

# 1917

"To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour of action arrives—these are the rules of the Fourth International"

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LIBERATION

*French Workers Take the Lead*

## Revolt Against Globalization

The front cover of the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, a leading journal of the American foreign policy establishment, frets that: "The world may be moving inexorably toward one of those tragic moments that will lead historians to ask, why was nothing done in time?" The "tragic moment" will come when the millions of victims of the "failure of today's advanced global capi-

talism to keep spreading the wealth" take their revenge.

Anticipations of revolt against the existing order are not regular features of this staid house organ of the world's most powerful ruling class. Only a few years ago, America's rulers were congratulating themselves on their victory in the Cold War, and toying with the notion that perhaps history had ended and they had

landed on top. Two recent political developments reminded them of how unstable their global "New World Order" actually is.

The first of these was Pat Buchanan's unanticipated success in the early Republican presidential primaries. Buchanan, representing the far-right fringe of bourgeois political opinion, staged a remarkable challenge to the respectable big-money candidates by tapping the anger and resentment of the "little people" victimized by corporate America's ruthless pursuit of profit. Posing as the defender of blue-collar America against the big bankers and downsizers, Buchanan campaigned on a platform of overt racism, chauvinism and protectionism. Buchanan's challenge was eventually buried under a barrage of negative publicity. But, for a brief moment, it illuminated some of the enormous pressures building up beneath the surface of the American social order.

The other, far more important, and, for the capitalists, far more worrisome development, was the explosion of class struggle in France late last year. This was lightly covered by the international capitalist media. The ruling classes of Europe and the world desperately want to believe that the strikes that shook France in November and December of 1995 were merely a death spasm of the old world order. But in their heart of hearts they know—as do militant workers around the globe—that France's winter of discontent was but a prologue.

## Ras-le-bol

The Chirac-Juppé regime, whose austerity measures provoked the strikes, could not have been a more fitting symbol of the arrogance and cynicism of post-Cold War bourgeois politics. In May 1995, the Gaullist mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, stood for president before the French electorate with promises to end the growing "social fracture," and to address problems such as unemployment and homelessness. But once installed in the Elyseé Palace, and backed by a solid parliamentary majority, Chirac set his prime minister, Alain Juppé, about the work of implementing his real agenda: balancing the state budget on the backs of workers, retirees and the unemployed.

The "Juppé plan" for reducing the \$45 billion deficit in the government's social welfare fund was announced in mid-November. It included requiring public employees to work 40 years (rather than 37.5) before collecting their full pensions, and abolishing the century-old right of railway workers—whose life expectancy is ten years lower than the average—to retire at age 50. A series of new taxes on health benefits, retirement and family allocations was projected. Of the revenues the new taxes would bring in, only 11 percent would come from businesses; the balance would come out of the pockets of wage earners. In addition, unions would be deprived of their right, enshrined in the constitution since the end of World War II, to manage health and retirement funds (the *Sécu*) along with employers; *Sécu* directors would now be nominated by the prime minister and approved by parliament. Moreover, the Juppé "reforms" were the

companion piece to a "draft plan" to privatize railways, telecommunications and energy, shut down unprofitable railway lines, and promote private clinics at the expense of public hospitals. Thus did Chirac-Juppé, following in the footsteps of Reagan and Thatcher, propose to heal the "social fracture."

Almost as infuriating to the majority of the French population as these measures was the man who introduced them. A graduate of the country's elite school of public administration, L'Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Alain Juppé personifies European capitalism's arrogant technocratic style. For Juppé and his co-thinkers, his reforms were the only conceivable way of reducing the deficit, thereby satisfying the criteria for entry into Europe's currency union in 1999. Anyone who called into question this goal was, by his lights, stupid or insane. He branded public-service workers as "privileged," while using his own high office to procure a well-appointed apartment for a relative at greatly reduced rent. Juppé is by nature secretive and impatient of discussion. His reforms were introduced in the National Assembly by decree, without prior consultation or opportunity for debate. The patronizing tone of France's ruling political caste was summed up by one striking railway worker:

"In 1968 we confronted the reactionaries head on; it was simple. We knew where we stood. Today we face people who say they are 'open,' in favor of dialogue. If we say we don't agree with them, they answer that 'you have not understood,' as if there were no ideology involved, as if the problems were technical, and they explain again. The cleavage is between those who understand and those who don't. In fact, there is only one ideology: theirs."

—*Le Monde*, 9 December 1995

France's rulers were soon jolted out of their smugness. On 24 November, railway workers went on strike to protest the Juppé plan, bringing train traffic to a halt throughout the country. Striking workers on the

*continued on page 14*

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## 1917

Editorial Board: J. Cullen, M. Hayes, B. Logan, T. Riley

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# What 'Land & Freedom' Leaves Out Spain: War & Revolution

*Land and Freedom*, a film by British director Ken Loach about the Spanish Civil War, is remarkable both for its vantage point and its subject matter. Winner of two prizes at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival, the movie brings to life one of the major class struggles of this century. After 60 years, the Spanish Civil War retains its romantic luster as a heroic struggle which pitted ordinary workers and peasants, aided by idealistic leftist youth from abroad, against the armies of General Francisco Franco, the Spanish ruling class and fascist military legions dispatched by Hitler and Mussolini. It is a conflict in which it is easy to choose sides.

During the Civil War Stalinists joined social democrats, pacifists and liberals in portraying it as a struggle to preserve Spanish "democracy." But there was much more at stake than this—the fundamental issue was whether society would be organized in accordance with the needs of Spain's capitalists and landowners or its workers and peasants.

There are many parallels between events in Spain in the mid-1930s and those in Russia after the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917. The immediate origins of the Spanish conflict can be traced to the fall of the monarchy in 1931 and the proclamation of a republic headed by a coalition of bourgeois liberals and social democrats. The leader of the liberals was Manuel Azaña who Trotsky dubbed "the Spanish Kerensky," after the leader of Russia's short-lived Provisional Government. Like Kerensky, Azaña did not enjoy the confidence of the big capitalists and propertied interests, but instead depended on the support of workers' parties (first the Socialists, and later also the Communists) to maintain power. Like Kerensky, Azaña's social base expected him to deliver far more radical changes than he was prepared to countenance.

The result was an escalating series of clashes between the workers and the state throughout the 1930s. In 1933, a short-lived anarchist rising in Cádiz was crushed. As the struggle deepened, death squads assassinated prominent workers' leaders. Elements of the far right launched a fascist party, the Falange Española. When Azaña's government was displaced in 1934 by a rightist coalition headed by Alejandro Lerroux, the normally legalistic Socialist Party, spurred on by its left wing, began to talk of purchasing arms for distribution to its members.

In October 1934, in the midst of a general strike against the government, the miners in Asturias declared a socialist commune. The government dispatched Franco at the head of his Moroccan Army of Africa to crush the uprising. Franco's troops massacred 5,000 workers and jailed another 30,000. But this did not extinguish the resistance.

In January 1936, Lerroux was forced to resign amid a

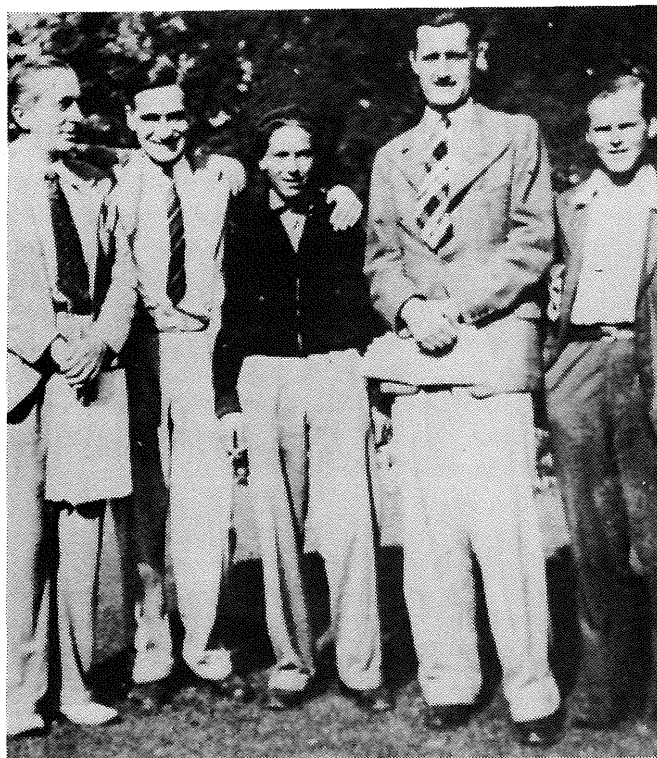


ROBERT CAPA/MAGNUM

## Republican troops, Valencia, Summer 1938

financial scandal, and new elections were called. For the first time, the anarchist leaders of the 1.5-million member Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT—the largest union in Spain) and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI—the illegal anarchist political organization) abandoned their principle of electoral abstention and endorsed the candidates of the Popular Front, a coalition of liberal bourgeois parties with the Socialists and Communists. The tide was so strong that the left-wing Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM—an alliance of former Trotskyists headed by Andrés Nin and the Workers and Peasants' Bloc led by Joaquín Maurín) which had previously denounced such class collaboration, called for a vote for Azaña, and signed the Popular Front's election manifesto. In a January 1936 article entitled "The Treachery of the POUM," Trotsky denounced its support to the class-collaborationist alliance as a "betrayal of the proletariat."

For the first few months after his election, Azaña did everything possible to assure the Spanish ruling class that the Popular Front would pose no threat to its essential interests. He opposed the arming of the workers, ignored widespread reports that rightists in the military were preparing to revolt, and rebuffed suggestions that he purge the officer corps. This passivity emboldened the reactionaries. On 17 July 1936 the military launched an uprising in Morocco that quickly spread to garrisons across Spain. It was immediately supported by the Catholic Church and virtually the entire bourgeoisie. The Popular Front government responded by trying to



ORWELL ARCHIVE

Stafford Cottman (center) with Orwell on his left, 1937

conciliate the rebels. Azaña rejected proposals to arm the population:

"But the workers had drawn their own conclusions, and, without taking the slightest notice of the Popular Front sermons about governmental and parliamentary authority, helped themselves. They spontaneously hurled themselves upon the rebel armies, and by fraternising with the soldiers, disarmed them and emptied the Fascist armouries and arms depots in Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia. In a word, they answered the Fascist insurrection organised by the 'Republican' army with a proletarian counter-insurrection."

—Jean Rous, "Spain 1936-39: The Murdered Revolution," *Revolutionary History* Vol. 4, Nos. 1/2

Throughout loyalist Spain, workers seized the factories and landed estates that the bourgeoisie abandoned as they fled to join the Francoists. Soon the working class began to organize production without the bosses. Hastily organized militias of the workers' parties were dispatched to do battle at the front, while in the rear workers' patrols replaced the former police.

In *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell's classic 1937 account of his experiences in the POUM militia on the Aragon front, he described the possibilities for humanity that he glimpsed in this revolutionary upsurge:

"I had dropped more or less by chance into the only community of any size in Western Europe where political consciousness and disbelief in capitalism were more normal than their opposites....In theory it was perfect equality, and even in practice it was not far from it. There is a sense in which it would be true to say that one was experiencing a foretaste of Socialism, by which I mean that the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of Socialism. Many of the normal motives of civilized life—snobishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc.—had simply ceased to exist. The ordinary class-division of

society had disappeared to an extent that is almost unthinkable in the money-tainted air of England....One had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where the word 'comrade' stood for comradeship and not, as in most countries, for humbug. One had breathed the air of equality....The thing that attracts ordinary men to Socialism and makes them willing to risk their skins for it, the 'mystique' of Socialism, is the idea of equality; to the vast majority of people Socialism means a classless society or it means nothing at all."

One of the great merits of Loach's film is that it captures this spirit. The story is told through the eyes of David, a young unemployed Communist Party member from Liverpool, who travels to Spain to join the International Brigades, and ends up by chance joining a POUM militia unit. David's experiences gradually transform his political views from uncritical acceptance of the Communist Party line to an understanding that, by keeping the struggle to limits acceptable to the capitalists, the Stalinists were betraying the revolution and paving the way for Franco's victory. David is apparently modeled on Stafford Cottman, the youngest member of Orwell's militia unit, "who had moved into the Young Communist League from the Labour Party's Guild of Youth, but who had none the less joined the P.O.U.M. (the lines were not so tightly drawn at first)" (*George Orwell A Life*, Bernard Crick). Crick reports that when Cottman eventually got back from Spain "his home was picketed on his return by local Communists denouncing him as a fascist."

The issues posed in Spain's civil war continue to reverberate today. According to *Freedom* (10 June 1995), a British anarchist publication, Santiago Carrillo, former leader of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), denounced *Land and Freedom* in Madrid's *El Pais* the day before the movie opened. He complained that it reduced "one of the greatest epics of the fight for freedom this century" to the small change of a conflict between the POUM and the PCE. Loach replied by pointing out that, at the time, Carrillo had been among those who slandered the POUM as being in league with Franco. Carrillo's comments were echoed by Paul Preston, a British historian, in the cover story of the 16 February *New Statesman*. According to Preston, "Loach's *Land and Liberty* [sic] has to be seen as marginal, if not perverse" because it is more "an anti-Stalinist tract than a celebration of those Spanish and foreign men and women who gave their lives fighting Franco and his Axis allies."

To Loach's credit, he explains the international context of Moscow's popular-front policy. A high point of the film is a discussion, which includes the militia unit and the peasants of a village they have liberated, about whether or not to collectivize the land. An American Stalinist intervenes, arguing that collectivization may scare off Republican Spain's potential democratic capitalist allies. And it was indeed in pursuit of a defense pact with Britain and France that Stalin insisted on sacrificing the Spanish Revolution on the altar of the Popular Front. The main political defect of Loach's presentation, however, is the absence of criticism of the policies of the POUM. From this film one could easily get the

impression that the POUM, as opposed to the Stalinists, pursued a consistently revolutionary course. This was not so.

In an article written two weeks after the Civil War erupted, Leon Trotsky, leader of the victorious Red Army in the Russian Civil War, observed:

"A civil war is waged, as everybody knows, not only with military but also with political weapons. From a purely military point of view, the Spanish revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to rouse the great masses to action. It can even take the army away from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this, it is only necessary to seriously and courageously advance the program of socialist revolution.

"It is necessary to proclaim that, from now on, the land, factories, and shops will pass from the hands of the capitalists into the hands of the people. It is necessary to move at once toward the realization of this program in those provinces where the workers are in power. The fascist army could not resist the influence of such a program for twenty-four hours; the soldiers would tie their officers hand and foot and turn them over to the nearest headquarters of the workers' militia. But the bourgeois ministers cannot accept such a program. Curbing the social revolution, they compel the workers and peasants to spill ten times as much of their own blood in the civil war. And to crown everything, these gentlemen expect to disarm the workers again after the victory and to force them to respect the sacred laws of private property. Such is the true essence of the policy of the Popular Front."

—"The Lesson of Spain," 30 July 1936

The capitulation of the POUM and the Anarchist CNT/FAI to the Popular Front—i.e., to the conception that the interests of the workers and peasants had to be subordinated to those of the "progressive" capitalists—laid the basis for the defeat of the revolution and, ultimately, of the Republican side. As long as the workers' parties accepted the necessity to maintain the bloc with the "progressive" capitalists, it followed that the strug-



JESUS LOZANO

Leftist women agitators in Barcelona



"Socialism is Liberation"

gle had to respect private property and safeguard Spain's colonial holdings. This is why the Republican camp refused to proclaim the independence of Morocco, despite the fact that this would have had a powerful destabilizing effect on the Moroccan troops, which constituted an important element of Franco's army. The government also refused to legalize the expropriation of the landed estates, and strove to reassure the capitalists by "regularizing" the state apparatus, disarming the workers and liquidating the organs of popular power that had arisen in July 1936.

The POUM deplored these moves, but refused to break with the Popular Front over them. The best that Nin could offer was some "revolutionary" doubletalk. Despite its left criticisms of the treachery of the Stalinists and the Popular Front, the POUM capitulated politically at every important juncture. It supported the Popular Front electorally and, in September 1936, entered the bourgeois government of Catalonia. One of the first tasks of the new government was to dissolve the organs of proletarian dual power that had sprung up alongside the official government bodies. The Central Committee of the Workers' Militias was dissolved, and its functions assumed by the Defense Ministry, while the local anti-fascist councils (dominated by the workers' organizations) were replaced by municipal administrations appointed by the government.

Furthermore, while the POUM held its ministerial



AGUSTI CENTELLES

### Barcelona militiamen, July 1936

portfolio, the working class was disarmed. A law was passed requiring all weapons to be delivered to the defense ministry within eight days: "At the end of the cited period those who retain such armament will be considered as fascists and judged with the rigour which their conduct deserves" (quoted in Felix Morrow's *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*). The decree was published in the 28 October 1936 issue of *La Batalla*, the POUM's newspaper. Having lent its prestige to the disarmament of the workers and the eradication of their committees, on 12 December 1936 the POUM was unceremoniously booted out of the government. The CNT, which was both considerably larger and more pliable than the POUM, lasted until July 1937, when it too was discarded.

As the war progressed, the Stalinist grip on the Republican state apparatus tightened. Within the Popular Front government, the Communists defended the interests of the capitalists with single-minded determination. In a March 1937 address to a PCE Central Committee plenum, José Diaz, the party's General Secretary spelled this out unambiguously:

"we should not lose our heads and skip over reality, trying to carry out experiments of 'Libertarian Communism' (Anarchist) or 'socialization' in the factories or in the countryside. The stage of the development of the demo-

cratic revolution through which we are passing requires the participation in the struggle of all anti-fascist forces, and these experiments can only result in driving away a very important section of those forces.

"If in the beginning the various premature attempts at 'socialization' and 'collectivization,' which were the result of an unclear understanding of the character of the present struggle, might have been justified by the fact that the big landlords and manufacturers had deserted their estates and factories and that it was necessary at all costs to continue production, now on the contrary they cannot be justified at all. At the present time, when there is a government of the Frente Popular, in which all the forces engaged in the fight against fascism are represented, such things are not only not desirable, but absolutely impermissible."

—*The Communist International*, May 1937

In his speech Diaz ominously anticipated the forthcoming Stalinist repression. First, in a clear attempt to isolate the POUM, he dismissed reports that the CNT/FAI would be targeted:

"Our enemies set rumours afoot that bloody clashes are inevitable between the Anarchists and the Communists, and that the question of who will crush the other will inevitably arise. It must be declared that those who spread such rumours are our enemies and enemies of the Anarchist comrades."

He declared that it was necessary to launch a "ruthless struggle against Trotskyism," and made it clear that the elimination of the POUM was a high priority:

"Our chief enemy is fascism, against which we concentrate all our fire and all the hatred of the people. But our hatred is directed with equal force against the agents of fascism, against those who, like the P.O.U.M., these Trotskyites in disguise, conceal themselves behind pseudo-revolutionary phraseology so as the better to fulfil their role as agents of our enemies in our own country. To destroy the 'Fifth Column' we must destroy all those who defend the political slogans of the enemy. But the slogans of our enemy are *against* the democratic republic, *against* the anti-fascist People's Front, *against* the Frente Popular government...."

The showdown came two months later, in May 1937, when the Stalinists launched an assault on the CNT-controlled Barcelona telephone exchange. Thousands of

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armed workers, spearheaded by CNT and POUM militants, responded to this provocation by flooding into the streets and building barricades. The workers soon gained the upper hand in the initial fighting. Hundreds of government police were captured and disarmed, and most of the city was soon controlled by the workers. *Land and Freedom* portrays this battle. What is left out, however, is the fact that the leadership of both the POUM and CNT were caught by surprise—both by the Stalinist attack and the workers' resistance. And then, instead of using their initial advantage to oust the government and restore direct workers' rule, they temporized with Azaña. Only the small Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Group and the left-wing anarchist Friends of Durruti called for a break with the Popular Front and the establishment of workers' power. The Trotskyists issued a statement calling for disarming the Republican police and arming the workers. They warned that: "This is the decisive moment. Next time it will be too late....Only proletarian power can assure military victory." The left anarchists issued similar calls. But the POUM and anarchist leaders instead agreed to lay down their arms and send the workers home in exchange for a promise that there would be no reprisals. Within weeks the POUM was outlawed, its militias demobilized, its cadres arrested and its leaders murdered (see accompanying box).

Far from strengthening the Republican side, the Stalinists' success in crushing the left only hastened Franco's victory. The critical question upon which the final outcome of the Civil War hinged was that of *class* interest. The Spanish ruling class understood this from the beginning. They supported Franco because they knew that if he won the unions would be smashed, the left annihilated and a military dictatorship installed to guarantee capitalist rule. But there was no equivalent appeal to class interest on the Republican side. The Stalinists exhorted the workers and rural proletarians to risk their lives so that, after the victory, they could resume life under the "democratic" rule of the same capitalists.

Fenner Brockway, leader of Britain's parliamentarist Independent Labour Party (ILP), was certainly no revolutionary. Yet, after visiting Spain in June and July 1937, he concluded:

"It is evident that the retreat from a revolutionary position by the Governments is encouraging disillusionment and even indifference to the war. Spanish experience shows that an effective war against Fascism must also be a war for the Social Revolution. This is the dynamic of enthusiasm, and as the counter-revolution in Spain has proceeded the passion for the fight against Franco has decreased."

—"Personal Report of Visit to Spain," mimeographed circular [1937]

*Land & Freedom* vividly portrays how close Spain in the mid-1930s came to working-class revolution, and captures the confusion of militants caught up in the situation, as they slowly come to realize that they are being betrayed. The disarming of David's POUM militia unit at the climax is the film's most harrowing scene.



EFE, MADRID

**Spanish bourgeoisie supported Franco**

Yet the absence of any explanation for the POUM and CNT/FAI's capitulation may lead viewers to draw unnecessarily pessimistic conclusions. For, aside from the decisive question of political leadership, the situation in Spain in 1936 was much more favorable than in Russia in 1917, where the workers triumphed. The Spanish proletariat of 1936 had much greater social weight, and was more politically advanced, than the Russian workers had been in 1917. Moreover, unlike the predominantly petty-bourgeois Russian peasantry, the rural population in Spain was composed mainly of landless proletarians and semi-proletarians who identified closely with their urban counterparts. The Spanish masses fought magnificently but, without a coherent revolutionary leadership, were unable to overcome the coalition of POUMists, Stalinists, Anarchists, and social democrats supporting the Popular Front. In Trotsky's words: "There can be no greater crime than coalition with the bourgeoisie in a period of socialist revolution." Those who accept the framework of popular frontism must necessarily regard socialist revolution as a delusion.

The difference between victory in Russia and defeat in Spain lay entirely in the quality of the political leadership of the left wing of the workers' movement. The Bolsheviks defended Kerensky, the leader of the cross-class Provisional Government, against the reactionary coup of General Kornilov, just as in Spain Trotsky called for the defense of Azaña against Franco. But, while Lenin adamantly refused to support Kerensky politically, and

aggressively championed the independent interests of the working class against the popular front, the POUM and the rest of the Spanish left bowed before the coalition government in order to avoid isolation.

The contortions resulting from the POUM's attempts to reconcile its formally Marxist analysis with its opportunist behavior would be hard for anyone to capture in a feature film. Loach at least deserves credit for telling the truth as he knows it. One of the political merits of the film is that it indicates that the key to the outcome of the

Spanish Civil War lay in the struggles *within* the Republican camp.

Loach does not like the Popular Front, but he does not explain it sufficiently. In that sense, the full story of the defeat of the Spanish Revolution is still waiting to be told to a mass audience. Yet in a period of widespread despair and cynicism about politics, *Land and Freedom* is valuable in at least suggesting to a new generation that it is worth considering some of the unrealized historical possibilities of this betrayed revolution. ■

## 'Small, Determined and Well-Organized'

Charles A. Orr, an American who edited the POUM's English language publication, *Spanish Revolution*, wrote an account of his experiences during the suppression of the POUM, entitled "Some facts on the Persecution of foreign revolutionaries in 'Republican' Spain." To our knowledge this document was never published. The following excerpt makes an interesting comparison between the POUM and the much smaller Bolshevik-Leninist group (the Spanish Trotskyists) in the face of repression:

"Since my comrade and I were released from prison in Barcelona on June 26, we have been asked time and again 'How was it possible for a revolutionary party such as the P.O.U.M. to be so thoroughly and quickly suppressed?' There are two answers to this. In the first place, the P.O.U.M. was woefully unprepared for underground activity. It failed to come up to the standards of a revolutionary party in this respect, as in others that could be mentioned, such as its failure to seize [sic] the revolutionary opportunities offered by the May Days in Catalonia. For months, but especially since the May Days, suggestions had come from the rank and file urging preparation for illegal activity. We could plainly see the repression coming, but Nin and the Executive Committee remained, as ever, optimistic. Finally some half-hearted attempt was made to reorganize the cells on the groups-of-five basis, but no practice meetings of the new groups were ever called, the larger cells would meet until after the party congress. In such over-centralized organizations as Spanish political parties there could be little stimulus for individuals or small groups within the party to carefully prepare for underground activity when the main machinery and personalities were obviously exposed and unconcerned.

"This explains in part why and how the large P.O.U.M. organization, with its thousands of revolutionary followers and its hundreds of cells and its dozens of newspapers in Catalonia, could suddenly lose [sic] half of its Central Committee and two-thirds of its Executive Committee within a few hours, and then flounder helplessly and ineffectively, like a chicken with its head cut off. It is significant that the tiny Bolshevik-Leninist group, which had been comparatively insignificant up until the time of the sup-



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### Andrés Nin

pression, was henceforth able to turn out more printed material and get it distributed, than all the presses and members of the P.O.U.M. It shows what a small, determined and well-organized group can do in a tight situation. Until three weeks after the suppression, this little group lost not a single member by arrest, because they were prepared for such conditions—by continually changing rooms and names, by living in two apartments at the same time, one to work and one to sleep, etc. I ran into the leader of the group one day after our release and he proudly explained this to me.

"The other reason for the complete collapse of the P.O.U.M. within twenty-four hours on the 16th and 17th of June lies on the side of the police. No one foresaw, though a revolutionary [M]arxist might have been expected to foresee it, the wonderfully organized police action. It can be said that never in Spain, where everything is always poorly organized, was such a round-up so well organized. And in fact this one was not organized by Spaniards, but was planned and carried through under the direction of Russian experts. (These we saw and spoke with in prison.)"



# Healyites of the Second Mobilization Workers Vanguard De-Collectivized

Reprinted below is the 1 July statement of the International Bolshevik Tendency on recent developments in the Spartacist League/U.S.:

The Spartacist League is currently retailing an "internal" bulletin on the recent purge of several members of their top leadership. SL founder/leader James Robertson opines that had they:

"gone on just a little bit more, I think we'd have found a roaring fire gutting our version of the theoretical edifice that Marx and Lenin and Trotsky built."

The hero of the piece is Al Nelson, who, Robertson "jocularly" suggests, deserves to be honored by a "motion that all party comrades shall hang in their homes a picture of Al, not less than one foot square." Al is credited with discovering that Jan Norden, editor of *Workers Vanguard* (WV) for the past 23 years, was a "revisionist," a "cliquist," an "impressionist" and an assortment of other bad things. Possessed of phenomenal energy, Norden was the SL's best linguist, their most prolific writer, and quite possibly their best administrator. We predict that this purge will soon be apparent in the journalistic quality, and perhaps also the frequency, of the SL's press.

The political issues ostensibly posed in Norden's removal chiefly concern events in the International Communist League's (ICL) German section, the Spartakist-Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SpAD). The dispute involves various documents not included in the SL's recent bulletin. One of the key issues appears to be differences on the evaluation of the ICL's failed intervention in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in 1989-90 (for our assessment see "Robertsonites in Wonderland," 1917 No. 10). For much of this period Norden was one of the senior ICL cadres on the spot, and was responsible for the production of the group's daily German newsheet. Nelson's attack on Norden hinges on the claim that in his January 1995 public speech on the collapse of the DDR at Humboldt University in Berlin, Norden capitulated politically to the Communist Platform (the left wing of the social-democratic Party of Democratic Socialism—successor to the former ruling party in the DDR).

Apart from the laudatory treatment of the ICL's activities, Norden's remarks at Humboldt seem unobjectionable enough. Nelson focuses on Norden's observation that given the tiny size of the ICL's German group, and its lack of connections to the working class, it could not have posed itself as an immediate contender for power. Nelson quotes Norden as saying:

"Look at the reality: we came in from the outside to the DDR, and at times at the height of our intervention at the end of 1989 and beginning of 1990 we only had eight comrades in Berlin who spoke German."

The fact is that the SpAD was never able to mobilize


even 100 people in its own name. Nelson displayed his political acumen during his sojourn in Berlin with the prediction that the SpAD would get hundreds of thousands of votes in the 1990 election. In fact it only got a couple of thousand. His insistence that only a "revisionist" would deny that the SpAD stood ready "to take the power, just as Lenin said in 1917," demonstrates that even hindsight is not 20/20 for everyone.

Once he knew where to look, Len Meyers, the facile cynic who has succeeded Norden as WV editor, soon came up with more shocking evidence of revisionism. Toward the end of his speech Norden attempted to explain how the policy of seeking to make deals with imperialism at the expense of workers' revolution (i.e., "peaceful coexistence") did not originate with Khrushchev, as some hard Stalinists in the Communist Platform imagine, but can rather be traced directly to Stalin himself. To illustrate this, Norden used an example that his audience would be familiar with:

"Stalin's policy of 'peaceful coexistence' also led to enormous concessions to imperialism. That was why the Soviet Union sent only limited amounts of munitions during the Spanish Civil War, because it didn't want to directly go against the blockade decreed by the imperialist 'democracies.'"

Meyers deliberately wrests Norden's example out of its context and treats it as if it had been put forward as an alternative analysis of the Kremlin's betrayal of the Spanish Revolution. He claims to have been "struck" by the "left-Stalinist or left-democratic critique of the Soviet bureaucracy on the Spanish Revolution" contained in the above passage and claims that:

U.S. \$5



**TROTSKYIST BULLETIN No. 5**

**ICL vs. IBT**

The complete text of the ICL's pamphlet, "The Communist Platform: A Critique of the Communist Platform," is available in a special 10¢ price.

1995, Box 332, Adelaide St. Station, Toronto, Canada M5C 1J0

**Polemics with the Spartacist League**

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"this statement, which it is hard to imagine coming from anyone even remotely sympathetic to the Trotskyist analysis of the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution, well politically epitomizes the conciliationism which permeates the Humboldt presentation."

It seems to us that Meyers' critique "well politically epitomizes" the logic-chopping that passes for political criticism among the Robertsonians these days.

### Norden's Group

What the SL bulletin refers to as "Norden's 'Group'" includes his companion, Marjorie Salzburg, a highly experienced and capable alternate member of the SL Central Committee. As well as being a prominent public spokesperson for the SL, Salzburg also functioned as WV's "de facto managing editor." She had also been the initiator of the ICL's South African work. The "Norden Group" also includes Negrete who, until he was recently purged, had been the leading figure in the Grupo Esparquista de México (GEM), the ICL's Mexican branch. As such he had worked closely with Norden, who ran the ICL's Latin American work. The fourth member of the "group" is Socorro, an 18-year ICL cadre, who had also been a leader in the GEM.

But it seems that this may not exhaust the list of supporters of the "Norden Group." The final pretext for kicking out Norden and Salzburg was their refusal to turn over their personal phone bills so the leadership could go after anyone unwise enough to have accepted a call from them recently. Norden/Salzburg characterized this as a "fishing expedition," and while insisting they had not engaged in any "public political activity" behind the back of the SL, refused to implicate comrades

whose only crime was having spoken to them on the phone. In his 7 June postscript, Robertson comments: "We are indeed left wondering *who* in fact he [Norden] has been in phone/fax contact with since the first of the year." Robertson may one day be able to make a pretty good guess.

Liz Gordon, apparently still a nominal member of the SL leadership, was a collateral target of the assault on Norden. Gordon and Norden, with Joseph Seymour, were the key Political Bureau members involved in the production of *Workers Vanguard* over the years. They were central to the "WV collective," which was denounced in the Autumn 1994 issue of *Spartacist* as "furiously defensive, turf-conscious, hypersensitive, arrogant, cliquist [and] anti-Leninist." In the recently released ICL document, Gordon, the former Secretary of the ICL's International Secretariat, is denounced for running "the would-be splitters as a cliquist operation out of New York behind the back of the party." Nelson quotes Robertson to the effect that, "Norden, Marjorie and Gordon stand revealed as the architects of an impressionistic opportunism, as shameful as it is dimwitted." Gordon, a highly political but introverted and emotionally fragile woman who has been periodically trashed by Robertson over the years, does not seem to have much of a future as a leader of the SL/ICL.

### Robertson's Midnight Ramblers

In their resignation statement, Norden and Salzburg denounce the charges against them as an "entire fantasy of groundless assumptions, wild conjectures and filthy smears," and protest that they were "framed up" for expulsion "on the basis of speculation based on suppo-

## *Pabloist Appetite & the DDR 1989-90*



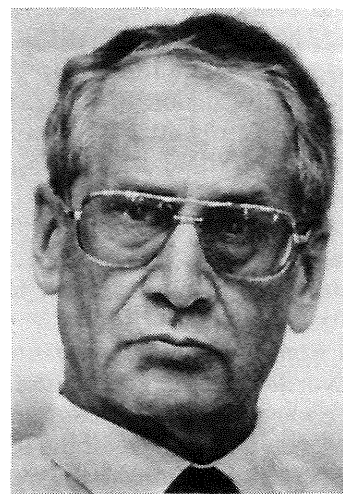
Gregor Gysi

DER SPIEGEL



General B.V. Snetkov

DER SPIEGEL



Markus Wolf

METIN YILMAZZENIT

*Workers Vanguard* (5 July) denounced leaders of the SED (Stalinist ruling party in the DDR) for taking "conscious, active steps to prevent a workers insurrection" and attacked Jan Norden for displaying a Pabloist appetite toward elements among them. But in 1989-90 the SL/ICL sought "Unity With the SED" and James Robertson tried to arrange personal meetings with Gregor Gysi (party leader), Soviet General B.V. Snetkov and DDR master-spy Markus Wolf. The meetings never occurred because the Stalinists were not interested in Robertson's advice.

sitions based on lies." This seems fair enough, judging from the materials published in the SL bulletin. Salzburg and Norden have not entirely lost their sense of humor:

"In recent months, we have been called Stalinophilic, Castroite, Shachtmanite, Pabloite of the second mobilization, accused of running a Healyite regime, with a touch of Loganism, like the BT, like Hansen, and partly like Goldman-Morrow and Cochran-Clarke. Oh yes, and also believers in Saddam Hussein's war propaganda. To be all that at once is quite a feat."

This kind of overkill will be familiar to anyone who has had the pleasure of witnessing one of the ICL's purge campaigns up close. The Norden/Salzburg claim that the leadership's charges "abound in utterly false statements" sounds about par for the course, as does their account of how they were notified of their suspension: a "hefty repo squad" arrived at their apartment around midnight, notified them that they had been removed from the leadership and demanded that they turn over their keys, computer and fax machine. The following example of double-think has also featured in other purges:

"all opposition to the line of the I.S. [ICL International Secretariat] was labelled 'anti-internationalist' and fundamentally deviant on the party question. We replied that the Germany dispute was a false fight to find a Stalinophilic deviation, that the alleged facts, analysis and conclusions bore no resemblance to reality. *Defenders of the I.S. and IEC line declared that if we thought that, then we must believe that they are bureaucratic witchhunters.*"

—emphasis added

In the ICL a "hostile" attitude to the leadership is incompatible with membership. Those who dispute accusations by the leadership must believe that the leadership levels false charges. But such a belief constitutes "hostility." And so the circle is closed.

### Mexican Leadership Purged

The SL has not been able to assimilate many of the handful of cadres they have regrouped internationally over the past 15 years. This is attributable to the disparity between the ICL's orthodox Trotskyist facade and the unpleasant reality of life on the inside. One of the main charges made in the purge of Negrete and Socorro was "anti-internationalism." Roughly translated, this means daring to disagree with instructions from the U.S. leadership. After the purge of Negrete, who, perhaps for cosmetic reasons, was apparently not suspended but rather placed on (involuntary) leave, Socorro was brought back to New York to stand trial on a variety of charges, including "breaking discipline" by getting separated from other GEM members in the midst of the several hundred thousand participants in Mexico City's May Day demonstration. This is the kind of infraction that only a perceived factional opponent would ever have to stand trial for in the first place. The result of the trial was of course a forgone conclusion: she was found guilty.

Two days later she criticized the ICL's trial procedure at an internal SL meeting:

"I was, a number of years ago, abducted and raped and

the fucking bourgeois court gave the rapist more justice than I got. And that is the truth. That is the truth. And it is a travesty and it's a shame on this party."

The next day the SL Political Bureau, citing this remark, responded:

"Membership must be based on something other than open hatred, contempt and derision, fundamentally counterposed to our basic principles. To therefore hereby expel Socorro for her comment..."

In other words, criticism of the SL's juridical procedures is now an expellable offense. One of the more puzzling features of the Salzburg/Norden resignation statement is their characterization of Socorro's remark as "unconscionable and false." We were not present at either trial, but judging from the SL's own account of the procedure, as well as Salzburg/Norden's observations, it is not apparent why her comment was either "unconscionable" or "false."

### Democratic-Centralism in the SL

Perhaps Norden/Salzburg have good reason for their criticism of Socorro, but it seems more probable that their comment somehow reflects the influence of a quarter of a century spent in the Spartacist League. This is also evident in their claim that:

"Over the recent period, and particularly in the past several weeks, the I.S. has taken a series of measures breaking sharply with our Spartacist traditions and norms of internal debate governed by Leninist democratic centralism and instead imposing increasing restrictions and reprisals."

—emphasis added

While it was necessary to have some room for political debate at the top of the SL (particularly within the editorial board), the fact is that the internal political life of the SL and its satellites has been pretty arid for the last couple of decades. As we noted in our initial declaration in October 1982, the SL/iSt had not had an internal tendency or faction since 1968. We commented that this distinguished the internal regime of the SL from that of Lenin's Bolshevik Party, Trotsky's Fourth International and James P. Cannon's Socialist Workers Party:

"Trotsky's method of dealing with intra-party political struggle was quite different than that of the present leadership of the iSt. Political differences were fought out politically and where possible attempts were made to re-integrate oppositionists. Seymour [the SL's preeminent intellectual and author of *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*] makes the same observation as regards the Bolsheviks.

"The fact is there is something pretty unhealthy about a Trotskyist organization in which there have been virtually no political tendency or faction fights for a decade and a half."

The ICL leadership has naturally always been a bit shy about addressing this question, but such a record strongly suggests that the SL's departure from Leninist democracy occurred years ago, not weeks ago. ICL cadres (like Healyites or Stalinists) who suddenly find themselves outside the organization to which they devoted their lives are forced to spend some time thinking back and trying to make sense of their experience. It is not

uncommon for them to begin with the assumption that things were basically okay—that there was at least rough justice—in most, if not all, cases that preceded their own. But often after further reflection and/or investigation, they realize that their experience was not really unique or unprecedented after all.

### 'WV Collective' Terminated

The impact of these events for the ICL can hardly be over-estimated. Robertson is well aware of this, which is why he has rushed to circulate this latest "internal" bulletin. As usual, his main concern is preserving his dues base. He evidently figures that it is best to undergo a short, sharp shock—particularly since it is clearly all going to come out anyway. Everyone familiar with the SL knows that this represents a deep split in the core cadre of the group. The apolitical authority fights, which have reduced every section of the ICL to shells directed by people deficient in either brain or backbone (or both), have now taken their toll on the *Workers Vanguard* editorial board. This can only further erode any expectation on the part of the aging layer of those who joined in the early 1970s and still remain in "Jimstown" that somehow, someday, things might start to turn around.

In the leaflet we distributed at the SL's debate with Ernest Mandel in November 1994 we commented that the internal difficulties of the SL leadership foreshadowed a "succession struggle" that "will erupt when Number One is no longer around to settle all disputes by personal fiat." We also noted that, "The current targets [of Robertson's inner circle] seem to be the leading members of the editorial board of *Workers Vanguard*" and commented that:

"The members of the WV collective, who have slavishly endured such abuse for years, may be missing a few vertebrae, but they constitute the brightest and most political elements in the group, and are therefore the most logical candidates for future leadership."

Norden is no longer short-listed for the job of taking over the post-Robertson SL, but he and Salzburg did demonstrate that there were at least a few vertebrae intact among the "WV collective."

Joseph Seymour is now the only one left at the top of the SL from the "cliquist" literati denounced in *Spartacist* several years ago. He only appears in the bulletin as the author of an opaque farewell to Norden, with whom he toiled for so many years in WV. Long pained by Robertson's insistence on driving out most of the more political and talented SL recruits, while promoting "reliable" low-caliber apparatchiks, Seymour might be feeling a bit lonely right now. His letter to Norden ignores the specifics of the various charges and instead chides him for thinking that it is possible to make a breakthrough in this period. This, says Seymour, marks Norden as a "man of the pre-1976 era," i.e., someone who is out of sync with the shrunken historic possibilities of the moment.

In his letter to Norden, Seymour comments: "I sometimes find it conceptually useful to look at our organization as if I were *not* a member of it." As the group's leading intellectual, Seymour has traditionally been per-

mitted a considerable degree of detachment from the operational side of the SL. Norden *et al.*, on the other hand, have had their detachment thrust upon them. Whatever one's vantage point, the picture must be discouraging for those who accept Robertson's dictum that only the ICL possesses the capacity to "facilitate the emancipation of the proletariat internationally."

### Ascension of Prince Albert

A revolutionary organization cannot be built upon the principle of deference to the whims of a single individual. But a political obedience cult can have no other basis. The history of the Spartacist League over the past two decades is that of an organization in transition from the one to the other. The termination of the "Norden Group" appears to be the culmination of the protracted process of pulverizing any sense of political independence in the leading cadre who remain from the revolutionary SL of the 1970s. The SL's bulletin is entitled "Norden's 'Group': Shamefaced Defectors From Trotskyism," but there is little evidence that they have so far defected from anything but the obligation to accept that "the party leadership," i.e., James Robertson and his surrogates, is always right. In a speech delivered in Germany in late January, Al Nelson put his finger on the real reason for getting rid of Norden:

"In the past when one of these episodes provoked a fight in the party he [Norden] would grudgingly yield to the party's judgment and go on to something else. But not this time. For six months he has categorically defied the party's judgment..."

Nelson concluded his January 16 document attacking Norden with the following classical statement of an apparatus man:

"It is the responsibility and duty of party leaders who steer the party off its programmatic course to *assist* the party in correcting that departure. You can't do that by standing back and thumbing your nose at the party. You can't be right against the whole party."

In the SL these days "the whole party" doesn't add up to a great deal, as Nelson's preeminence indicates. Norden's opposition was tolerated for as long as it was because he was so important to the whole operation. In their resignation statement, Norden and Salzburg recount how Norden was gradually stripped of one post after another, in what was evidently an attempt to isolate him internally, while gradually increasing the pressure on him to capitulate. In response to the leadership's charge that Norden had gradually wiggled out of his political responsibilities, they write:

"This cynical question is designed to get around the fact, which the I.S. knows full well, that Norden didn't 'unilaterally suspend his political responsibilities,' but rather *he was removed from them*. Following the 20 July 1995 I.S. meeting, Norden was removed step by step from operational responsibility for the work in areas which he previously oversaw. This was immediately true for everything concerning Germany except work on *Spartakist*; Brosius took over phone contact with the SpAD. On Mexico, Richard D. was assigned to maintain regular communication with the GEM. This can be verified simply by looking at the reports and fax traffic. On Brazil,

Norden supervised the trip by Abrao and Adam in August 1995, but after that communication with Brazil was handled through other comrades.

"This culminated in the January 1996 IEC meeting, where Norden was removed from full IEC membership; thereafter he was no longer responsible for any particular area of work in the I.S...."

In the Spartacist League today the selection of cadres does not take place on the basis of their political capacities and commitment to the program of Trotskyism, but rather on the basis of their "loyalty" to the leadership. It is therefore somehow fitting that faithful Al Nelson (the only veteran, besides Robertson himself, of the SL's predecessor, the Revolutionary Tendency of the Socialist Workers Party/U.S.) should emerge as the victor in the fight which defines and shapes the final, irreversible decline of the ICL. Nelson's detractors may grumble that he's rather dull, very insecure, has a tendency to be a

bully and is sometimes a bit unstable. But they ignore his other qualities: he has a certain base cunning, and, more importantly, he is thoroughly, deeply, unremittably loyal to Robertson. Robertson is well aware of Nelson's limitations and has occasionally had to jerk his chain—but one needs to do that with pit bulls.

While the SL degenerated beyond recognition, its press continued to publish some first rate articles. *Workers Vanguard* was the main reason why anyone would want to join the SL. But a high-quality political newspaper requires high-quality political people to produce it. It cannot be written without discussion and argument—phenomena which the Robertson regime, in its desire for absolute control, profoundly distrusts. With the expulsion of Norden/Salzburg, and the triumph of the hacks over the "WV collective," the SL leadership divests itself of the one thing that has unnaturally prolonged its life: a compelling literary facade. ■

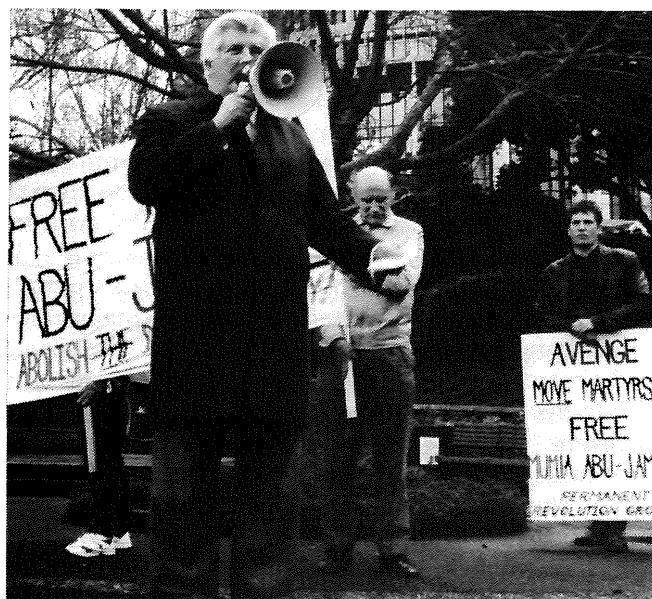
## Mumia Defense in New Zealand

Fifty people braved cold, wintry conditions to attend a 4 July rally in Wellington, New Zealand, in defense of U.S. political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. The midday protest, held outside the Parliament grounds, coincided with other demonstrations around the world in defense of the former Black Panther, who has been on death row for 14 years after being wrongly convicted of shooting a Philadelphia policeman.

New Zealand's Trade Union Federation (TUF—a grouping of unions disaffected by the rightward drift of the larger Council of Trade Unions) helped publicize the demonstration in its newsletter. TUF president, Con Devitt, who spoke at the rally, said the TUF was not "anti-American," but was opposed to a system that had "never executed a rich person." He called for the abolition of the death penalty.

Other speakers included Sam Buchanan, a local anarchist, Sandra Buchanan of the Socialist Workers Organisation (SWO—New Zealand affiliate of Tony Cliff's British Socialist Workers Party) and Bill Logan of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT). Like other speakers, Logan referred to the recent police execution of Terence Thompson in New Zealand, a country where officially there is no death penalty, but where those accused of murdering cops do not often survive to face trial. He recalled Mumia Abu-Jamal's history as a fighter against oppression, summarized the overwhelming evidence of his innocence, and pointed to the racism inherent in the death penalty.

This is the third united-front protest in Wellington in defense of Jamal. The two earlier ones, which were initiated by the IBT, occurred in August 1990, and in June 1995, after the signing of Jamal's death warrant. In May the Bolshevik Club (BC—a Wellington campus group associated with the IBT) organized a video showing and a forum on Mumia. The BC also took the lead in establishing a Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Committee, which in-



1917

**Con Devitt, TUF president, speaking out for Mumia**

cludes various activists from Wellington's leftist and human-rights milieu.

Recent Mumia defense work in Auckland, New Zealand, developed out of a Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Committee initiated in early April by an independent leftist and IBT supporters. Representatives of Workers Power and the Communist League (NZ co-thinkers of Jack Barnes' U.S.-based Socialist Workers Party) were involved in the committee, and practical support was given by the Communist Workers Group (a NZ split from Workers Power) and the SWO. Thirty-five people participated in a 17 May demonstration organized by the Auckland committee to coincide with Mumia protests in the U.S. This kind of international solidarity is vital to saving the life of Mumia and winning the struggle for his freedom. ■

# Revolt...

continued from page 2

Paris underground, the Métro, likewise made sure that not a single train moved. The strikes spread to include, at different times, postal workers, electrical workers, bank employees, air traffic controllers, miners, truckers, hospital workers, teachers, secondary school and university students. At their height, the massive demonstrations called by the unions brought more than two million people into the streets—a number that Juppé had earlier said would be sufficient to force his resignation. Red flags waved over the marchers, in some places to the accompaniment of the *Internationale*. The sleepest of provincial towns came to life, as thousands demonstrated, occupied city halls and blockaded the streets with cars.

Beginning as limited, defensive actions, the strikes and marches rapidly became more than a protest against specific economic measures, or a defense of particular sectional interests. The most common phrase used to describe the movement was *ras-le-bol*: an overflowing of the cup of discontent. Workers of all occupations, as well as other oppressed groups, saw the movement of November-December 1995 as a chance to strike back for years of declining living standards, harder work, longer hours, humiliation on the job, official corruption and deceit. Opinion polls showed early on that more than 60 percent of the public supported the strike. Strikers were applauded in the streets. Donations in money and in goods flowed to strike headquarters. Unemployed youth from the suburbanghettos of France's major cities, as well as numerous immigrant groups, were prominent in the marches. Respected academics offered their support in the form of newspaper petitions and, on several occasions, personal appearances before assemblies of strikers. In short, nearly all of working and involuntarily non-working France saw the cause of the strikers as their own, and the strikers saw themselves as fighting the fight of the whole working class. One railwayman described the rapid evolution of his consciousness:

"I threw myself into this fight as a conductor. The next day, I felt myself to be above all a railroad worker. Then I took on the identity of a public worker. Now I see myself simply as a worker..."

—*Le Monde*, 12-13 December 1995

As public-service strikes unfolded in Belgium, where thousands of trade unionists marched in Brussels to protest their government's plan to privatize the railroads, and Milan was paralyzed by a streetcar strike, fear grew in banks, boardrooms and editorial offices across the continent that it was not only the fate of the Juppé government, but perhaps that of Europe itself, that hung in the balance. *Der Spiegel* wrote that Chancellor Helmut Kohl, "looks with much apprehension toward Paris," and wondered if, in certain high places in the German government, France was now being regarded as "the sick man of Europe." For a conservative Swedish newspaper, *Svenska Dagblidet*, the future of the European



DER SPIEGEL

Juppé and Chirac

unity deal signed at Maastricht was being determined "in the streets of France" (quoted in *Le Monde*, 5 December 1995). Perhaps the most celebrated journalistic comment of all was the headline in *Le Monde* which called the strikes the "first revolt against globalization" (7 December 1995). Thus, just as the European capitalists were getting comfortable with the notion that communism is dead, class struggle a thing of the past, and the logic of capital omnipotent, they faced the biggest eruption of social struggle since the great British miners' strike of 1984-85.

## French Paradoxes

Yet, looking back, the contrast between the breadth of the strike movement and the meagerness of its results is striking. It is true that Juppé retreated on several key points. The plans for closing down railway lines, increasing the retirement age for railway workers, and restricting the pensions of public employees have been shelved. However, Juppé remains firmly entrenched, and the major provisions of his plan—increased taxes for wage earners, frozen health benefits, removal of welfare funds from union control—are going forward. By May Day, Jacques Chirac felt confident enough to lecture the people more sternly than ever on the need "to be draconian in the reduction of [public] expenditures" (*Le Monde*, 3 May).

One cannot understand why the government managed to resume the offensive so quickly without examining a second apparent paradox. On Tuesday, 12 December, some two million people were in the streets demanding Juppé's resignation and the total withdrawal of his plan. Yet, by the end of the week, Juppé was still in the saddle and the strikers were going back to work. How did such a broad and militant mass movement come to so abrupt an anti-climax? Why did a few significant but limited concessions suffice to extinguish the blaze?

The standard explanation offered by the bourgeois media was that the workers, disappointed that the private sector had not followed their lead, and divided in their response to Juppé's concessions, grew weary as Christmas approached, and decided—perhaps with some misgivings, but more or less spontaneously—to end their strike. This explanation is not confined to the mainstream media. It is echoed on the far left as well. *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO), the largest French organization claiming to be Trotskyist, commented:

"The strike took a week to reach a part of the public sector, almost two weeks to reach the teachers. To involve the whole private sector would have taken much more time again...."

"Neither the railworkers nor anyone else could hold out for the necessary time. The strike came up against the buffers with the approach of Christmas—the teachers going on holiday, the big industrial enterprises shutting down partially or totally for a week or more."

—*Lutte Ouvrière*, 22 December 1995,  
quoted in *Workers' Liberty*, January

Daniel Bensaid, a leading spokesperson for the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR), flagship of the ostensibly Trotskyist United Secretariat, made a somewhat different assessment:

"[the strikers] might have obtained even more were it not for divisions in the trade union movement that left the government a margin of manoeuvre. Despite its massive scale, this struggle hardly gave birth to grassroots forms of unitary self-organization. Although the union confederations...found themselves side by side in the streets, there was no trade union front capable of putting forward an overall strategic timetable of mobilization or presenting a platform of common demands."

—*New Left Review*, January-February

The left tended to avoid the key question of the role of the union leadership. For LO, the latter hardly seemed to exist. Bensaid, whose article is very detailed and precise on many aspects of the strikes, turns decidedly vague when it comes to the role played by leaders. His references to "divisions," lack of grassroots organization, and the failure to put forward common demands are in themselves entirely insufficient as explanations. In what follows, we will argue that the role of political parties and, especially of the trade-union leaders, was not only an important factor in the outcome of the struggle, but the key element. Only by paying close attention to the chronology of events, and to the response of the leadership at every turn, is it possible to understand how and why the workers could be demobilized as quickly as they were.

## Unions and Politics in France

Unlike the Labour Party in Britain, which was created as a political arm of the unions, French unions are essentially the creatures of political parties. They have traditionally been organized along party-political, rather than craft or industrial lines, and engage in fierce competition with one another for members. There are three big union federations. The largest is the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*), closely



J WITT/SIPA

**Railroad workers in Paris: core of the protest**

associated with the Socialist Party. Second in size is the CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*), historically aligned with the French Communist Party (PCF). The FO (*Force Ouvrière*) is the smallest of the three, and, unlike the others, has its main base not in industry, but among white-collar government workers. It originated in 1947 as an anti-Communist split-off from the CGT, and was built with generous technical and financial assistance from the CIA. The FO flaunts its pro-capitalist credentials by refusing to join with the other unions in the traditional May Day parade.

This time it was not the openly pro-capitalist FO leadership, but rather the head of the Socialist-Party-affiliated CFDT, Nicole Notat, who played the role of strikebreaker. A former schoolteacher with little experience of class struggle, Notat sought for her union the role of "privileged interlocutor" with the Juppé government, i.e., recipient of special favors in return for class collaboration. Notat therefore took a position of "critical support" for Juppé's reforms—a stance for which she was repudiated publicly by a sizable portion of her own membership, and driven bodily from the first of the big union demonstrations in Paris on 24 November.

The relatively militant posture taken by Marc Blondel, Gaullist president of the FO, was conditioned by his recent ejection from the "privileged interlocutor" role in which Notat sought to replace him. Partly as a reward for its services in the Cold War, the government had accorded the FO one third of the administrative posts in the management of the *Sécu*. But with the "Communist menace" defeated and union membership at a post-war low, the French ruling class was no longer so inclined to make concessions to the workers. One of Juppé's proposed "reforms" was to cut the unions out of the management of the *Sécu* altogether.

Realizing, in his own words, that there was no longer "any grain to grind," Blondel suddenly discovered within himself unsuspected reserves of militancy. For

the first time since the 1947 split, the fiercely anti-Communist FO joined its traditional arch-rival, the CGT, in demonstrations and strikes. This accommodation occurred partly at the urging of a layer of FO leaders aligned with the pseudo-Trotskyist Pierre Lambert's Parti des Travailleurs (PT). But the main reason for Blondel's switch was that the CGT, with its extensive industrial base, was crucial to any successful resistance to Juppé.

While its leadership is reformist to the core, the CGT has historically enjoyed a reputation as the most militant and combative of the union federations, and has tended to draw around it the most class-conscious elements of the labor movement. But the CGT leadership never lived down its infamous betrayal of the revolutionary hopes that stirred the working class in the struggles of May-June 1968. Following the lead of the Stalinist Communist Party, the CGT brass were openly hostile to the student radicals who ignited the rebellion, and spared no effort to deflect the growing revolutionary mood among the workers into harmless, bread-and-butter trade unionism. This betrayal was compounded by the CGT's shameless class collaboration during Mitterand's Union of the Left government in the early 1980s, in which the PCF initially held the ministry of transport. The CGT discouraged strikes, especially on the railways, to avoid giving offense to Mitterand's Socialists, who were in turn eager to prove their respectability to the bourgeoisie. But sections of the CGT's base remained combative in defiance of their leaders. A major strike took place at the SNCF (France's government-owned railways) in 1986 in response to then prime minister Chirac's plans to lay off thousands of workers.

The Socialist Party and its allied union federation, the CFDT, were at first more skillful than the Stalinists in exploiting the radical impulses of 1968 for their own reformist ends. For a time, it was the CFDT rather than the CGT that attracted the more militant workers. However, years of Socialist Party austerity, combined with Notat's overt defection to the class enemy, left the field open for the CGT. The anger of much of its base, and especially railroad workers, over the Juppé plan provided the CGT and its leader, Louis Viannet, with a long-sought opportunity to refurbish their militant credentials.

## Public Strikes & Autoworkers

The public workers' strike was initiated by the CGT leadership, but as a limited defensive action. The union bureaucrats understood that the Juppé plan was an unprecedented attack, and aimed to pressure the government into negotiating. But the strike movement soon went beyond its intended limits. As one French academic, Francois Dubet, observed:

"On all evidence, the strikes and demonstrations of December have not been directed from on high, and the political and trade-union general staffs appear as astonished as the government by the success of the mobilizations."

—*Libération*, 26 December 1995

It is always difficult to evaluate the dynamics and potentialities of social movements from afar. But one thing is beyond doubt: even in the early phases, the idea of spreading the strike to the private sector, i.e., of a general strike, was gaining ground. During the first two weeks, half of the postal sorting centers had followed the example of the railroad workers; power workers had also come out, reducing production of electricity by one third. The action was spread by contingents of union militants that went from one work site to another. A striking railworker told an assembly of postal workers in Paris:

"We must toss the Juppé plan into the dustbin of history...The SNCF [railroads] and the RATP [Métro], that is not enough. It will take postal and electricity workers. We can win, but it will take everyone to do it. We must paralyze the economy. We must go to the factories and explain."

—*Le Monde*, 30 November 1995

The same team went to another mail sorting center. Again, a railroad worker spoke:

"Juppé has deliberately introduced the reform of the *Sécu*, knowing that we would be the first to react. He wants to play on the divisions within the unions and turn public opinion against us. Today the RATP has joined our action, yesterday the bus drivers, tomorrow, why not private enterprises? A general strike becomes possible. We must make a liar of Juppé!"

"As time passes," the article adds, "the more does the idea of a general strike raise the spirits of the workers." *Le Monde* of 5 December further reported how Métro strikers hung the red flag over the main RATP depot in Paris, and how the slogan, "No, the Commune is not dead!" appeared on the walls of the Gare du Nord. At the Gare d'Austerlitz:

"One CGT delegate explains in an almost anodyne tone that 'there are 180,000 railway workers on our side, but now we must speak of a general strike involving millions of comrades.' CGT representatives from the Bank of France have come to announce that they will launch their strike appeal on Thursday. 'With us, there is a feeling that goes beyond trade-union organizations. People say to us: 'it is becoming possible; we have to do something.'"

Meanwhile, back at the RATP depot:

"Maryvonne, agent of the National Treasury, regrets having to refrain from striking. 'We see the wealth that is accumulated as a result of fiscal policy. Certain departments have doubled the number of tax deductions for the big fortunes, and there are now 5 million living in poverty [*exclus*] in France! For a little while, Maryvonne, with her tailor-made clothes and her pearl necklace, joins the striking RATP worker who hung out the red flag at the entrance of the depot; she explains that 'this situation will last as long as the revenues of capital remain more important than those of labor.' She too wants a general strike."

On 2 December, Marc Blondel of Force Ouvrière appealed to "all sectors of activity to enter progressively into the strike" to demand the withdrawal of the Juppé plan. A hundred and sixty-eight militants of the CFDT defied Notat's treacherous leadership and published a petition demanding a "general strike everywhere."

Nevertheless, the strike failed to take hold in the private sector. With an 11 percent unemployment rate,



the workers were cautious. Also, Juppé's demand that public-sector workers work 40 (instead of 37.5) years before collecting pensions had already been conceded by unions in the private sector. Unlike 1968, there were no spontaneous mass walkouts in the factories, and private-sector participation in mass demonstrations was spotty.

Yet it is generally acknowledged that most private-sector workers saw their public sector comrades as striking for all of working France. The private sector, moreover, was not untouched by the struggle. In the provinces, truckers struck, demanding, among other things, the right to retire at 50 like railway workers. In Lorraine, 15,000 miners went on strike for two days over wages, and 2,000 of them engaged in a pitched battle with police in front of management offices in the town of Freyming-Merlebach. Fifty people were injured, five of them seriously. The question thus arises of whether a determined initiative by the union leadership, particularly the CGT, could have succeeded in spreading the strike to the private sector.

We will never know because the attempt was never made. We do know that Louis Viannet and the upper layers of the CGT recoiled at the prospect of a general strike. While never condemning the idea outright, they engaged in a behind-the-scenes effort to avoid calling on private-sector workers to join the battle. A reporter commented:

"If the FO can eventually appeal for a general strike in the private sector without being ready to take the consequences—the great majority of its apparatus being in the public sector—it is not the same for the CGT, for whom an appeal for a general strike would have a strong impact."  
—*Le Monde*, 6 December 1995

France's biggest working-class battalions are in the auto industry. The decision of auto workers to stop production was the turning point of the general strike of 1968. At state-owned Renault, in particular, the CGT is deeply entrenched. Unlike in North America, where union membership is often a condition of employment, and dues are automatically deducted each month by the employer, in France there are no union shops nor dues check-offs. Joining a given union and paying monthly dues is a strictly voluntary act. Each union has a core of dedicated militants, who must go among the workers and argue for the organization's policies at regular intervals. An appeal by the central leadership of the CGT for a general strike at Renault or other CGT bastions would therefore have had real impact, whatever the ultimate outcome.

Yet the CGT at Renault proceeded with extreme caution. In the CGT stronghold of Le Mans in northwestern France:

"Renault workers move with determined but prudent steps. They know that their attitude will set the pace for the whole region and deliberately refrain from inciting an intensification of the strikes. We are not strike fomenters; for the present, we do not envisage an unlimited strike," insists Alain Boulay, a CGT official.  
—*Le Monde*, 5 December 1995



REUTERS

**Cars overturned by students**

Resolutions of solidarity with striking public-sector workers were passed at general assemblies of Renault workers. Contingents were sent to the demonstrations on the "days of action." There were three and four-hour symbolic work stoppages. But, to the surprise of management, during the three weeks of confrontation production never actually ceased. There was undoubtedly some reluctance to strike on the part of the rank and file. But it was a reluctance the CGT leadership made no attempt to overcome.

The reasons for the CGT leadership's "prudent course" are not hard to fathom. So long as the strike was confined to public workers, it remained a trade-union struggle, albeit a particularly militant one. Juppé was attacking government employees, not private-sector workers. A strike on their part would therefore have signified the transformation of the trade-union struggle into a political struggle; it would have meant the beginning of a general working-class confrontation with the government, a situation the CGT officialdom was determined to avoid.

### **The CGT Congress & the General Strike**

The CGT's forty-fifth annual congress took place outside Paris from 3 to 8 December, when hopes for a general strike were at their peak.

"While the week [of the congress] will be decisive for the different social movements that are unfolding, M. Viannet knows that his organization holds the key to any solution. The CGT has the upper hand in the movements now in progress. At the SNCF, unlike 1986 with the spontaneous formation of strike committees, the CGT maintains its authority with the strikers. In the postal sorting centers, it co-directs the strike with the SUD [a left-reformist union] and, at the RATP, it has a preponderance among the unions."

—*Le Monde*, 5 December 1995

In the first days of the congress, the issue of spreading



Mass union demonstration in Paris

the strike to the private sector—about which Viannet was extremely vague—became the subject of intense debate. Several delegates protested Viannet's retreat from his earlier declaration that Juppé had to withdraw his plan as a precondition for negotiations. About half the delegates intervening from the floor spoke in favor of appealing for a general strike, arguing that, without such a clear-cut call to action, the position of the CGT was "blurry" and "ambiguous."

But this is exactly how the leadership wanted it. In the end, a motion was adopted "to generalize the strike for the withdrawal of the Juppé plan and the attacks on the retirement system" (*Le Monde*, 6 December 1995). To the uninitiated, the difference between calling for a general strike and the "generalization of the strike" might seem trivial. But for working-class militants and their enemies, the deliberate avoidance of the words "general strike" was significant. Even the ambiguous formulations about "generalizing the strike" had been resisted by the leadership. According to the LCR's *Rouge* (14 December 1995):

"The CGT position on the current strike was discussed four times.... But the vigilance of delegates was necessary each time to avoid the ratification of resolutions on the current situation, proposed and read at top speed by the presidium, in which the words, 'generalization of the struggle' were absent, and, each time, reintroduced at the

request of the body. On the evening of Thursday, 7 December, Louis Viannet himself had to take the floor amid unmistakable discontent. The turnout for demonstrations called for that day had been massive. Certain sections of the membership, particularly the railway workers, expected a firmer commitment, which did not seem to be forthcoming from the leadership. Viannet thus toughened up his text in a full session of the congress, after interventions from the delegates."

The leadership and its supporters did not come out and assert that the idea of a general strike was mistaken, but merely that it was not up to the CGT congress, but rather the federation's component unions, to issue such a call. Said one delegate, "We have over the years played the game of calling push-button strikes. This is not the moment to revive the schemas of the past." Another declared: "Only the workers can vote on the course of the movement" (*Le Monde*, 6 December 1995). Thus the leadership sought to disguise its fear of intensifying the struggle behind a veneer of concern for democratic principle.

The delegates, however, *were* the elected representatives of CGT workers. And a general strike, although it may begin spontaneously, requires some form of centralized leadership. While the CGT did not represent the entire working class, it was the single most powerful workers' organization in the struggle, and a general-strike call from the CGT congress would have enormously accelerated the spontaneous movement in the ranks. The hyper-"democratism" of the CGT leadership was therefore nothing more than a new disguise for a time-honored Stalinist tradition: betrayal.

The new disguise was, however, fully in keeping with the latest French intellectual fashions. In the mid-1970s, as revolutionary ardor began to fade, a gaggle of renegade '68ers came forward to sell their literary talents to the bourgeoisie. Styling themselves the *nouvelles philosophes* ("new philosophers"), they recycled the old canard that Stalinism was not a hideous negation of Bolshevism, but, on the contrary, the inevitable end-product of Lenin's vanguard party, and indeed of Marxism itself. Such reactionary notions have become widely popular among France's intelligentsia.

But not only among the intelligentsia. The "reformed" Stalinists of the CGT also appear to be taking a few cues from the Bernard-Henri Lévy's and André Glucksmans. Claiming to have renounced Stalinist organizational methods, they equate such methods with *any* attempt to lead the workers in struggle. They also argue that democracy does not involve the direct intervention of workers and the oppressed to resist their oppressors, but rather can only find true expression through parliamentary elections.

There are two other things about the CGT congress that should be noted. First, a motion to suspend the proceedings of the congress so that delegates could attend the 5 December mobilization (called by the CGT itself) was defeated in favor of the leadership's proposal to send only a delegation. It seems that Viannet and friends were worried that the congress might become

infected by the spirit of the streets. Secondly, the congress, like Tony Blair's New Labour in Britain, voted to eliminate a call in the preamble to its constitution for "the suppression of capitalist exploitation...by the socialization of the means of production and exchange." Inserted in its place was a piece of social-democratic drivel that designated capitalism as one among many forms of oppression, and proposed a "democratic society" as the remedy:

"the CGT works for a democratic society free of capitalist and other forms of exploitation and domination, and against discrimination of all kinds—racism, xenophobia and social exclusion of all sorts."

—Rouge, 14 December 1995

Various commentators remarked that Louis Viannet succeeded in walking a thin line between the "conservatives" (old-line Stalinists) and "renovators" (Stalinists cum social-democrats) at the CGT congress. But, on this last point at least, the "renovators" seem to have scored a clear win. There is a certain irony in the fact that, just as the right-wing "consensus" was being shattered in the streets, the bureaucrats of the leading "left-wing" union federation were codifying their rightward political shift.

## Juppé Retreats

On 5 December, Alain Juppé responded to a motion of censure against him by the opposition in the National Assembly with a defense of his "reform" plan, and a reaffirmation of his unwillingness to negotiate. He was immediately backed by both Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who were meeting in Baden-Baden. Chirac's visit with Kohl was designed to help him appear above the fray, while emphasizing that it was not only the French government that had a stake in the success of the Juppé plan. The Paris bourse responded favorably to Juppé's "firmness" in the face of the mounting protests. The French employers' association, the CNPF, declared its unanimous support for the government, while the Bank of France lowered one of its key interest rates as a show of solidarity. The motion to censure Juppé failed by a wide margin.

Yet, five days later, on 10 December, Juppé appeared before the television cameras to announce a series of concessions to the strikers. All the gestures of ruling-class support had done nothing to alter the views of the rest of the population. Transportation remained paralyzed, and the miners of Lorraine went out on strike along with schoolteachers across France. December 7th saw the largest mobilizations since the beginning of the protests, as well over a million people took to the streets. The turnout in the provinces was especially strong. Faced with a rising tide of anger, Juppé was forced to give ground.

His concessions were not negligible. The Le Vert Commission, a special parliamentary task force charged with civil service reform, was suspended, along with the demand that public employees work longer to collect their pensions. Plans to raise the retirement age of railroad and underground workers were scrapped, as was

(at least temporarily) the shutdown of thousands of miles of unprofitable railway lines. The head of the railroad system was accused of insensitivity to workers and replaced. And, in perhaps the most dramatic symbolic gesture of all, Juppé finally brought himself to utter a word that he had in previous weeks found it impossible to pronounce: negotiations. He announced that he would meet individually with the heads of the union federations the following Monday in preparation for a one-day "summit on employment" on 21 December, at which he would sit down simultaneously with union chiefs and employer representatives. The prime minister added that the suggestion of reducing the working day to alleviate unemployment "doesn't scare me."

If, in response to massive pressure from below, Juppé went further than he was initially prepared to, his 10 December television appearance was nevertheless a calculated move. His concessions were announced just before Christmas, when the pressure on workers to return to their jobs would be greatest. They were, furthermore, intended to satisfy the particular grievances of the most militant of the strikers, the railway and Métro workers, while leaving intact the core of his "reforms": increased taxes to help pay the government debt, taxes on medical care and family allocations, and elimination of all union control over health and welfare funds.

It was widely recognized that Juppé's gambit was a crossroads for the strike. *Le Monde* headlined its editorial "Last Chance for M. Juppé." During the week that followed, government propagandists, and those of the pro-government unions, aggressively promoted the idea of a return to work. Juppé was at pains to point out that "there is no longer any motive for striking." Speaking before his Council of Ministers, Chirac declared full confidence in his prime minister, stating that it was necessary to "stay on course" and "there are no other politics" than those of the government (*Le Monde*, 15 December 1995). One by one, the various leaders of Juppé's right-wing coalition trooped to his offices at the Hôtel Matignon to offer their support.

The union chiefs who had opposed the strike were quick to follow suit. CFDT leader Nicole Notat declared that the strikers must decide "democratically on the conditions of their resumption of work," and "cannot but have a positive appreciation" of the results of their action. Alain Deleu, head of the smaller Catholic union federation, the CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens), stated that: "the demands concerning the status of public workers and their benefits have today been satisfied, permitting a return to normal." He said his federation would decline to participate in further mobilizations, and repeated the famous dictum of the former Communist Party chief, Maurice Thorez, when he pulled the plug on the 1936 general strike: "It is necessary to know how to end a strike." A *Le Monde* reporter speculated:

"if the assurances concerning the special benefits of public workers are publicized, and if the prime minister can succeed in his meeting with the union confederations on Monday, the national demonstration called for Tuesday



AFP/DPA

### Strikers shut down railroads

could possibly be nothing more than a final *baroud d'honneur* [a fight made solely in order to maintain one's honor]."

—12-13 December 1995

Thus spoke official France. But everything depended on the response of the other France, the striking workers and those who marched with them—students, retirees, immigrants and unemployed youth.

### 'The Movement Has Become a Torrent'

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the popular response to Juppé was one of unanimous rejection. Any social movement this broad is bound to be uneven in its levels of consciousness and militancy. The working class was undoubtedly demoralized by fifteen years of overt class collaboration on the part of its leaders. The tendency of the strikes to transcend sectional interests, while on the ascendant, never reached the level of 1968.

Even before Juppé sounded the retreat, the miners of Lorraine had returned reluctantly to work for a small raise. The student movement, which had unfolded simultaneously with the strikes, was weakened by divisions between those who wanted to throw their lot in with the workers and those who wanted to focus on narrow student demands. There was far less enthusiasm for the strike among professional and white-collar employees than among railroad workers. And on the railroads themselves, the strike was weaker in the northeast than in western and southern France. The political offensive of the right-wing unions also took its toll on the strikers' resolve. Some railway workers, mainly in the provinces, decided to return to work as a result of Juppé's maneuver.

Yet, during that same crucial week, there were also strong signs of renewed militancy, indeed of an increased politicization and radicalization of the movement, which, on balance, outweighed the sentiment in favor of retreat. In the days following Juppé's announcement, all eyes turned toward the striking railroad workers. At the Gare du Nord, perhaps the most militant of the strike centers, *Le Monde* reported workers saying that "[Juppé's] televised intervention last night marks the beginning of his end." The prime minister's words were described as "saccharine and sinuous," and a ploy to "divide and rule." "We have not fought for two weeks simply to hear the word 'negotiations!'" "Whatever Juppé does has the smell of a circling wolf."

At another strike bastion, the main RATP depot, the response was similar: "On Tuesday [the day of the last big demonstrations], Juppé sprained his ankle, tonight [the night of his television interview] he banged his knee, tomorrow he will break his face." "If he has retreated, it is a victory that will galvanize us." The report continues:

"For fifteen days, they have discussed much and thought about much. Their speech has been enriched, as well as their demands. The withdrawal of the Juppé plan remains an 'absolute precondition' for the halt of the movement. But that is no longer enough. 'We are not fighting only to defend our gains. We have wives and children in the private sector. My father fought for the *Sécu* and for his pension. Me, I'm fighting to improve these benefits. To return at least to thirty-seven and a half years for retirement in the private sector....' But that is not all. They also want radical political change..."

"They speak of the defense of public service, of the struggle against pollution—with the aid of public transport—taxation of profits, justice, dignity...."

—*Le Monde*, 12-13 December 1995

Later that week, another reporter asked workers at Paris's Gare d'Austerlitz if they would miss their December pay:

"The question surprises them. 'This is not the time to ask about such things!' Such questioning seems to them mean-spirited and beside the point. What? They are living 'a page in history' and someone is talking to them about 'pennies?' They are asserting 'power,' 'solidarity' and the 'will of the people,' and someone wants to know if they have 'paid their bills at the chemist?' They fight for the 'right to live decently,' but also for 'respect,' for 'honor,' and someone thinks they calculate their monetary losses every night? To underscore the point, one picketer...explains: 'What we are living through is truly exceptional. During several days of struggle, many things in this country have changed. They will say "before '95" and "after '95".'

"Yannick, twenty-seven, controller...doesn't want to think about money. 'Come what may! I'm convinced we will win. In striking today, I earn money for tomorrow.

"His comrade also doesn't want to talk about cash balances... 'One month, two months, three months. I no longer have anything to lose. I will take to my bills the same attitude that Juppé takes toward the people in the street: "nothing for you!"...I will fight this fight to the end, to the death if necessary! This is not a question of money!'"

—*Le Monde*, 15 December 1995

This attitude of renewed resolve was confirmed three

days after Juppé's television appearance by some 200 delegates at a general assembly of striking railroad workers in the Paris region. Their overwhelming sentiment was that, although Juppé had backed away from attempts to attack their historic gains, they were now in a position to demand improvements. More than that, it was felt that railroad workers had a responsibility to more than themselves. If they were to go back now they would be letting down many others, in both public and private sectors. They therefore decided, by a near-unanimous vote (with only two abstentions), to hold out for the total withdrawal of the Juppé plan.

In the provinces there were some capitulations. In Lyons, a federation of autonomous unions that had taken the government's side, the FGAAC, representing a third of the conductors, held a separate assembly, which voted for a return to work. But they were not able to restore rail traffic in the region due to the continuation of the strike by the other workers. There was a definite weakening in the east, where the strike movement had been subdued to begin with. At the instigation of the CFDT, the workers in the Alsatian city of Mulhouse decided to go back, as did workers in Reims. Yet these were the only reversals. The general assemblies of all other cities and regions stood solid for the continuation of the strike.

The hesitation by a minority of railroad workers was more than counterbalanced by the response to the call by the CGT and FO for mass demonstrations on the twelfth of December. Juppé had earlier said that if two million people descended into the streets he would be finished. The unions claimed that 2.2 million marched that day, in the largest demonstration since the confrontation began. Some carried signs proclaiming, "I am two million and one!"

All the big cities of France saw giant turnouts, but since transportation was paralyzed, demonstrators in lesser towns and villages were unable to assemble at regional centers. Records for public turnout were therefore broken in one provincial town after another. A former mayor in the area around Chartres said that: "in thirty years, none of the struggles, the great popular movements that followed the Liberation, not even May 1968—he is certain of it—caused such a stirring...." A resident of another town, watching 8,000 march past, remarked: "So many people in the streets of a modest town like Orléans, that means something is happening."

As the demonstrations unfolded in a holiday atmosphere, many were also struck by their increasingly political character. "Slogans hostile to Juppé," remarked *Le Monde*, "are more and more giving rhythm [to the marches]." In Paris, at the Place de La Bastille, with strains of the revolutionary anthems, the *Carmagnole* and *Ça ira*, as a fitting accompaniment, one railwayman said that "each day of the strike becomes more wonderful." He continued:

"One is supposed to make sacrifices for a society that knows how to produce nothing but unemployment and insecurity. Money flows and the society is inhuman."

—*Le Monde*, 14 December 1995

A professor commented:

"We were never mobilized while the socialists were in power. They conducted a liberal, monetarist policy. In 1936, if the left did things [under the Popular Front government of Léon Blum—ed], it is because the people moved."

A 45-year-old railway worker who voted for the Socialist Party added:

"I was deceived by the reformist current.' I voted for Maastricht; I even believed in the overture toward the political center.' He excused himself for talking 'like a Communist. But all the same! The Socialists wanted to manage a supposed "crisis." Capital has never been as well off. And it is a Europe of money they are heading towards. We can't level everything downwards."

In Toulouse:

"The procession drew between 80,000 and 100,000 demonstrators, making it the longest line of march that Toulouse had seen in thirty years. Observers noted another record: the strongest participation of the private sector since the beginning of the movement, with the presence of 8,000 aerospace workers, who walked off the job for the occasion. The tone was combative and determined. 'It doesn't matter all that much whom we are demonstrating against. We have had enough...It's the revolution.'"

In Marseille, where 100,000 turned out to break another municipal record:

"I have attended all seven demos these last two months,' observed a secondary-school teacher. 'I've seen them grow in volume and in determination.'

"This demonstration is distinguished, it would seem, by a growing politicization and a generalized set of demands. The signs saying 'Juppé Resign' were many. The prime minister was taken to task in all tones....

"For the first time, they sang the *Internationale*...while the black flags of the anarchists floated over the parade...The demonstrators, among whom were mixed militants of Act Up, homeless advocates, and others, were not content to stop at the theme of the *Sécu*, but equally demanded 'work for all' or proposed 'Together, to invent the future.' Secondary-school students have put back on the order of the day a slogan of May, 1968: 'Be realistic, demand the impossible!'

"The monster demonstration in Marseille, often marked by a sort of fraternal exaltation, did not look anything like a '*baroud d'honneur*.' 'The dynamic, the tenacity and the confidence,' says Marcel Carbasse, general secretary of the regional CGT, 'are in the camp of those who protest. Relaxing the pressure is out of the question. We have opened a breach. We must make it bigger.'"

Another measure of the changing mood was the fact that mass action did not stop on Tuesday, 12 December. It continued in the days that followed, assuming various forms. In Toulouse, three postal sorting centers were occupied by workers. Schools were closed because teachers were striking. A demonstration took place in support of an FO official who had gone on hunger strike to demand the withdrawal of the Juppé plan. Bordeaux drowned in uncollected garbage due to a sanitation strike. The town center was paralyzed by an "inter-professional" car rally. In Rouen, electrical workers protested the planned privatization of their industry by giving electricity to clients around the clock at nighttime half rates. Railway workers blocked a bus depot,

occupied the offices of the *Crédit Lyonnais* (a bank), installed barriers at the entrance of the town to control the flow of traffic, and sent delegations to private-sector workplaces to persuade the workers to come out. Two hundred agents of Posts and Telegraphs occupied the offices of France Telecom (the government-owned phone company).

In Caen, bus drivers blocked the principal intersections with their buses, and like their comrades in Rouen, established barricades to control the flow of traffic. At Roanne, 2,000 people demonstrated on 13 December for the tenth time since the beginning of the movement, and students occupied the university of Chambéry. The city hall in Marseille was blocked by three hundred cars belonging to strikers, who demanded an audience with the mayor.

All of these events point inescapably to the conclusion that the masses of people who joined battle against Juppé's attacks at the end of November did not, on the whole, lose the initiative as a result of his carefully calculated partial retreat. On the contrary, "the movement," in the words of one striking Paris Métro worker, "became a torrent" (*Le Monde*, 12-13 December 1995).

### A 'Crisis of Leadership'

At this crucial juncture, the two union federations leading the strikes, the FO and the CGT, but especially the latter, held the keys to the situation. It was apparent shortly after Juppé announced his concessions that FO head Marc Blondel was looking for an opportunity to be reinstated as a "privileged interlocutor" with the government. He was anxious to end his partnership with the CGT, in which he had been consigned to the junior role. Blondel declared that he was ready to call off the strike in return for "global negotiations," i.e., broadening the agenda to include all points of disagreement between the government and his union. The 14 December *Libération* noted that he had "no longer any interest in prolonging the conflict," particularly as "[the FO's] unions are not firmly implanted in the bastions of protest of the SNCF and the RATP." "Only the CGT," continued the journal, "can settle the situation: everyone, even Matignon [Juppé's residence], agrees that it alone has the capacity to get the strikers back to work."

In public, CGT chief Louis Viannet continued to take a tough line, remarking that Juppé's concessions only changed the implementation, not the substance, of his "reforms." Viannet vowed to continue the strikes and protests and called for another "day of action" on Saturday, 16 December. But there were already indications that Viannet's real attitude differed considerably from his public stance. Since the CGT head is hardly known for his candor, one must infer his actual aims from his actions.

One clue to Viannet's attitudes can be found in the policy of the French Communist Party (PCF), with whom the CGT has always been closely associated, and whose members remain prominent in the CGT leadership. For decades the PCF sought to forge a durable

electoral alliance with the Socialist Party (PS), and remains anxious not to offend the PS leadership. But the PS has for fifteen years been carrying out the austerity policies of which the Juppé plan was only a logical extension. While they could not denounce the strikes without risking alienating their working-class base, the PS leaders did nothing to encourage the movement. Their line from the start was that "reform" of the public sector was necessary, but that Juppé was going about it in too authoritarian a fashion. Throughout the crisis, the PS limited its opposition to parliamentary motions. They did not endorse the union demonstrations, and, when the demand for Juppé's resignation was echoing in the streets, PS leader, Lionel Jospin, made it clear that he was *not* calling for the prime minister's head.

Throughout the month-long confrontation, the PCF, although rhetorically more sympathetic to strikers and demonstrators than the PS, was careful never to transgress the political boundaries set by the latter. When PCF members criticized their leadership for the party's low visibility in the demonstrations, and its utter lack of interest in leading the strikes, Robert Hue, the PCF's chairperson, responded: "It is not necessary to say of the movement that which it does not say of itself. The movement today is not for political change" (*Le Monde*, 8 December 1995). According to Hue, the business of the PCF was politics; the business of conducting strikes was best left to the unions. Any attempt to infuse a trade-union struggle with political consciousness would be infringing on the prerogatives of others: something that the new, de-Stalinized, decentralized, oh-so-democratic PCF would simply never dream of.

This became a little harder to argue as the movement underwent a spontaneous politicization. But, even then, the PCF conspicuously insisted on characterizing the movement as "social" as opposed to "political." Besides, argued former party chief George Marchais, why call for a "change at the 'head' [of government], since any prime minister taking the place of Alain Juppé would necessarily pursue the same politics" (*Le Monde*, 14 December 1995).

### The Deal is Cut

While the movement in the streets and railway terminals was taking a more radical turn, a very different drama was unfolding behind the scenes. Before his television appearance of 10 December, Juppé, who still refused to meet directly with union chiefs, had initiated a series of lower-level contacts. A special mediator was appointed to meet with the striking railway workers, including the CGT, while Jacques Barrot, Minister for Labor and Social Affairs, met individually with the heads of the union federations. Thus the union bureaucracy and the government had an opportunity to sound each other out in a low-profile way, while maintaining a tough posture toward one another in public.

*Le Monde* (12 December 1995) reported an "avalanche of signals" in the days preceding Juppé's television appearance. On the morning of Saturday, 9 December,



FO's Blondel, CGT's Viannet

Barrot, who had expected to meet a CGT secretary, found himself face to face with Louis Viannet, who assured him that he would be "available at any moment to respond to an initiative from the prime minister." At the CGT congress that had just adjourned, Viannet had made a point of *not* joining Blondel in demanding the withdrawal of the Juppé plan as a precondition for negotiations. Soon after, when Blondel visited Barrot, he too dropped his demand for withdrawal. Now, "global negotiations" would be enough, said the FO potentate. "On Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday," *Le Monde* observed, "discreet and even secret contacts multiplied between the government and the unions" (*Ibid.*). The article continued:

"The CGT and the FO, whose two leaders talked to each other by phone on Sunday afternoon, maintained their demand for wider negotiations, but also made it known that certain signs [from the government] would make a de-escalation more likely: the suspension of the Le Vert Commission, the indefinite postponement of plans to re-structure the railroads, guarantees on the retirement age of railway workers."

Thus, "Alain Juppé had all the cards in his hand before his intervention on Sunday evening." In other words, the union chiefs had told Juppé what it would take to end the strikes.

On the morning of Friday, 15 December, as the mood of strikers and demonstrators was turning more militant and growing numbers were becoming convinced that they had Juppé on the run, a tersely worded communiqué from the central office of the CGT railway division arrived at strike headquarters. It read: "The CGT proposes a modification of the form of the current movement, while preserving its unity and vigilance...." (*Le Monde*, 17-18 December 1995). Although couched in typically evasive language, the message was clear: end the strike. The "democratic" scruples that had prevented the CGT leaders from broadening the strike were set aside when it came time to call it off.

The reaction, at least among the most class-conscious of the strikers, was one of indignation. One 26-year-old

mechanic from the Gare du Nord said:

"I have slept here every night since Monday. What nauseates me is the communiqués of the unions that are weakening. They pull back and that demoralizes me. If we settle for these petty corporatist concessions, we will be taken for clowns. It is not correct to put aside the demands for the withdrawal of the Juppé plan, while that is what they are clamoring for in the streets."

The 17 December *Le Monde* article continued:

"An official of the CGT does not hide his bitterness to see the old strike-ending reflexes of the federations and confederations. This was more than a simple economic struggle. It had become a critique of the élites, of liberalism imposed with baton blows and downsizings, of wealth not shared, of a society that is not made for human beings. At this point, the movement needed to be political. It was leading to an awakening of consciousness and they did not have the right to betray it."

While the strikers' assembly in Paris voted overwhelmingly to continue the strike, there was no organized alternative to the existing leadership. As doubt and demoralization grew among the ranks, the strikers' assemblies became increasingly divided. As the unity required to maintain the strikes dissipated, a return to work became inevitable. Once the railway workers, the backbone of the resistance, abandoned their strike, other public workers soon followed.

The most politically advanced elements understood what had happened. In summing up, one CGT official said:

"On the level of the railworkers union, our complete victory is undeniable. On the national level, Viannet thought he was in a much better negotiating position because he had not sought an absolute confrontation with Juppé. He thought that there was no alternative to Juppé. There had to have been several consultations with the PCF..."

An FO delegate at the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris pointed to the sabotage by the bureaucrats:

"The national leadership of the FO and CGT never wanted a general strike. Viannet and Blondel shit in their pants at the idea. The movement was becoming too spontaneous, too autonomous. They saw that happening on the ground. They slammed on the brakes rather than allow the organization of general strike committees in each locality."

## Results and Prospects

As in 1936 and 1968, the mobilizations of 1995 were brought to a premature halt by the treachery of the official leadership of the workers' movement. Because the crisis was of shorter duration and less explicitly political than the other two, the betrayal was perhaps less apparent. But for anyone making a close analysis of the events and willing to call things by their proper names, the evidence is clear. As in the other two great episodes, the problem was not the backwardness of the workers, but the duplicity of their leaders. It is the duty of revolutionaries to draw the lessons for the working class—to make it known, first, that they were betrayed by their leaders, and then to explain why and how they were betrayed. Yet, as we indicated above, this is something that France's self-styled Trotskyists, with their

significant implantation in the unions, apparently lack the political backbone to do.

The strike wave was, first of all, a reaction against an attempt by the French ruling class to increase profitability by lowering the living standards of the workers. Such "reform packages" are not unique to France; capitalists around the world are currently demanding similar concessions. Sometimes this takes the form of direct attacks on wages, and sometimes, as in France, attacks on government policies and programs which lessen class inequalities through a limited redistribution of wealth. One major function of European integration is to create a zone in which capital can flow unimpeded across national frontiers. To the extent that social programs are partially funded by taxes on profits, increased social spending tends to act as a disincentive to capital investment. Moreover, the existence of such programs tends to make workers less fearful, and therefore less docile on the job. In order to make its national economy as attractive as possible to investors, each country is thus supposed to reduce taxes on corporate profits, financial transactions and investment earnings. At the same time, bankers demand a stable currency to ensure that their loans will not be paid back in depreciated money.

Because government expenditures in excess of revenue tend to be inflationary, and can result in monetary instability, the capitalist ideologues proclaim that "we" can no longer "afford" to maintain the current level of social benefits. Thus the capitalists use European integration, and/or "globalization," to pit workers of the various capitalist states against one another in a race to the bottom. The Juppé plan, as the French workers realized, was their bourgeoisie's starting pistol in this race.

In response to the capitalist offensive, the labor bureaucrats pursue distinct aims of their own. Their prin-

cipal concern is to preserve their role as intermediaries between the working class and the capitalists. That role, however, depends upon certain institutional arrangements. During what the French call "*les trente glorieuses*"—the thirty years of relative prosperity following World War II—the arrangement, in France as in other advanced capitalist countries, was that the capitalists made various material concessions to the workers, for which they allowed the labor bureaucracy to take a certain amount of credit. In return, the bureaucracy—whether Stalinist, social democratic, or openly pro-capitalist—used the authority derived from their ability to "deliver the goods" to keep the class struggle safely within the bounds of the existing order.

Today those arrangements are unraveling. An important factor in this is the triumph of counterrevolution in the degenerated Soviet workers' state. The USSR originated from the victory of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and, despite the profound bureaucratization which it underwent under Stalin and his successors, its very existence tended to act as a restraint on the capitalists' inclination to engage in frontal assaults on the working class. Today the "Red Menace" is gone, and the pressure on the capitalists to increase profitability has led them to conclude that they no longer need to maintain the post-war class equilibrium. Instead, they are turning to confrontation. This creates a dilemma for traditional, class-collaborationist labor lieutenants, whose authority rests on the ability to deliver certain limited concessions to the workers. When the capitalists demand concessions, the labor bureaucrats and reformist politicians react in different ways. Some abandon any pretense of fighting for the workers at all, and sign on as out-and-out pawns of the ruling class, like the "New Realists" in Tony Blair's British Labour Party. Others, fearing that the capitalist assaults will ultimately cost them their sinecures, are prepared to defend their intermediary role through partial mobilizations of their working-class base.

This is essentially what happened in France last December. Realizing that they were no longer being accorded the respect to which they were accustomed, Blondel and Viannet felt they had no choice but to bring the public sector out on strike. As the movement developed and assumed a broader and more radical character, the union leaders were compelled to assume a public posture militant enough to remain in control. But, when the popular movement began to push the envelope of reformism, and Juppé indicated that he was willing to compromise, Blondel and Viannet managed—if only narrowly—to put on the brakes.

The compromise they reached with Juppé settled nothing important. The government made a temporary tactical retreat on a few of its more audacious demands, but its war on the French working class is being pursued with renewed vigor. The French workers, on the other hand, have not been defeated. Although their struggle was derailed, they demonstrated to themselves, and to the world, that the forces of capital are not unassailable, that the working class still possesses the will to resist,

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and the objective capacity to triumph. The battle will soon be joined again. This is what gives the lessons of November-December 1995 a particular importance.

### What Was to Be Done?

The main immediate weakness of the strike movement was its failure to throw up any structures capable of challenging bureaucratic control. Although there were elected assemblies in each workplace and locality, they never coalesced into an authoritative body capable of coordinating the strike on a national level. The absence of any sort of national strike committee allowed Blondel and Viannet to retain central control of the strike, and to sabotage it at the crucial moment. One of the key lessons for the future is the necessity of an elected, representative national coordinating body. The election of strike committees at a local, regional and national level could also provide an opportunity for revolutionary militants to intervene and compete for political influence.

The French events demonstrate that, in a period when the ruling classes are on the attack, even defensive struggles of the working class cannot long remain confined to the economic sphere. The strike of railway workers soon became a magnet for the entire proletariat and other oppressed groups. They quickly began to demand not only the withdrawal of the Juppé plan, but the resignation of Juppé himself. But who was to replace Juppé? In the larger, strategic sense, a general strike would have posed the question of political power, at least implicitly. In such situations there is no substitute for a revolutionary party capable of contending for state power.

Yet the absence of such a leadership does not imply that the most advanced elements in the class should simply have sat on their hands or, what amounts to the same thing, insisted that "building a revolutionary party" was a pre-condition for confronting Juppé aggressively. It is of course impossible to guarantee a victory in advance, particularly given the treacherous character of the union leaderships, but to use the possibility of betrayal as a reason not to advocate broadening and generalizing the struggle, or directing it against the Juppé government, can only be called surrender.

The appropriate tactic was to agitate for a general strike with the aim of junking Juppé's plan and ousting his government. Such an initiative could have exacerbated divisions in the ruling class and rallied the support of the broadest layers of the working people behind the organized labor movement.

A defeat for Juppé would likely have created a pre-revolutionary situation, which might, or might not, have been channeled into a new round of elections. Even if Juppé had been replaced by some other bourgeois or social-democratic politician, the workers would still have won a victory, and Juppé's successor would think twice before going on the attack again. A victory over Juppé, based on the development and extension of the workers' assemblies, would have greatly accelerated the growth of revolutionary sentiment within the working

class, and could have presented important opportunities for a small revolutionary organization to grow rapidly through direct recruitment, and more importantly, through splits in the cadre of the larger ostensibly revolutionary organizations.

The working class cannot become a contender for political power solely on the basis of its own narrow economic interests. It must simultaneously champion the cause of all the oppressed—immigrants, youth, the unemployed, women and minorities—and combat attempts to divide it along ethnic, racial or national lines. This is not a matter of altruism, but of survival. Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (which is the deadliest enemy of the union movement) has already had some success in channeling the rage of the most debased and ignorant lumpen and petty-bourgeois layers into hatred and violence against immigrants. The National Front has recently gained ground among the backward elements of the working class.

The French bourgeoisie, while it disdains Le Pen, instinctively seeks to direct plebeian anger at targets other than itself. Immigrants provide the most convenient scapegoat, and Le Pen the best trained attack dog. With an anti-immigrant police sweep called Operation Vigipirate, and proposed legislation aimed at further restricting immigrants' rights, the government is flirting with Le Pen, and stirring the racist cauldron. Any working-class leadership worthy of the name must demand full citizenship rights for immigrants, and take the lead in the fight to build broad united-front mobilizations against the ultra-right.

Finally, the workers' movement must be clear about its long-term objectives. The mobilizations of last winter took to task the existing social order with only the vaguest of ideas about what to put in its place. But the current attacks against the working class are not the whim of a particular set of politicians. They express the most pressing immediate needs of a social system based upon private ownership and production for profit. It is called capitalism. *Nouvelles philosophes* and CGT bureaucrats notwithstanding, the solution remains that advocated by the most advanced detachments of the workers' movement for the past 150 years: the removal of the major means of creating wealth from private hands, and their conscious control by society as a whole. This is called socialism. It cannot be attained without the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class and the destruction of its state. If socialism is in disrepute today, it is not because it is intrinsically deficient, but because of the ideological pressure of the bourgeoisie and the countless betrayals committed by the Stalinists and Social Democrats in its name.

In France as elsewhere, the revival of revolutionary socialism within the working class requires the conscious, organized presence of those who espouse it. Only thus can a successful conclusion be written to a new chapter of class struggles in France—and Europe—the origins of which may one day be traced to the upheavals of December 1995. ■

## SLP...

*continued from page 32*

stabbed the miners in the back.

This betrayal drastically weakened the trade union movement as a whole, and was a victory for Thatcher. It was also a victory for her union-bashing legislation requiring mandatory ballots before strikes, banning solidarity action and effective picketing, and giving corporations and the state wide leeway to sue unions and seize their assets. The resulting demoralization of the working class strengthened the right wing in the Labour Party, and hardened their intention to sever the party's historic connection to the unions.

The SLP was conceived as a reassertion of traditional left-reformist Labourism. Clause IV of the SLP's interim constitution advocates "common/social ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange," just as the Labour Party constitution used to. But the political center of gravity of the SLP is considerably to the left of the old Labour Party.

The SLP membership is chiefly composed of working-class militants who have traditionally looked to Scargill and the Labour Lefts for leadership, along with a few hundred "far-left" activists of various political persuasions. In an attempt to ensure control, the leadership inserted a bureaucratic clause in the SLP's interim constitution, which is not up for discussion until next year. The clause stipulates:

"Individuals and organisations other than bona fide trade unions which have their own programme, principles and policies, distinctive and separate propaganda, or which are engaged in the promotion of policies in opposition to those of the Party, shall be ineligible for affiliation to the Party."

This is so sweeping that it could be used to justify suppressing virtually any criticism. Attempts to enforce such measures can only paralyze the fledgling SLP. But while a few individuals accused of retaining memberships in other left groups have been targeted, the internal life of the SLP is on the whole quite open and democratic.

### SLP's Founding Conference

The wide-ranging and open discussions at the May congress confounded many of the SLP's Labour-loyal "Trotskyist" critics who expected it to be run like some kind of neo-Stalinist boot camp. The congress was hurriedly prepared, and flawed by the fact that it was far too short (one day) to address many important questions. Nevertheless, there were several significant discussions. The first of these focused on a paper on economics, put forward by Scargill himself, which addressed the immediate demands of the working class, and tacked on a call for socialism.

There were several attempts to amend the economics document. The most serious was by a group of militants who had participated in earlier discussions in an SLP economics workshop. They proposed to insert a call for "nationalisation without compensation of the major

capitalist concerns," and pointed out that as "the capitalist state exists to keep the ruling class in power," it could hardly be transformed into an agency for socialism. After some discussion, this amendment was defeated, but the fact that it was supported by a sizable minority indicates the strength of leftist sentiment in the SLP.

Another important controversy took place over the Irish question. The leadership's rather equivocal document was improved by an amendment calling for the immediate withdrawal of the British Army from Northern Ireland. With the membership overwhelmingly in favor of a "Troops Out Now" position, the leadership quickly climbed on board. Such a motion would never have passed in the old Labour Party.

This is a good beginning. But to promote a class solution to the communal conflict in Ireland, the SLP must be prepared to go beyond simple opposition to British intervention. It must transcend the left Republicanism (encapsulated in the call for a "United Ireland") common throughout the British left, and recognize that the call for "self-determination" will not solve the national question. A proletarian solution can only be achieved through political struggle to break Protestant workers from Orange bigotry. But this in turn means appealing to their common *class* interests with the oppressed Catholic proletarians—not trying to give Green nationalism a left tinge.

The third major debate at the congress arose over the policy paper on black liberation and the call for abolition of Britain's immigration laws. An Asian woman from Birmingham gave a powerful speech explaining that she had left the Labour Party chiefly because of its support for restrictive immigration laws. Speaking for the leadership, Brian Heron argued that, just as Cuba has the right to keep out counterrevolutionaries, so too the SLP would wish to keep reactionaries out of Britain, and used as an example a flood of South African whites fleeing a workers' revolution there. After a lengthy and sometimes confused debate, the proposal to scrap immigration laws was defeated, and the leadership's call for reforming them passed by a vote of 182 to 114, the narrowest margin of the whole congress.

There were few surprises in the leadership elections. The SLP's three national officers were elected unopposed: Arthur Scargill as President, NUM Vice-President Frank Cave as SLP Vice-President, and Rail, Maritime and Transport union militant Patrick Sikorski as National Secretary. The interim steering committee put forward a list of recommended candidates for the National Executive Committee (NEC), who were duly elected. However, some of the other 70-odd candidates who stood for the NEC also received substantial support, with the closest finishing only a single vote behind the last candidate on the NEC slate.

For all the criticisms that can be made of the SLP and its leadership, the founding congress demonstrated that it is both an organization with a small but real base among militant workers, and that it is open to serious discussion and debate. As such, the SLP offers the best

opportunity in decades to root genuinely revolutionary Marxist politics in the British working class.

### Labour-Loyal 'Trotskyists' & the SLP

One would expect that most leftists would be eager to participate in building this new working-class organization and transforming it into a party with the political clarity, internal cohesion and fighting capacity to lead the British working class. This was certainly the conclusion reached by supporters of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) in Britain, who decided that participation in the SLP was more important than maintaining a propaganda circle. If a similar development were to take place elsewhere, our comrades would respond in the same way.

Unfortunately, only a handful of the thousands of organized leftists in Britain have drawn similar conclusions so far. In part, this is attributable to the SLP leadership's refusal to allow organizations to affiliate directly; those wishing to participate must leave their organizations and join as individuals. But this is not the main problem. Many of Britain's "Trotskyist" groups seem miffed that Scargill and his followers parted company with Labour at all. This sentiment is often lightly camouflaged with facile "left" criticisms of the SLP's supposed parliamentary orientation, or the inadequacies of its initial program. Yet the angle of these objections makes it clear that they are not raised to push the SLP into becoming more than just an electoral machine, nor to sharpen its programmatic positions. Instead these "left" criticisms are raised to justify abstention from the SLP project and/or continuing electoral support to the official neo-Thatcherite leadership of the Labour Party.

The largest left group in Britain is Tony Cliff's Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Boasting 10,000 members, and purporting to represent a socialist alternative to Labour, the SWP rarely transcends left reformism in practice. It has existed for over 40 years, but has yet to lead any significant strikes or play an important role in any of the struggles of the working class. While the SWP supported Brenda Nixon in the February by-election, it has since played down the potential importance of the SLP. The SWP leadership doubtless fears that, if the SLP takes off, it will recruit at their expense, particularly among trade unionists. Certainly the SLP's willingness to defend Cuba against capitalist counterrevolution makes more sense than the Cliffite dogma that Cuba is a "state-capitalist" society, and that its reintegration into the American neo-colonial empire would not significantly affect most Cubans.

Following the SLP congress, *Socialist Worker* (11 May) predicted that "the main focus of SLP activity will be elections" and attacked Scargill's remark that there is "no fundamental difference between the Conservative Party, New Labour and the Liberal Party." In terms of political program this is a simple statement of fact. To win the loyalty of the masses of working people the SLP must indeed do a great deal more than run for office. But the SWP itself has not stood a candidate against the

Labour Party for almost 20 years! The Cliffites' counterposition of "class struggle" to "electoralism" may appear militant to the uninitiated, but in fact amounts to a cover for voting for Tony Blair:

"Millions of people still look to the election of a Labour government to bring at least some improvements after 17 years of the Tories.

"They will have to live through the experience of a Labour government to be convinced of the need for a socialist alternative."

—*Socialist Worker*, 11 May

This is lesser evilism pure and simple. The "millions of people" to whom *Socialist Worker* is adapting are not looking to the Labour Party as any kind of socialist or working-class alternative to the Tories. No one in Britain believes that Labour will lead *any* kind of struggle against the bosses. But still the "revolutionary" SWP perversely insists that workers must vote for the "New Realists" as a necessary step on the road to socialist consciousness.

Labour loyalism is even stronger among some of the smaller "Trotskyist" groupings. The Workers International League (WIL), for instance, simply condemns the SLP as an adventure. This theme was taken up by Al Richardson, who sometimes stands in as a theoretician for the WIL, in a recent article entitled "Scargill's SLP in perspective." Warning that "omens are not good" for the SLP, Richardson compares its founding to the split of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1931, when:

"the ostensible reason [for the ILP's split] was over whether the ILP MPs in parliament should be bound by the policies of the ILP conference or by the standing orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party, a distinction that could not be expected to make much sense to the ordinary party member, and still less to the voter outside. Scargill's contention that he has left the Labour Party because it has ceased to be socialist can hardly appear any more convincing, since the Labour Party has never been socialist, and you would have to be very old even to remember a time when it used socialist language to justify its actions. The working class depends upon unity for its very survival under capitalism. Splitting its institutions is a very serious matter, however necessary it may be for the building of revolutionary parties, and it has to be justified before the whole class in the clearest possible way. And the old ILP and the new SLP are far from being revolutionary parties. "The second point to note is that both splits took place at the wrong time. Labour in 1932 was moving rapidly leftwards, and the ILP would have built up a greater measure of support within its ranks if it had stayed. Blair's government has yet to come into office, but when it does it will come into collision with a major public service union, and if, as I suspect, he seeks to cut Labour's links with the unions by introducing state funding of political parties in proportion to the votes they gain (with or without a system of proportional representation), a major split could follow with the others. The worst calculation in politics is to mistake the first month of pregnancy for the eighth."

—*Workers News*, May-June

Richardson's speculation about the house-trained remnants of the 1980s Labour left suddenly rising in revolt is implausible, to say the least. There could have been a revolt over Kinnock's role in knifing the 1984-85

miners' strike, but there wasn't. That would have been "comprehensible" to the mass of the working class. It was, after all, the most important struggle of the decade. But there was no split. Why not? Because of the depth of parliamentary illusions in the British working class. These illusions were shaken, but not destroyed by the experience of the miners' strike.

It took *ten years* of further betrayals by the "New Realists," culminating in the abandonment of Labour's longstanding paper commitment to "socialism," for the accumulated anger to find a political expression. Yet still the insipid Labour "Lefts" cling to Blair. Why should anyone expect them to split over measures that Blair has announced even before he gets elected? Does Richardson really think that Rodney Bickerstaffe, Bill Morris et al., are likely to strike out on their own when Blair introduces state funding of political parties? Similar measures have been enacted elsewhere in Europe without producing any such splits. Richardson's fantasies about the "Lefts" suddenly developing a backbone and resisting Blair's attempts to free himself from the connection to organized labor are based on little more than wishful thinking.

Richardson is quite right that the Labour Party has never been socialist. But it has been seen to represent some kind of socialist (or at least anti-capitalist) alternative by a large section of its base. The illusion that left Labourism somehow represents workers' interests against the bosses has bound the more militant layers of the proletariat to Labour for decades. Such consciousness is contradictory, as it embodies an aspiration to fight the capitalists, but seeks to do so by fantastic and utopian means.

Richardson begins from the premise that maintaining the unity of the Labour Party is of vital interest to the working class. He recognizes that Labour no longer even pretends to offer an alternative to capitalism, but he does not believe that any significant section of Labour's traditional base wishes to "abolish capitalism and replace it with a Socialist system," as printed on the SLP membership card. His conclusion is to call for "unity" under Blair.

The SLP has not been cooked up by a handful of declassed petty-bourgeois radicals. It is a serious attempt by some of the most left-wing elements in the trade-union bureaucracy, based on the most class-conscious section of the British working class, to reassert the necessity for working people to have their *own* party in pursuit of their *class* interests. To dismiss this initiative in order to cling to the Labour Party bureaucracy, as it plunges to the right, reflects a loss of confidence in the capacity of any substantial section of the working class to recognize, at even the most basic level, its historic interests.

### **Workers Power: Opportunists as Confusionists**

The WIL and Al Richardson represent the uniformly hostile attitude of mainstream Labour-loyal "Trotsky-

ism" toward the SLP. The posture of the centrists of Workers Power (WP) has been less consistent. Initially they showed some enthusiasm:

"Workers Power welcomes Arthur Scargill's call for discussions on the left to consider the establishment of a Socialist Labour Party (SLP).

"...at the present moment, when hundreds of thousands of trade unionists and Labour supporters are deeply concerned about the right wing rampage of Blair's New Labour, Arthur Scargill's initiative provides an opportunity to address them with the revolutionary socialist politics, practice and arguments that can really solve the crisis of leadership in the working class movement."

—*Workers Power*, December 1995

But they included the following escape clause:

"A revolutionary SLP would not turn its back on the millions of workers who still look to the Labour Party through their trade unions and support it through their votes at elections. It would call for a vote for Labour in any constituency where there was no revolutionary candidate, and continue to demand that Labour acts [sic] in the interests of those workers. This is crucial to ensuring that revolutionaries in a new party are not cut off from workers who have yet to break from Labour."

—*Ibid.*

It has been clear from the beginning that a "revolutionary SLP" was not going to spring into the world like Athena from the head of Zeus. The SLP's initiators saw themselves as merely *reasserting* working-class politics against the Thatcherization of the Labour Party. Despite their left-reformist programmatic framework, they at least recognized that Blair's "SDP Mark II" did not deserve any kind of support.

As it became clear that the SLP was serious about standing against Labour in elections, WP withdrew its previous lukewarm support. For these centrists, electoral support for the Labour Party is the *sine qua non* of socialist politics. Workers Power complained that Scargill's draft constitution "would also preclude joint membership with the Labour Party" (shocking!) and issued the following warning:

"The central task remains: to break millions of workers away from Blair; to use the unions link with Labour to place demands on Labour and to organise resistance to Labour once in office. Both Scargill and Militant Labour as new converts to 'life outside the Labour Party' are demonstrating an alarming inclination to ignore these tasks.

"On present form Scargill may be capable of organising a bureaucratically run Stalinist sect, but not the fighting alternative to Labour the working class needs.

"The SLP has been, so far, a squandered opportunity: part of the workers movement's past, not its future."

—*Workers Power*, February

These criticisms parallel the Blairite attacks on Scargill. Despite their talk about "break[ing] millions of workers away from Blair," Workers Power supported Blair's candidate against Brenda Nixon in the Hemsworth by-election:

"Workers Power members and supporters will not be voting for the SLP in Hemsworth.

"We will vote Labour. Not because we cannot bear to vote against Labour. We have and will vote for left-wing can-

didates representing an ongoing struggle by a section of the working class breaking to the left.

"But in the absence of such conditions, a critical vote for Labour is the best way to put Labour to the test, exposing the illusions of millions of workers.

"Our job is not to put illusions, which the mass of the working class do not have, in the SLP.

"The Labour Party is the main obstacle. The best way to tear it down is to put it in office, demand that it act in the interests of the working class and organise to force these demands upon it."

—*Ibid.*

This sums up WP's methodology: Blair's Labour Party has a mass base, so we can vote for it; the SLP doesn't, so we can't. The fact that Labour candidates stood on a program that was openly Thatcherite, whereas the SLP campaigned on a program defending working-class interests (albeit within a left-reformist framework), is of no consequence.

Yet the vitality shown thus far by the SLP has apparently given Workers Power second thoughts, and some long-time WP members resigned over this issue. In an article published on the eve of the SLP conference, Richard Brenner admitted that:

"Scargill's bureaucratic plan has not prevented political debate from emerging within the party. At several pre-conference workshops centrist and even revolutionary minority positions emerged.

"In *Workers Power* 198 we said that the SLP was now 'immune' from a democratic internal discussion. Clearly this was premature. The Conference itself will show whether revolutionary opponents of the Scargill leadership can make their voices heard.

"SLP members at this month's founding conference are still faced with a choice.

"They can open up debate, allowing affiliation from the thousands of socialists already organised in left groups outside the SLP. They can reject the warmed-over Stalinism on offer from the leadership. They can choose a revolutionary socialist alternative to Labour.

"Or they can follow Arthur Scargill down the road of a bureaucratic and reformist SLP."

—*Workers Power*, May

The headline of the article beside this piece reads: "Why we still say: Vote Labour." WP is in effect giving the SLP membership an ultimatum: if you do not adopt our "revolutionary" program wholesale (including voting for Tony Blair to "force Labour to meet workers needs") we'll support Tony Blair against you! It is pretty easy to imagine the rude response of workers who have joined the SLP out of hostility to Blair's "New Realism."

WP seems likely to face further internal turmoil and defections over the SLP in the coming period. There is a stark contradiction between its February pronouncement that the SLP was a "bureaucratically run Stalinist sect," doomed to "either sink rapidly into obscurity, or become a confusing obstacle in the way of socialists who want to really get rid of capitalism," and its report on the SLP conference:

"The founding conference indicated that the SLP is a party that remains in the process of formation. In its majority, it supports the policies of the man it regards as its greatest single asset—Arthur Scargill. The members are in high

morale, and roared their approval when Scargill called for 'a recruitment campaign the likes of which this country has never seen before'.

"Whether this really happens we shall see. But with a small but significant minority clearly seeking revolutionary policies and answers, one thing is certain: the struggle for the soul of the Socialist Labour Party has only just begun."

—*Workers Power*, June

## Spartacist League: Sideline Sectarianism

In a recently released "internal" memo, the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B), the stunted and ineffectual British branch of James Robertson's declining International Communist League (ICL), was described as being in a "precarious" situation, without a functional leadership and "chronically internally divided." Certainly its track record in relation to major developments in the British labor movement is unimpressive. The last time there was significant left motion in the Labour Party (in the early 1980s, as Tony Benn led the "Lefts" in challenging the Cold Warrior leadership) the Robertsonites were initially indifferent. Only after Benn's defeat did they decide that the issues posed were substantial enough to have supported him.

In recent years, the SL/B has refused any kind of electoral support to Kinnock and Blair, and has repeatedly called for Labour's base to break with the New Realists. Yet, despite this formally correct posture, when the SLP was formed, the SL/B deliberately abstained. While unwilling to participate in the SLP, the SL/B at least supported Brenda Nixon in February and has, on paper, acknowledged the historic significance of the SLP:

"For communists who fight to build a revolutionary internationalist party of the proletariat, breaking the stranglehold of the Labour Party over the working class is a key strategic task. Although the programme of Scargill's SLP is simply that of 'old' Labour as against the 'New' Labour Party of Tony Blair, this split within the Labour Party offers the possibility for a fundamental realignment of the political configuration in this country out of which a genuine working-class party can be constituted."

—*Workers Hammer*, February/March

If the formation of the SLP is an opportunity for "fundamental realignment," why is the SL/B so determined to abstain? For Marxists the maintenance of small propaganda groups is not an end in itself. Such formations only serve as a means to preserve and promote the ideas of revolutionary socialism and to aid in introducing them into the mainstream of the labor movement. But for the Robertsonians the chief object is to preserve and extend their own separate organization. Despite their shrill insistence that they alone are the true defenders of Trotskyism, the SL/B is a peculiar kind of political organization, which is not, at bottom, cohered by agreement to a common program, but rather by unquestioning obedience to their "uniquely correct" leadership. To maintain its authority, the leadership must ensure that the ranks are isolated from sustained collaboration with other leftists. This, and not political principle, is why



JOHN STURROCK/NETWORK

### Miners' strike officially begins, 19 April 1984

Robertson's minions cannot join the SLP.

To justify abstention, *Workers Hammer* strikes a pose as a tribune of the people, and attacks the SLP leadership, who don't have:

"a word to say in opposition to the escalating anti-immigrant racism codified in the Asylum Bill but the SLP's constitution would prohibit membership to asylum-seekers and recent immigrants by confining membership to those who have 'resided in Wales, Scotland, England or Ireland for more than one year'. Not a word has yet been expressed against the British Army occupation of Northern Ireland..."

—*Ibid.*

The residence clause in the SLP's interim constitution is indeed scandalous, but it is also opposed by a large section of the membership. While the constitution was not open for discussion, according to the ground rules laid down by the leadership, the SLP congress did vote to oppose the Asylum Bill. This indicates that the residency clause could well be dropped at the next party congress. In any case, the SL/B is in no position to influence internal debates going on in the SLP, for the simple reason that they refuse to participate in them.

The SL/B's posture toward the SLP seems, in its own way, as contradictory as that of *Workers Power*. If, as they insist, the SL/B uniquely embodies the program of revolutionary Marxism, how can a "genuine working

class party," i.e., a socialist party, come out of the SLP without their assistance? Their repeated calls for breaking with the Labour traitors and forging a mass workers' party ring hollow in light of their abstention from the most important left split from Labour in over half a century. For Marxists, organizational forms are subordinate to the advancement of the socialist program. For the SL/B it seems to be the other way around.

Thus far the Robertsonians have pursued a two-pronged tactic toward the SLP. On the one hand, they attack the SLP as, at best, indifferent to racism or British troops in Northern Ireland, and therefore unworthy of their participation. On the other hand, they run around loudly denouncing known leftists within the SLP, in an apparent attempt to finger them to the leaders responsible for the policies *Workers Hammer* objects to.

As we noted above, there have been only a few relatively minor incidents to date, but a witchhunt remains at least a potential danger in the SLP. Tony Blair and his cohorts would like nothing better than to see the new party torn apart in internecine squabbling. All members of the SLP have a duty to abide by the decisions of the majority, but it is also necessary that members have the opportunity to argue freely for their views. This is not a matter of abstract morality, but of practical necessity. Attempts to deal with political differences by fiat rather than discussion, education and debate can only prevent the development of the critical, self-confident, politically educated cadres necessary to provide leadership in the class battles ahead.

### Militant Labour & Labour 'Lefts'

A few tendencies on the British left have welcomed the SLP. Militant Labour—a group of more than a thousand, which recently surfaced after spending more than three decades in the Labour Party, initially tried to participate in the formation of the SLP. They were rebuffed when they made it clear that they wanted to affiliate openly with the new party. In recent years, Militant Labour has achieved substantial electoral success, particularly in Scotland, where their candidates have won a number of council seats. In the 1992 general election, one of their candidates, Tommy Sheridan, captured nearly 20 percent of the vote for a Glasgow parliamentary seat.

We oppose the exclusion of Militant Labour from the SLP. Yet it is clear that they are to the right of the SLP leadership on the critical question of voting for the Blairites. This was illustrated by a recent *Militant* article pointing out that Scargill's refusal to enter into any electoral arrangements with Militant Labour could result in a situation where both groups stood candidates against a Blairite:

"Scargill made similar points when he addressed 200 people at the Nottingham SLP launch. Members of Militant Labour explained that we were considering standing in Nottingham North in the general election.

"We pointed out that the MP for Nottingham South is Alan Simpson, a left-wing member of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs, leaving Nottingham East and other con-

stituencies in the area for consideration by the SLP. We raised the idea of further discussion so that socialists did not stand against one another."

—*Militant*, 26 April

Militant Labour clearly considers it wrong to run against the loyal "opposition" to the Labour leadership. Selective critical support to oppositionists in a bourgeois workers party can be an appropriate tactic when there is a clear programmatic distinction. But Alan Simpson and the rest of the Labour loyalists in the Socialist Campaign Group have made it clear that they have no intention of breaking with Labour's "New Realists." They therefore deserve no more support than any other candidate running on Blair's ticket. *Militant's* impulse to support the likes of Simpson is a sign that, despite its recent organizational separation, its worldview remains firmly within the framework of left Labourism.

### CPGB: 'Leninists' Without a Program

Another organization taking a generally positive view of the SLP is the small group claiming the mantle of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). On the eve of the SLP Congress they wrote:

"Enormous potential exists in the formation of the Socialist Labour Party. These are exciting times for all who are committed to socialism and working class liberation.

"The drift of mainstream politics to the right has left a huge vacuum. Politicians from all the capitalist parties now treat the working class—the overwhelming majority of people in Britain—as if they simply did not exist.

"New' Labour in particular simply takes the support of workers for granted. Its leaders believe it does not matter how much they are attacked, vilified, ignored or exploited: the working class has no option but to come crawling back to Labour.

"The SLP initiative has shown that a layer of workers—a thin layer, but important nevertheless—has started to break from the suffocating embrace of this treacherous party. These comrades have begun to search for a viable political alternative to Blair, an alternative that can at last start to put socialism and working class power on the agenda.

"All communists and genuine partisans of our class must welcome this development warmly. The SLP could be an important movement in the fight of our working class in Britain to form itself into a class. As Marx and Engels put it, communists have no interests separate and apart from the working class. We do not have a predefined set of sectarian principles with which to judge this movement of the class. On the contrary, communists always seek to bring to the fore the general interests, the 'interests of the movement as a whole'."

—*Weekly Worker*, 2 May

Given their recognition that the SLP has begun to break the stranglehold of Labour's "New Realists" over the working class, one might expect that the CPGB, a small organization without any significant working-class base of its own, would conclude that the time, resources and energy required to maintain a separate organization and publish a weekly press could be better spent getting the SLP off the ground. Instead, the CPGB prefers to project itself from outside the SLP as in some way the organizer and inspirer for "leftists" in the SLP.

Despite its name, the CPGB is not a party, but rather a shifting agglomeration of centrist groupuscules, Stalinist fragments, refugees from Cliffism and various other bits of political flotsam. It is, in short, a classic centrist combination. Its *modus operandi* is "freedom of criticism, unity in action," with more emphasis on the former than the latter. This formula is lifted from the early years of the Bolsheviks, when they were in a common party with the Mensheviks. In practice, it means that every disparate fragment can say whatever it wants whenever it wants. The revolutionary Communist International, founded by Lenin and Trotsky, insisted on democratic centralism as the organizational principle for its sections and repudiated the formula, "freedom of criticism, unity in action," as a corollary of Kautsky's theory of the "party of the whole class."

At the core of the CPGB is a faction known as the "Provisional Central Committee," a grouping that published the *Leninist* magazine in the early 1980s. The key members of the *Leninist* collective, who derived from the ultra-Stalinist New Communist Party, have avoided grappling with the record of Trotsky's Left Opposition and its struggle against the corruption of the international communist movement by Stalinism. Rather than address the world-historic issues that marked the political destruction of the Third International (e.g., the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927; the German Communist Party's capitulation to Hitler without firing a shot; the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s; and the social imperialism of the Western Communist Parties during World War II) the CPGB's "Provisional Central Committee" endlessly agonizes about the need for a revolutionary program.

Lacking a coherent program, or any understanding of the historical evolution of the socialist movement, the CPGB is so amorphous that it could not possibly maintain any kind of political identity as a current within a broader working-class movement. This explains the CPGB leadership's insistence on remaining organizationally aloof from the SLP.

Marx's famous observation (in his 5 May 1875 letter to Wilhelm Bracke) that "Every step of a real movement is more important than a dozen programs" has long been a favorite of pseudo-leftists seeking to rationalize their opportunist maneuvers. But the formation of the SLP is exactly the sort of situation Marx was referring to: it is a development that could potentially change the whole terrain of left politics in Britain. Most left groups have been slow to grasp this, and very few have drawn the appropriate political conclusions. The task of serious socialists is to reject the false alternatives of reformism and centrism, Labour loyalism and sterile sectarianism, and to seize the opportunity represented by the formation of the SLP. The SLP not only has the potential to become a stepping-stone for the resurgence of a fighting workers' movement in Britain, but also to provide a catalyst for similar developments internationally. The task of Marxists is to struggle to help it realize that potential. ■

*Scargill Launches New Party*

# Left Split From Labour



Arthur Scargill, Patrick Sikorski, Carolyn Sikorski on platform during SLP Congress

In London on 4 May, 600 delegates attended the founding congress of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), the most significant left-wing split from the Labour Party since 1931. The SLP was launched largely on the initiative of Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). He first floated the idea of a new party after the 1995 Labour Party conference dropped the clause in its constitution advocating "common ownership" of the "means of production, distribution and exchange." While Clause IV had always been a dead letter in terms of Labour's actions, it did express the party's historic attachment to a social-democratic version of "socialism." By getting rid of Clause IV, Tony Blair and the "New Realists" running the Labour Party signaled their commitment to the interests of British capitalism, without regard to the sensibilities of Labour's traditional working-class base.

After meeting with various left-wing trade-union officials and left Labourites (including a few putative Trotskyists), Scargill produced a draft statement, "Future Strategy for the Left," calling for a new party. He also enlisted the aid of a few leftish lawyers to produce a draft

constitution. In January, Scargill resigned from the Labour Party, and within weeks the SLP was issuing membership cards. In February, the fledgling party stood Brenda Nixon (a leading activist in "Women against Pit Closures" during 1992-93) in a parliamentary by-election in Hemsworth, Yorkshire. Running for a tiny party that had not yet officially been founded, she still managed to poll 1,193 votes (5.4 per cent of the total) which, though modest, was enough to rattle the Labour Party bureaucracy.

The formation of the SLP represents a political counter-thrust by a section of militant workers, led by left wingers in the trade-union bureaucracy, to a series of betrayals by the official leadership of the workers movement during the 1980s. The decisive event was the Trades Union Congress (TUC)/Labour Party leadership's refusal to back the miners in their titanic struggle against Thatcher during 1984-85. This historic battle, waged by the most militant and class-conscious union in the country against an army of cops and strikebreakers, could have been won had the other unions come out in solidarity. Instead, the TUC and Labour Party leaders