of anguish explicit submission to the powers that be. The other religious substitute for secular protest, the religious communist colonies, belongs to the history of utopian socialism and comes at a time when the role of utopian socialism has become a reactionary one.

What happened to bourgeois anti-clericalism? Once the bourgeoisie triumph, they, too, find like the ruling class which preceded them that religion is useful to the state, and freethinking and atheism become in their eyes identified with ‘immorality’ etc, i.e., hatred of the established order. The realistic rationalism of the epoch of bourgeois revolution passes; no American politician who announced the beliefs of Jefferson and Patrick Henry, or even the indifferent churchgoing of Washington, would be run nowadays for office.

Tom Paine, the propagandist of the American revolution, became, for Theodore Roosevelt, ‘that filthy little atheist’. In France, its classic home, anti-clericalism remained longest, owing to the political usefulness of the traditions of the Revolution, and continual conflicts over property with the Catholic church. But despite any manifest unfriendliness, the church of Rome laboured to find favour in the eyes of French capital, and at long last, it has not laboured in vain. When a flare-up between the church and the Chamber of Deputies occurred in 1924, the *Journal des Debats*, organ of the most important French imperialists, sharply warned the government against breaking with the Holy See, ‘because of the large number of French Catholic institutions abroad’. ‘French influence,’ the journal said, ‘in Asia Minor and North Africa is largely maintained through these [Catholic] institutions.’ The rush of the formerly anti-clerical bourgeoisie into the arms of the church became so precipitous and for such obvious reasons that the church itself felt embarrassed. Here is how Abbé Ernest Dimnet commented on this sudden influx of converts:

Today it is remarkable that the French upper middle classes are the main support of religion and go to great expense in order to support the schools in which

their children are educated in a religious atmosphere totally different from that in which the previous generations grew up. The majority in the French Chamber may still be Masonic . . . French governments in consequence cannot but feel the influence of the lodges and might be expected to be anti-clerical. Yet they are not. Monks and nuns have returned to their schools and teach in their costumes. The Archbishop of Paris is on the best terms with the Prime Minister and a recent legal case has shown that the government regards the Papal Nuncio as a valuable ally.

'What does this mean?' asks the reverend father. It is true, he sadly goes on, 'that the bourgeoisie and the politicians representing it have opened their eyes to the social utility of religion. A mean notion of religion, this utilitarianism in the land of Saint Louis and Joan of Arc! . . . But in France as in the rest of the world there is, working for a return to religion, something higher than opportunism'. And so forth and so on.

**Sanctifying wealth**

Thus passed the last stronghold of anti-clericalism. The Catholic church has adjusted itself to its capitalistic successors, and serves them as loyally as she once served feudalism. Once she completes the process of adjusting herself, with some necessary losses of estates, to the new capitalist regime of Spain, the Catholic church will have finally completed her transition from feudalism to capitalism. Her losses will be little enough in the process, if she can help herself. On the same day that the Pope by radio condemned 'men for fixing their eyes on earthly goods', he demanded cash reparations of thirty million dollars from the Spanish government for church property destroyed by the revolution.

In America, once the Civil War decided that capitalism was to be master of the continent, the churches proceeded to become capitalist with a brazenness which no established church has ever outdone. The example of the Baptist church is a good one, since it had always been known as a poor man's church. As I have said, these evangelical movements were once substitutes for social protest; however, as they prospered, they ceased to be substitutes for social protest and became glorifiers of the social order. Baptist ministers indignantly repudiated the idea that the Baptist churches are composed of the poor of the world. A prominent Baptist divine has declared:

God has so blessed [us], temporally, as well as spiritually, that we could demonstrate that the aggregate of wealth among [us] is far greater than of some

ecclesiastical fraternities whose members not infrequently put on lordly airs and affect to despise the Baptists for their poverty.

The concept of the sanctification of wealth became a creed of the churches. Dollars and godliness were pronounced to go together. Capitalists were 'God's stewards'. Baptist conventions passed resolutions saying that they 'thankfully recognised the rich blessing of the Great Head of the Church, in the recent gift of Brother John D. Rockefeller' (or other millionaire Brothers Vassar, Bishop, Colgate, Deane, etc, etc). The *Christian Standard* urged businessmen to take over the administration of church affairs, for who, it asked, was 'so qualified to do business as a businessman, and who to spend God's money as his legitimate stewards?'

It ought to be noted that the developing control of the churches by capitalism was more than an obviously direct control. While the Protestant churches have been directly controlled by the businessmen – who generally control property, funds and ministers – this kind of control is not at all indispensable to the general support of capitalism by the churches. As a matter of fact, the most effective supporters of capitalism are not the obvious hirelings but the apparent volunteers. The short-sighted businessmen who directly control the Protestant churches may prevent at crucial moments a flexibility which is much more valuable to capitalism. In this, the Catholic church has proved superior to Protestant. In Spain the ally of the feudal nobles, in Italy of Fascism, in Germany of the Social Democracy, all at the same time. Thus,

the Catholic church has been the saviour of capitalism in ways impossible for the less flexible Protestants. Her union with German socialists helped bring forth the Weimar constitution, saving capitalism, while the Protestant churches, in the hands of Junkers and industrialists, were unable to manoeuvre. The Catholic church knows how to yield the husk to save the kernel. Today [This was written in 1932 – Ed.] she is unwilling, in America, officially to recognise the principle of trade unionism (though she exercises considerable influence in the AFL.) Tomorrow, if it is necessary to hold the masses from rushing forward, the Catholic church will organise trade unions. This flexibility, plus the fact that so far as the working masses in large numbers go to church, they are Catholics, bids fair to give the Catholic church an increasingly important role in American capitalist struggle against the workers.

In general, when the underdog struggles, it is high time for the top dog to call down to him in the name of brotherhood. In particular, this has been the role of the Social Gospel. To bring the worker into the church or at least to persuade him that the church is not his enemy; offering either religious techniques for solving the social problems or paper programmes, which mean nothing and which, even on paper, go no further than the mildest of liberalism. This, and an occasional gesture. The high water mark of the Social Gospel in this country was the Interchurch World Movement's report on the steel strike after it failed; the result was the collapse of the Interchurch organisation. I once asked a secretary of the Federated Council of Churches why

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his organisation did not do things like the steel strike report. He looked hurt. Why, he said, 'that steel strike report put us in a fix which we have just about dragged ourselves out of now. Do you want to ruin us?'

The measure of direct control of the churches, therefore, is not a sufficient index to their capitalist loyalty. Nor is their relation to the state. The political privileges of the churches, their freedom from taxation, their right to conduct religious schools or teach religion in the public schools, blasphemy and Sunday laws, religious propaganda in the armed forces and legislatures, etc, are also not the most significant revelations of the capitalist role of the churches. The fact is that formal separation of church and state, like the formal appearance of impartiality assumed by capitalist 'democracy', is the most efficient form under which the churches can function in the interests of capitalism. An established church is suspect even by scarcely class-conscious workers. Under the slogan of freedom from state domination, the church performs its best work for capitalism.

### The mechanics of deception

The ministers and administrators of the churches are by income or social status part of the capitalist class, move in it and have their being in it. They simply express the capitalist ideology of their class. The principles of capitalism become, as by a process of osmosis, the principles of religion under capitalism. When the pillar of the Baptist church, John D. Rockefeller, declared, as he fought the Ludlow strikers, that the great principle at stake was that American workmen should not be deprived of their 'right' to work for whom they please, the Baptist pulpits echoed him. The clergy howled for the blood of the Haymarket martyrs, as did the capitalists. When Theodore Roosevelt pronounced Debs an 'undesirable citizen' he was but repeating the gist of thousands of sermons. The history of the development of the American working class is mirrored in the capitalist propaganda of the churches, their

calling the workers to submission, their outright strikebreaking, their regimentation of the workers for the capitalist parties, etc, etc.

As a matter of fact, the churches, in their inculcation of the standards which are also inculcated by school, press, radio and state, have an immeasurable advantage over other institutions. What the others teach to be correct as a matter of expediency, advisability or judiciousness, the church teaches as the word of God or connects with religious significance or translates into archaic, sonorous language far more effective than the language of school and press and state. The world war of 1914-1918 proved this to the hilt. They turned the war of capitalism into a holy war, and God's habitations became the most effective recruiting stations. In this capacity of the churches to make religious principles out of practical politics lies their greatest service to capitalism.

Bourgeois thinkers occasionally blurt out this fact. I quote, as an example, the following unguarded soliloquy of James Bryce. That philistine becomes thoughtful as, in his survey of the American Commonwealth, he is struck by the important role of the churches:

No one is so thoughtless as not sometimes to ask himself what would befall mankind if the solid fabric of [religious] belief on which their morality has hitherto rested, or at least been deemed by them to rest, were suddenly to break up and vanish . . . Morality with religion for its sanction has hitherto been the basis of social polity, except under military despotisms . . . So sometimes, standing in the midst of a great American city, and watching the throngs of eager figures streaming hither and thither, marking the sharp contrasts of poverty and wealth, an increasing mass of wretchedness and an increasing display of luxury . . . one is startled by the thought of what might befall this huge yet delicate fabric of laws and commerce and social institutions were the foundation it has rested on to crumble away . . . History cannot answer this question. The most she can tell us is that hitherto civilised society has rested on religion, and that free government has prospered best among religious people.

No wonder, then, that no Commencement address in schools and universities is complete without a tribute to religion; and no Chamber of Commerce banquet ended without someone sounding the religious note. No wonder that in dedicating a statue of Francis Asbury, that Methodist pioneer, Coolidge should have declared:

Our government rests upon religion. It is from that source that we derive our reverence for truth and justice, for equality and liberty, and for the rights of mankind.

In the midst of the imperialist war of 1914-1918, Lenin wrote:

Feuerbach was right when in reply to those who defended religion on the ground that it consoles the people, he pointed out the reactionary meaning of consolation: 'Whoever consoles the slave instead of arousing him to revolt against slavery, aids the slaveholder.' All oppressing classes of every description need two social functions to safeguard their domination: the function of a hangman, and the function of a priest. The hangman is to quell the protest and rebellion of the oppressed, the priest is to paint before them a perspective of mitigated sufferings and sacrifice under the same class rule (which it is particularly easy to do without guaranteeing the 'possibility of their realisation' . . .). Thereby he reconciles them to class domination, weans them away from revolutionary actions, undermines their revolutionary spirit, destroys their revolutionary determination. (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, English Edition, vol. XVIII, pp.295-296.)

Whoever grasps and assimilates this Leninist-Marxist analysis of religion has learned the truth about the social function of religion. He who denies it, in the words of Feuerbach – *aids the slaveholder*.

## Part II

Why are people religious? The glaring fault of bourgeois atheism is that its analysis of religion gives no hint as a rule of the social roots and function of modern religion. Abstract analyses of religion, even from an atheistic standpoint, thus in effect *embellish* religion – through omission. One might even say therefore that most bourgeois atheistic writing on religion creates an even greater mystery.

If bourgeois atheists cannot give us insight into why people are religious, still less will we receive our answer from religious people, particularly the professional peddlers of religion, the minister, preacher, priest, or rabbi whose task it is to embellish religion in every conceivable way. In a letter to Gorki, written in December 1913, Lenin pointed out that those who embellish, under any pretext, the idea of God or religion are thereby:

embellishing the chains which shackle the benighted workers and moujiks . . . God is (historically and in day-to-day life) first of all a complex of ideas arising from the torpid condition of man under the oppression of external nature and class domination; ideas which *reinforce* this oppression, ideas which *lull* the class struggle. (*Leninski Sbornik*, vol. I, pp.157-158.)

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In a document, 'On the attitude of a workers' party to religion', written in 1909, Lenin expounded the Marxist viewpoint as follows:

The social oppression of the toiling masses, their seemingly complete impotence in the face of the blind forces of capitalism, which afflicts the rank-and-file toiling people daily and hourly with far more terrible sufferings and far more savage tortures than such uncommon events as wars, earthquakes and so on – this is where the most profound, modern root of religion is to be found. 'Fear created the Gods.' Fear before the blind force of capitalism – a blind force because it cannot be foreseen by the masses of the people – a force which at every step in the life of a proletarian and a petty proprietor threatens to bring and does bring him 'sudden', unexpected', 'accidental' bankruptcy, ruination, transformation into a pauper or into a prostitute, or leads to hungry death – there is the root of modern religion. (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, First Russian Edition, vol. XI, book 1, pp.253-254.)

Let us now analyse some of the favourite 'techniques' – or tricks – of the religionists in order to lay bare what they seek to paint up.

The place of God in religion is emphasised and re-emphasised. Yet no really religious person is religious because, on occasion, he or she can offer 'arguments' proving the existence of God. For the common run of believers, which is to say, the overwhelming majority of religious people, God is simply 'there'. Professional spokesmen of religion have good and sufficient reasons for putting undue emphasis on God.

### Theologians and 'God'

The theologian who must reduce to some order the vague feelings and behaviour of believers finds the most palatable solution in making God the organising principle; the minister, embarrassed by any scrutiny of the efficacy of prayer or the magical elements in ritual, draws attention away from these by emphasising God. In this way the actual relation of means and ends in religion is obscured and dislocated. We are told God is the goal of religion rather than God's being one of the religious means. In consonance with this tendency, the newer prayer books list fewer and fewer prayers for specific needs and occasions; the Catholic church does not publicise the long roll of specialised saints who cater to specific needs. (Such as Breton saints of healing: St Lubin for all afflictions, Mamert for intestinal disorders, Meen for insanity, Hubert for dog bites, Livertin for headaches and Houarniaule to dispel fear, and so on.) The professional spokesmen for religion would have us ignore the occasion

for prayer, the need or desire expressed, and throw the emphasis on the fact that the religionist prays to God.

Any acquaintance with religious people, however, soon teaches one that God is not the object as distinguished from the apparatus of religion, but that God is just as much part of the apparatus of religion as is church, prayer or ritual. The religionist does not pray to God merely in order to pray for God, no more than he prays merely in order to pray. The occasion for prayer need not, of course, be specific: religion is employed not only for specific needs or anxieties, but for the general reinforcement of the believer's peace of mind, assurance and security. But whether religion is employed for specific or general purposes, in either case, God is part of the religious 'technique', not the purpose for which it is employed.

We may grant that there are some men for whom God is apparently not a religious 'technique' for expressing or securing needs. God, the religionist claims, is at least for some men not a technique, but an object of contemplation. God is such an object in Spinoza's intellectual love of God; he is such an object to some mystics and theologians. Even in this type of religious situation, however, the significant factor is not the contemplation of God but the motivation of such contemplation. As Dewey has illustrated in his *Quest for Certainty*, God is sought, even in Spinoza's case, because he is changeless and certain, as contrasted with our daily life of uncertainty. In other words, the intellectual love of God is only a sophisticated form of the so-called religious technique to ward off the confusion and peril of everyday life.

For the great masses of believers, this sophisticated form of religious 'technique' is unsatisfactory. They do not separate God from the rest of the complex of religious 'techniques' and institutions which constitute a church. The few for whom God is an object of contemplation might perhaps view with equanimity the role of the church as a bulwark of capitalism and take for granted the illusory efficacy of religion; but it is certain the masses do not take such a view. The main road to atheism for the masses is the discovery of the reactionary role of the churches and the social inefficacy of religion. A God who is believed to exist and cannot help them is not a God the masses continue to worship. The church may have been founded by Christ himself, but once the masses discover the role of the church, they break with it. The most effective propaganda against religion, as the Soviet Union demonstrates, is to reinforce the arguments against religion from science, proving that God does not exist, by the exposure of the church's reaction-

ary functions, the venality of the clergy, the fraudulence of relics, etc. Unlike a bourgeois atheist, the Marxist does not confine his systematic attack on religion merely to its 'truth value', but probes into its social roots. For the great masses of believers, with whom we are concerned, it is the exposure of the social function of religion that is conclusive.

### Ethics and religion

In the same way that religious apologists emphasise the place of God in religion, so they also exaggerate the place of honorific ideals and values. Religion as the defender or conservator of ideals and values is also the position adopted by those so-called humanists who agree that God does not exist but who nevertheless wish to save religion. So the humanistic theologians of the University of Chicago define religion variously as 'the conservation of human values' (Ames), 'a quest for the good life' (Haydon) or the like. In the same way, but with a franker recognition of the actual role that religion has played, Harry F. Ward appeals to the ethics of Jesus as the true essence of religion. The arguments against any such attempted identifications of religion with ethics are conclusive.

Any ideal or value proposed as religious contains nothing in it which is *per se* religious. Security, harmony, happiness, the good life, love, peace – what is religious about these? They are the goals of all human effort. They can only be called religious if we falsely define life as a whole as religious. Some humanists do not shrink from this *reductio ad absurdum*. Professor Haydon, for instance, who defines religion as 'a quest for the good life', then goes on to speak indiscriminately of every quest as religious. Such attempts to save religion by relinquishing its identity must, however, be set down as the latest and most cynical defence of a vested interest. The identity of religion will not be found in ethics, though, of course, any ethical ideal may be spuriously expressed or sought for in religion. How efficacious is religion for the realisation of any such ideal? As we have seen, no ideals inimical to capitalism are furthered by religion. The realisation of ideals involves a belief in a kind of supernatural efficacy to which even the Catholic church does not assent publicly too often. I may add that when she does assert her belief in such a degree of supernatural efficacy, the Catholic church does so in support of the capitalist ideals which she furthers as an institution. An example is the Pope ordering prayers for Russia, prayers which, declared the Catholic *Commonweal*:

may affect the future much more profoundly than the success or failure of the



Soviet government's Five-Year Plan.

The best commentary on the relation of ethics to religion is the way in which the equalitarian doctrines of Jesus and his immediate followers is employed. These have their uses. 'Christianity a capitalist religion?' cries the preacher, 'Why Jesus himself was a poor man!' Or the rise of the church from its humble beginnings makes a Horatio Alger story edifying to the bourgeoisie and reinforcing the democratic illusions of the churchgoing masses. From Jesus's cry for charity for the poor the medieval church drew the comforting and highly sophisticated conclusion that if charity is a religious duty, we must always have the poor to give it to. The symbolical tendency of religious ritual serves to turn equalitarianism into a ceremonial which only serves to show the masses how good their rulers are. An example is Maundy Thursday. I quote a *New York Times* story of the last time King Alfonso of Spain was able to perform this pleasant ceremony:

Madrid, April 2 [1932], King Alfonso today got down on his knees in the royal palace to wash the feet of twelve poor men. Queen Victoria, in a gold and white court dress, with a white lace mantilla and elaborate jewels, washed the feet of twelve poor women, and the monarchs afterward served food to the group with their own hands.

Nobles, high church dignitaries, including the Papal Nuncio, resplendent Generals and members of the royal family in magnificent court regalia watched their Catholic Majesties observe the age-old custom of Maundy Thursday in thus administering to the poor in rags and tatters.

No, one cannot find the identity of religion in ethics.

### 'Religious experience'

To the apologist's attempt to cover up the fact that religion, including God, is a class institution employing a class technique, and the similar attempt to identify religion with ethics, one may add the attempt, for equally apologetic reasons, to discover and single out a unique experience to be called *the* religious experience. This is a game which was very popular with psychologists a few years ago, and a perennial source of employment for bourgeois philosophers. To controvert this hunt for the 'numinous', one has but to think of the innumerable range of human experiences which have been the occasion for prayer. As Professor Schneider once put it wittily: 'Any good mystic can get more varieties of religious experience than a "numinous" psychologist can talk about.'

### How modern 'technique' arose

I now reformulate the question with which

I began, why are people religious? in this form: under what conditions are modern religious 'techniques' employed?

Let us return to the example of the French Revolution. Through the thought of the plebeian ideologues of the French Revolution streams the clear bright light of a new dawn in which humanity, bursting at last the fetters of feudal church and state, seems free to work out its own destiny. Confidence in humanity, assurance in the full capacity of men to evolve purely secular ways of fulfilling their potentialities, is the motif of all their writings. The theory of progress, progress without peril, is the dominant philosophy of the bourgeoisie itself on the eve of the Revolution. Hatred of the Catholic church as the bulwark of feudalism is united with hatred of religion because it attributes impotence to man. Destroy the existing forms of oppression and man will be free to pursue a glorious destiny.

But then comes the French Revolution and victory for the bourgeoisie. And behind them looms the menacing proletariat. Fear of the proletariat drives the bourgeoisie into a union with the remnants of feudalism, into relinquishing their power to Bonapartism; the inevitable contradictions of capitalist economy appear: individual failures, economic crises, war. The bright new dawn of the plebeian revolutionary ideologues is followed by the cold light of a day of new forms of oppression, bloodshed, suffering, anxiety. Few are able to understand how these must necessarily follow from the antagonistic mode of production of feudalism. Man's omnipotence seems an illusory dream. Perhaps man is doomed to defeat? It is precisely the most sensitive sons of the new bourgeoisie who in the cold light of day start a Catholic revival. The economic rehabilitation of the Church, its role in keeping the masses in subjection, combine with the loss of self-confidence by the bourgeoisie; anticlericalism shows signs of old age and finally disappears.

### Source of fetishism

What we see so clearly in comparing the dawn and day of bourgeois revolution is a dominant characteristic of the everyday life of all classes in the capitalist era. The basic process was analysed by Marx who laid bare the fetishism of commodities.

The process of production is not mastered by man but is his master; man's labours appear to him as elemental natural forces beyond his control. Forces so independent of his own control appear to him inevitably as non-social forces. Failure, crises, war appear as though by the inexorable hand of fate. Neither will, nor foresight, nor effort are in any case commen-

surate with results: the worker toils and yet starves, and is thrown out of work to suffer still more, by forces which cannot but seem mysterious and evil to him; the bourgeois is equally in the hands of fate; there is no relation between his efforts and rewards; he is superstitious when he plays a hunch on the stock-market and wins, equally superstitious when business prospers or fails. Commodities, the products of man's own efforts, rear up like monsters to overwhelm their makers; the social relations, which should be merely the way in which men are organised to produce the necessities of life, these social relations of employer-employee, state-people, appear to be the mysterious and eternal dictates of inexorable law. Men are frustrated at every turn by their own social relations. They desire security, but whatever they may have, this they cannot have. They desire peace and prosperity and work for it, only to find themselves fighting devastating wars which bring in their wake economic catastrophes. The potentialities of most men are never realised. Their intellectual, aesthetic, social faculties are warped at every turn, no matter what class they belong to. There is a basic dualism between social ethics and practical activity. Attempts to satisfy human needs or potentialities fail or are frustrated under capitalism. It is inevitable under these circumstances that so many fall victims to the religious 'techniques'.

It is precisely for the sake of what they hold dearest that the believers go down on their knees. For life and love, for food and shelter, for the innumerable needs and desires and hopes and dreams. Often they pray for no specific reason, but it is precisely then that they are praying for all their reasons, for the whole complex of hurt and pain and anxiety left by their crushed social status as Lenin so correctly pointed out.

### 'The quest for certainty'

One of the most familiar religious techniques – i.e., fraudulent embellishments – is to contrast the hazards of change with the sureties of the changeless. In the religious revivals that have accompanied every business depression, the churches have pointed out the 'lesson'. As the *Christian Times* once phrased it: 'the sad experience of the uncertainty of worldly riches . . . disposed the hearts of many to sigh for the durable riches'. Another Baptist paper, a few weeks after the panic of 1873 declared that 'the suffering incident to the present state of affairs' would 'lead thousands to turn from the fleeting things of time to the realities of eternity'. Essentially, this is what John Dewey has sought to generalise as – 'the religious character of the philoso-

pher's quest for certainty'.

The religiosity accompanying depressions is a very clear illustration of the fetishism induced by the capitalist mode of production. The fleetingness of the things of time and the uncertainty of worldly riches are put down, quite automatically, as proof of the impotence of man and the necessity of fortifying himself – by religious 'techniques'. As suspicions of the real causes of depressions have permeated society, especially today when the crass contradiction of starvation and overproduction lies bare, there is a growing tendency to say little about the rise in religiosity during crises, which has been so regular that it is called the evangelistic index; the obvious causes of the evangelistic index must seem to churchmen an embarrassing commentary on the functions of religion at all times.

The fetishism of commodities, resulting from the contradictions of capitalism, this phenomenon of men's own labours overwhelming them, stultifying them and frustrating their best potentialities, causing them to fall prey to superstitions, rituals and the entire mumbo-jumbo of religion, this cannot be done away with by those in power, the bourgeoisie, without destroying themselves as a class. Faced by the contradictions of capitalism, the bourgeoisie, as in the case of the Catholic revival of the French bourgeoisie, can only turn to religion to help them survive the necessary evils of their own economy. At the same time, however, from the proletariat ranks there arises the beginnings of a scientific economic system – socialism. Here the bourgeoisie and the workers confront each other, as irreconcilable enemies.

For the proletariat the socialist way out is irreconcilable with the religious way out. To take the religious way out, the road of consolation and reconciliation, is possible only as long as the proletariat shares with the bourgeoisie the illusions bred by capitalism in its ascendancy. Once, however,

the proletarian vanguard has cut to the source of these illusions, has learned that the contradictions of capitalism are not given by fate, are not necessary evils, the main basis of religion becomes impossible for the proletarian movement – and for society as a whole.

### Communism and religion

Will religion disappear under communism? Speaking of the fetishism of commodities, Marx says:

Such religious reflections of the real world will not disappear until the relations between human beings in their practical everyday life have assumed the aspect of perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations as between man and man, and as between man and nature. The life process of society, this meaning the material process of production, will not lose its veil of mystery until it becomes a process carried on by a free association of producers, under their conscious and purposive control.

But those religionists, like Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, who tacitly recognise that it is the fetishism of the evils, frustrations and perversions of capitalism which are at the root of modern religion, insist, nevertheless, that communism will not do away with religion. There will still be, they say, the problems of our relation to the universe and the personal problems which no social system can solve.

It is least likely that 'our relation to the universe' will be a problem for religious solution. This phrase is generally a professional subterfuge of ministers. Moreover, those who point to the influence of nature on the religion of peasants and farmers ignore the conditions under which such religion flourishes. As Marx points out, it was not the direct relation to nature which made agricultural peoples religious. The process by which agricultural peoples produced the material necessities of life was an immature one; their interaction with nature, that is, their tilling of the soil, was immature – in their ignorance of the sciences of fertilising, irrigating, accurate planting, and intensive agriculture, they were at the mercy of the elements. It is for this reason that their relations to nature were correspondingly immature, and led to fetishism of nature. A mature process of agricultural production leads to a mature attitude toward nature. Under capitalism, the farmers' attitude toward nature is inextricably involved with the fetishism of commodities. The mysteries of nature are to the farmer nothing so puzzling as the mysteries of the market which holds him in subjection. His fear for his crops is a fear driven by need. I have seen a community of farmers come together in a time of drought to pray; they know all about the

natural causes of rain, but still they are apparently praying for rain. Actually, however, they are praying not for rain, but to be saved from the consequences which will befall them if their crops fail. Suppose, now, that no serious economic consequences would follow upon the failure of the crops, would the farmers be praying for rain? Under communism, that part of the community which will raise the food-stuffs will feel no terror when faced by crop failures; a purposive and systematic organisation of production will provide for such contingencies; surpluses from other years will always be on hand. Under communism, the individual farmer will not be penalised for drought or plague of crops, as he is under capitalism. Will he then pray for rain? or need to fortify himself by religion under continual anxiety and fear of failure? It scarcely seems likely. As for the rest of us, including the religious masses, our relation to nature is not a religious problem today. Only a Niebuhr could envisage man's relation to nature becoming a 'religious problem' under communism.

So far as the 'personal problems' or 'the personal equation' is concerned, the trick of connecting these questions with religiosity is quite as threadbare as all the other 'techniques'. It consists in transferring the individual as he or she exists today – warped, twisted, undeveloped, enslaved – into the free communist future where such 'egos' and all their problems, frustrations, fixations, neuroses, etc, etc, might perhaps be for a brief while subjects for nursery rhymes but certainly never topics of serious discussion among adults. To take such problems seriously is to forget the ABC of Marxism which is materialist to the core and which affirms that man's consciousness is determined by the material environment and not vice versa.

We Trotskyists are firmly convinced that capitalism is the last refuge of religion; and once capitalism is abolished this opium of the people as Marx called it, this 'kind of spiritual corn-whisky' as Lenin aptly branded it, will be cast into the garbage heap of history, where it belongs. **WA**

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# A farewell to the vanguard party or a return to Leninism?

Ed George

There is a recurring tendency on the revolutionary left to declare that the old ways are not working and that we need a 'fresh start'; and frequently central in this argument is the view that what has come to be called Leninist 'democratic centralism' is acting as a barrier to our building healthy, responsive and relevant political organisations. The argument often runs like this. Lenin's strictures as to the type and functioning of revolutionary organisation were, if not exclusively then at least principally, a product of the conditions of Russian absolutism in which the RSDLP had to operate. A tight organisation of conspiratorial revolutionaries, however, while appropriate to these conditions, can only result in highly over-centralised and undemocratic organisations run by self-appointed leadership cliques – unable to relate to the real class struggle and real processes of radicalisation – when applied to conditions of bourgeois-democratic openness. We thus need to find new ways to organise as revolutionaries, and, in our search for new methods in the enlightened bourgeois democracies of the twenty-first century, Lenin's approach, developed in opposition to an absolutism that firmly belonged in the nineteenth, can have little to say to us.

That this argument has the currency that it does is indeed a reflection of the parlous state of the revolutionary left, for it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what Lenin's contribution to Marxist theory and practice really is. As such, a 'moving-on' of this type represents not a fresh start but a retreat from the very fun-

damentals that make us Marxists in the first place. The rest of what follows here is an attempt at a justification of this judgement.

Marxism itself as such had emerged in the nineteenth century in Russia in the form of a conscious and deliberate break with revolutionary 'populism'. Populism – if it can be summed up in such a simple way, for, in truth, what is called 'populism' encompasses a broad swathe of ideological and political priorities – took the form of a rejection of the idea, common amongst the liberal intelligentsia, that Russia was an inherently and peculiarly backward society that needed to undergo a European-type process of development. Rather, populism projected that Russia could by-pass a capitalist stage of development altogether on the path to socialism. In good part it was the perceived peculiarities of Russian social development, in particular the nature of the peasant commune, that provided the historical basis for this view. As populism developed into a fully-fledged – if still relatively minuscule – political movement by the 1870s, this central conception of the significance of the peasantry in the revolution, founded on the view of the peasant commune as proof of the collectivist tradition of the great mass of the Russian people, and bolstered to a certain degree by the influence of anarchist conceptions of mass spontaneity, led to the celebrated 1874 'turn to the people'. The manifest and dispiriting failure of this attempt at mass propaganda, directed at a largely bewildered peasantry, prompted an advance in populist ideology along two lines: first, a move towards forcing a confrontation with the state (increasingly viewed in populist circles as the main Russian capitalist-inducing institution); and second, on the need to develop better and more effective forms of organisation.

In 1879 the movement split, bequeathing *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will), an increasingly centralised organisation focused on acts of terrorism against state officials (and which was ultimately successful in 1881 in its attempts to assassinate the Tsar himself); and the minority *Chernyi Peredel* (Black Repartition) group, which opposed the growing stress on armed action in favour of propaganda. This latter organisation is of significance for our purposes since in 1883, as a wave of state reaction threatened to crush the indigenous populist movement, an exiled group of its leaders, Plekhanov, Axelrod and Zasulich prominent among them, established themselves as the 'Emancipation of Labour' group and declared for Marxism.

Thus Marxism in Russia was at birth founded on the basis of a conscious and deliberate break with populist orthodox-

ies. Central to the conceptions advanced by Plekhanov and his followers was the view that Russia was a backward and barbarous country: before any idea of an advance to socialism could be even considered, a long supervening process of capitalist industrialisation and westernisation was necessary. The precondition for this was to be a bourgeois-democratic – not socialist – revolution: the working class in Russia would be forced to play the role of supporting the liberal bourgeoisie in overturning absolutism and establishing a constitutional, parliamentary state. The peasantry, communal or otherwise, was seen not as a revolutionary asset in the struggle against Tsardom but as a backward and reactionary force.

Thus it is intriguing to note that on these questions Plekhanov was something more of an 'orthodox Marxist' than Marx had been. In a polemic directed at the populist theorist Mikhailovsky in 1877, Marx had objected to the accusation that he wanted to transpose on Russia the process of 'primitive accumulation' described in *Capital*. Marx disagreed: 'It is absolutely necessary for [...] [Mikhailovsky] to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed [...].'<sup>1</sup>

Thus Marx expressed a far greater degree of flexibility with regard to the possibilities for Russian development in the light of its concrete and specific historical circumstances than did Plekhanov's rather more abstract schemas. In fact, the rather mechanical 'evolutionism' being advanced by Plekhanov seemed to have more in common with the brand of Marxism that was beginning to emerge in the Second International, and which was later to develop the structural weaknesses that were to result in the practical disintegration of the International in 1914 and against which the more mature Lenin was to be in the forefront of opposing on the international plane.

Bolshevism – 'Leninism' – emerged as a break from this 'Russian Marxism' when it appeared as a distinct political trend with the *de facto* political split at the second congress of the RSDLP in 1903. In this respect, therefore, its foundational text is Lenin's own *What Is To Be Done?*,<sup>2</sup> even if its writing pre-dated the congress. Of course, the full ramifications of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split were not to become apparent until later – especially the case with regard to the outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of the Second International (considerations that lie outside the scope of this article). However,

the post-1903 evolution of Bolshevism, I would argue, was precisely predicated on the ramifications of the theory of the revolutionary party that Lenin elaborated in *What Is To Be Done?* in 1902 and fought for in the Congress of 1903 and beyond.

As is well known, the split was precipitated by the debate over the two different conceptions of party membership advanced by Martov and Lenin. Although the differences between the two formulations appear small,<sup>3</sup> behind them lay fundamentally different, if as yet incipient, conceptions of the nature of the coming revolution and the role to be played by the party within it. The content of Lenin's views as a codification of party practice were both fundamental and new, and represented the beginnings of a decisive break with not only the organisational but the political conceptions of Russian social-democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Central to Lenin's argument were his views on spontaneity and consciousness. Now, the ostensible target of *What Is To Be Done?* was the trend known as 'economism', which stressed the importance of the day-to-day, economic and trade union aspects of working class struggle, positing as a virtue the spontaneous development of working class consciousness. Against this conception, Lenin offered a number of critical arguments. Most importantly, he stressed that the working class, left to its own devices, was unable to develop social-democratic – meaning revolutionary socialist – consciousness, only what he termed 'trade union consciousness'. That is, simply by virtue of its conditions of life under capitalism, there was no automatic mechanism which prompted the working class to revolutionary conclusions. Thus: 'The working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness', or, more strongly: 'The spontaneous working-class movement is by itself able to create (and inevitably does create) only trade-unionism, and working-class trade-union politics is precisely working-class bourgeois politics.'<sup>5</sup> Socialist consciousness had to be introduced into the working class struggle from *without*. This is what was most fundamental and new about Lenin's theory. Lenin went on:

The basic error that all the Economists commit [...] [is] their conviction that it is possible to develop the class political consciousness of the workers *from within*, [...] from their economic struggle [...].

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which it alone is possible to obtain this knowl-

edge is the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between *all* classes.<sup>6</sup>

For Lenin, 'within' and 'without', 'inside' and 'outside' are defined as a function of the distinction between the partial, and the global. Sectional struggles, trade union struggles for example, 'organically' only lead to sectional, partial consciousness: what the working class needs, therefore, is a centralising, totalising instrument – a revolutionary party – to unify the experiences of its multifarious, partial struggles. For Lenin, the revolution will require at some point a confrontation with the centralised state; the working class, as a consequence, needs its own instrument of political centralisation. This was Lenin's fundamental innovation, a re-assertion of the political element of socialist strategy, founded on the conception of the revolutionary party as a pro-active, subjective political instrument. It was this conception which marked such a sharp break with the evolutionist, objectivist conceptions developed by Russian social-democracy in its own break from populism; although it was not at this stage explicitly formulated as such – the fundamental content of the break was only to become apparent over the course of the next decade and a half.

But why should the working class need such a centralising instrument? Why would the working class, without this weapon of organisation, only be capable of developing partial – 'trade union' – consciousness? The key is that capitalist social relations do not automatically reveal themselves as they really are: the laborious excavations undertaken by Marx in *Capital*, for example – a project to which he devoted the best part of his life – were precisely necessary because of the mystificatory nature of capitalist social relations. The nature of the exploitation and oppression suffered by a peasant is different from that experienced by a capitalist wage-earner: it is clear to the peasant how she is exploited, even if it may appear that such exploitation arises from the 'natural order' of things, but the nature of the exploitation of the oppressed in capitalist societies is not readily obvious at the level of surface appearances. In order to unmask the real nature of the workings of capitalist social relations a level of theoretical – scientific – understanding is necessary.

Intrinsic to capitalist social relations is that the ideas that 'organically' arise on the basis of the appearance of bourgeois society – and which are, in this sense 'partially' correct – are insufficient in themselves for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness, and are, moreover, not organically amenable to self-correction:

meaning that full socialist consciousness needs a theoretical – scientific – understanding of the global relations making up bourgeois society. Such a scientific understanding was for Lenin, predicated on organisation: the theoretical understanding that was necessary was impossible to achieve without a revolutionary party. Or to put it another way, what Lenin meant by 'revolutionary party' was the type of organisation that would bring this process about. It was, in turn, on this theoretical innovation – summarised in *What Is To Be Done?* – that the entire remaining course of his political evolution was predicated.

There is a fundamental point that needs to be registered here. There is a qualitative difference between the type of organisation that Lenin suggests – a type of organisation that has to be consciously fought for – and that which 'organically' develops within capitalist society, and, as a consequence, which normally obtains within the working class movement. For the consequence of the modus operandi of the classic social-democratic type organisations (of which, the Communist Parties form a sub-group) is not to engender the type of totalisation that Lenin envisages as essential for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness but precisely to reinforce and institutionalise the sectoral divisions that organically arise within bourgeois society, be they functional ('parliamentarism'), national, or vertical and horizontal sectoralism. Indeed, the very structure of social democratic organisations mitigates against totalisation: if the phenomenon of bureaucracy broadly understood can be said to have a functional characteristic then it is precisely this: that it arises from degrees of 'partial' consciousness and acts as a block to their supercession. Moreover, such forms of organisation, arising as they do on the basis of partial, sectoral, consciousness, themselves are the organic and natural forms of political organisation that bourgeois society prompts: without conscious political struggle for the revolutionary party as a totalising instrument the working class movement will spontaneously throw up bureaucratic and conservatising social-democratic type political organisations. If the contour of the struggle to build a revolutionary party can be summed up in one sentence, then it is the struggle to break free from and overcome the limitations of this partial and sectoral consciousness that the working class movement develops organically within bourgeois society and which finds its reflection in the type of political organisations that it spontaneously produces. It is against this necessity that particular attempts to build revolutionary parties can be judged in terms of (relative)

success or failure, against the degree to which they have been successful in overcoming the limitations of partial conceptions of the struggle for socialism.

Thus it is not the case that Lenin's prescriptions regarding political organisation were developed solely with reference to conditions in Tsarist Russia. What we find in Lenin is a method, a theory of organisation: a theory based on an understanding not of the specificities of Russian society but on how capitalism works in general. And this theory was founded on a profound and conscious radical break with the vulgar evolutionism that marked the existing conceptions of 'Russian Marxism'. Nevertheless, it is true that the specific features of Russian society at the beginning of the twentieth century impacted on how the party functioned, but it is not the case that as a consequence of this we can differentiate different types of Leninism: pre-1905, 1905-07, post-1917, etc. What we see is periods in which, for contingent reasons, it is more or less possible to apply the method of organisation to its fullest extent. It is thus necessary to differentiate between the particular, and the general, in Lenin's writings.

For Lenin, as we have seen, the guiding principle of the revolutionary party was to be Marxism; and for Lenin Marxism was a science: 'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.' And: 'The role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory.'<sup>7</sup> But where does this revolutionary theory, so to speak, come from? Following the conception of the party as a centralising instrument of sectional struggles, the theoretical understanding of the party is itself a product of this political centralisation. After the revolution, summarising the experiences of Bolshevism in a text directed at socialists in the new Communist Parties outside Russia, Lenin asserted that 'Correct revolutionary theory [...] assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement'.<sup>8</sup> That the development of theory was an ongoing and a practical question is intimated by Lenin's assertion in his own account of the proceedings of the second congress: 'A struggle of shades is inevitable and essential as long as it does not lead to anarchy and splits, as long as it is confined within bounds approved by common consent of all party members.'<sup>9</sup> That the party had to be centralised flowed from the understanding that it needed to develop a global understanding of political struggle; in order to achieve this it also had to allow for open, and public, discussion and disagreement – indeed, inevitably and essentially so.

It is essential to recognise the fundamental nature of Lenin's innovation. In Perry Anderson's judgement, with which I agree, Lenin's outlook, 'often seen as simply "practical" measures, in fact also represented decisive *intellectual* advances into hitherto uncharted terrain'. Lenin 'inaugurated a Marxist science of politics, henceforward capable of dealing with a vast range of problems, which had previously lain outside any rigorous theoretical jurisdiction'.<sup>10</sup>

There is, I would argue, in this respect a direct and linear connection between the Lenin of 1902-3 and the Marx of 1844, when the latter, in the first of his Theses on Feuerbach, suggests that 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism [...] is that [...] reality [...] is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.' Marx went on: 'Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice,' and ended with the famous exhortation: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.'<sup>11</sup>

This conception is impossible to overestimate in its fundamental importance for historical materialism. Marxism, so claimed its founders, is a science. What does this mean? Marx and Engels were always at great pains to differentiate their theoretical viewpoint from what they, in the nineteenth century, called 'ideology'. For the founders of Marxism, 'ideology' was those sets of ideas intended to explain reality but which were unable to do so. For Marx and Engels, what was specific to their theory was that it could paint a sufficiently accurate picture of the inner workings of human society that it could be used by humanity to change, *consciously*, the course of human history. It was this very *accuracy* of Marxism that made it scientific, and it was its scientific nature that consequently made it *revolutionary*, for the transition from what Marx called the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom – impossible without international, social, socialist revolution – demands a degree of accurate theoretical *knowledge and consciousness* historically speaking hitherto uncalled for.

But the obvious question is: where does this theory come from, and how do we know that it is true? Marx is precisely addressing this matter in 1844: he argues that a 'correct' theoretical understanding comes not from abstract contemplation of society from without but from the active engagement with it from within; and that its correctness is to be measured in terms of

its efficacy in changing the world, in the way that theory serves as an effective weapon to this end. When Marxists speak of the unity of theory and practice it is this that they should be referring to, yet it is a conception generally poorly understood.

Marx devoted the greater part of his efforts following his theoretical breakthroughs of the 1840s to a sustained analysis of existing social phenomena: trapped as he and Engels were within the given conditions of the time, they did not develop sustained reflection on the central ideas of the Theses on Feuerbach; they did not elaborate substantially on the relation between theory and practice; they did not, in short, develop a theory of *politics*. For classical Marxism, that was to come later. And it came in the form of the revolutionary current within the socialist movement of the Russian Empire, of Bolshevism. Lenin's profile within the received wisdom of Marxism – itself echoing bourgeois commentary – is very much that of the 'practical politician' rather than the theoretical innovator. Yet to deny the fundamental role of Lenin's work in the development of Marxist *theory* is to seriously debase it. If the Marxism of Marx and Engels lacks a theory of politics (understand in the terms that they would themselves understand it, within the parameters of the final Theses on Feuerbach), this was to be supplied by Bolshevism, and by Lenin. And the key text in which this theory was first established remains *What Is To Be Done?*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Letter to *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*', *MECW*, vol. 24, p.200. See also Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich: 'Marx to Vera Zasulich', *MECW*, vol. 46, p.71. Earlier drafts of this letter are to be found in Karl Marx, 'Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich', *MECW*, vol. 24, pp.346-371.

<sup>2</sup> 'What Is To Be Done?', *LCW*, vol. 5, pp.347-529.

<sup>3</sup> For the original texts, see in E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.41.

<sup>4</sup> And, as Carr insists, the relationship between Lenin's formulation and his theories on party organisation was both understood and acknowledged at the congress (Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, p.41).

<sup>5</sup> 'What Is To Be Done?', p.375, p.437.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.421-22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.369, 370.

<sup>8</sup> "'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder', *LCW*, vol. 31, p.25.

<sup>9</sup> 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', *LCW*, vol. 7, p.347.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976), pp.11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp.421-23.



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