

Socialist Newsletter

NUMBER 55

SEPTEMBER 1988

50P



Resisting Tory Attacks

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SOCIALIST NEWSLETTER is a bi-monthly journal of Marxist discussion and analysis, which aims to contribute to the development of a perspective for working class independence and strategy for power. We welcome articles and letters from revolutionaries and socialists and seek to encourage a genuine discussion in this vein. Signed articles do not necessarily reflect the view of the editorial board.

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The Tories soak the poor



while the rich get soaked

DURING TEN years of Thatcher government a three-pronged attack against the working class has been taking place. Firstly, against the ability of the trade unions and the Labour Party to struggle and form administrations, national and local. Secondly, a more shadowy, but increasingly clear offensive, on issues of personal rights and 'morality'. Thirdly, an attack on the actual incomes, working and living conditions of workers, the unemployed and their families.

The Poll Tax is an aspect of both the first and third of these.

Thatcher has increasingly closed down the 'municipal socialism' option for Labour, which was contingent on local authorities with large enough disposable incomes for political use. Rate-capping limited the overall amount any Labour council could spend in one year by cutting the support grant from central government. Some Labour councils, usually under left-wing control, tried to find a way around this, by 'creative accountancy', which often meant sales of assets, combined with loans taken out against property, and then by crude massive rate rises in some areas.

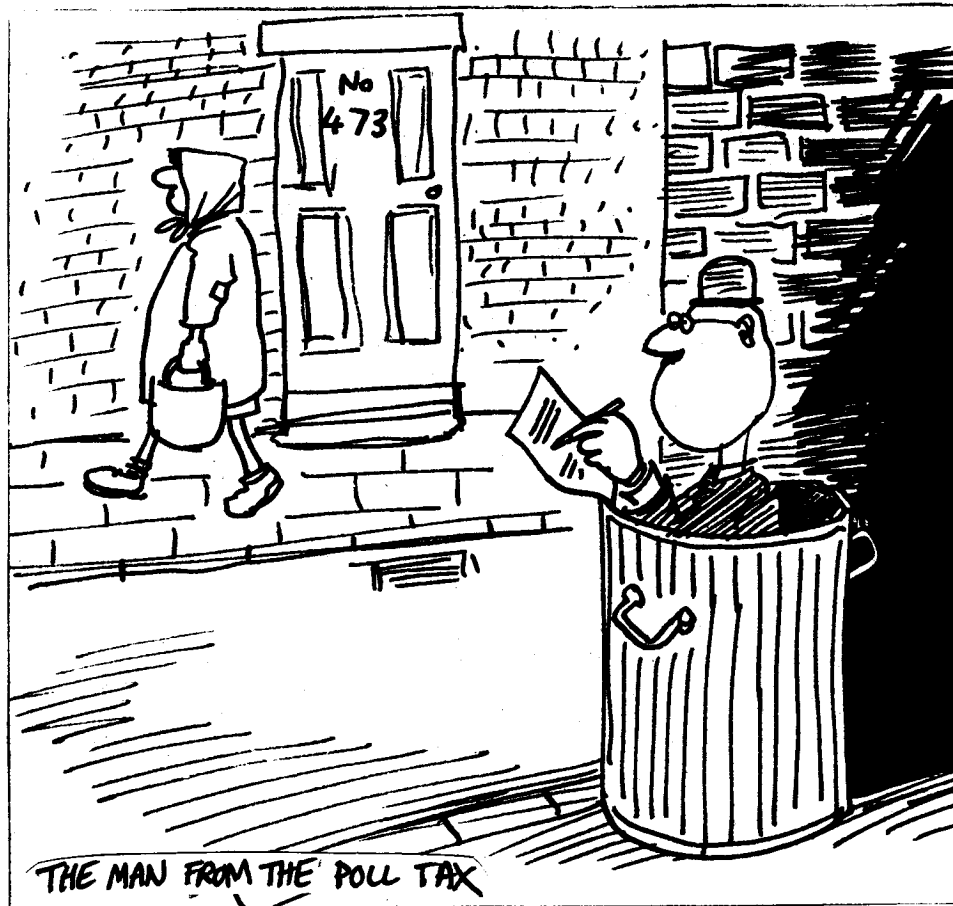
Such a non-political administrative response has been possible under the old rating system where roughly 22% of income came from domestic ratepayers, 28% from local business-

es and the remaining 50% from central government.

This system at least gave Labour councils a little leverage to manipulate spending and maintain a semblance of a caring reformist approach. Even before the Poll Tax comes in this image has begun to evaporate, with Brent council in London, which has been prone to utilise the most vehement leftist rhetoric, trying to implement a £17 million cuts policy to stay in power.

The era of tub-thumping left-wing Labour councils which verbally opposed Thatcher and tried to hang onto power by bluff and financial manipulation is ending. The first and most immediate effect of Poll Tax, so far as the political system of government in this country is concerned, will be to put all non-domestic local taxes outside of the control of Labour councils. Only 22% of necessary income will be under local control. Financially speaking, the autonomy of local government is being ended.

At one stroke, the whole logic of half a century of 'municipal socialism' is being overturned by Thatcher. If Labour cannot form a central government, and under Kinnock the prospects of that look minimal, then it will be able to do little or nothing to save local democracy through the Thatcherite system within which it has accepted to work.



Why should we tolerate this act of robbery?

The Conservative Party will actually control the way in which Labour councils spend money, behind the scenes. As a Tory press statement made clear almost a year ago, if Labour councils don't make cuts in line with what the Tories demand, "the government may decide to impose conditions on the authority's expenditure or financial management." Local Tories, elected or not, acting in concert with the Thatcher government, could actually decide how much gets spent, and on what.

Is the Labour Party going to provide a 'critical' fig-leaf for this completely undemocratic procedure?

This local government dilemma, combined with such a clear hollowness and failure at national leadership level, is creating a steady collapse in the life of local Labour Parties, many of which are focused on the control of councils. Thatcher is destroying the political ability of the Labour Party to exercise political power and Kinnock has no answer besides speechifying.

The destruction of the local tiers of government, along with severe cuts in the welfare state and curbs on trade unions, was also part of the Thatcherite plan. It was an open secret even before she came to office, although it has taken the Tories some time to work out mechanisms to do it, and very clever and sophisticated mechanisms they are, with all the accumulated flexibility of the ruling class expressed through them.

British methods in politics rarely dictate a frontal attack on existing institutions. Thatcher has maintained the appearance of an autonomous tier of government - the imposing Town Hall facade - but is ripping out its guts. Having been marched up the road and down again on so many occasions, Labour supporters, council workers and others who will lose under Poll Tax are not rushing to mount yet another media-oriented protest. Indeed, the councils which acted as the focus for previous such protests - Liverpool, Lambeth, Lothian, Sheffield, and so on - are strangely silent.

The fact is that protest in front of what amounts to the keystone in Thatcher's attack on local government is seen to be next to useless. Politically, the Labour Party has no answer to the effect of Poll Tax and the other structural changes in local government. The working class cannot turn to Kinnock for a lead on this.

The practical effect of Poll Tax will be to take quite large sums of money out of the pockets of the whole working class in Britain. In combination with recent changes in the social security system, in particular housing benefit, large cuts in disposable income are being engineered. This form of indirect wage cut will greatly exceed any gain for most people by Lawson's small cut in income tax.

Only the rich, who also benefited from a huge tax cut, will gain from Poll Tax. Under the new system, a very poor household in Merseyside with half its members on the dole, will pay as much, or more, than an aristocrat

in a mansion. As the Tories say, dukes don't actually use the education, welfare and council housing services, so why should they pay for them?

Poll Tax is one of a number of measures now in process which will further polarise society, financially speaking. Many thousands, probably millions of people will find they are unable to maintain their standard of living and have to pay an extra £300 to £600 a year in taxes, while the rich and the yuppies in the Southeast of England are given a tax cut.

Poll Tax will not only have a material effect on the lives of many people, but will create a historic national injustice. Opposition to it cannot be successful through a short-term protest, such as the Communist Party-inspired 'People's Petition' against its introduction. The outlook of working people has grown very complex under Thatcher. They have too many experiences of campaigns like the 'People's March for Jobs' or 'Save the GLC', or Lambeth and Liverpool, which vanish into thin air when Labour leaders drop them. Workers have fought Thatcher and the bosses every step of the way. Even those layers which have made material gains in the last ten years in real wage terms (and these exist), are going to lose under Poll Tax.

It should be remembered that unjust taxes and the right to vote have provided the two major reasons for dynamic social movements in Britain since the early 17th century.

Without indulging in the kind of wishful thinking which offers a new mass social movement on the horizon, we must say that only a very deep and prolonged battle can overcome what the Poll Tax actually represents.

Such a view flows, not from the superimposition of an abstract Marxist view of the need for class struggle, but from the tactical problems of fighting Poll Tax here and now. The full effects of the change are to be felt from April 1990 in England and Wales. But English socialists must not forget that Scotland is being used as a guinea-pig. The high working class presence there and strong militant Labour tradition makes Scotland a good testing ground for how workers will respond to and try to resist the new tax, allowing the Tories both to adapt their own approach and to weaken one of the bastions of opposition. Scottish workers must not be left to fight alone for a period. If the British workers' movement is to fight Poll Tax, then it must start now, in Scotland, and fight as a whole. Failure to do this will reveal serious problems in putting together a national response to Thatcher's plan. Poll Tax may be a local measure in its effects, but it cannot be defeated region by region or town by town.

Nor can it be sweetened by the kind of concentration on reams of paper, noisy exchanges in the Commons and posturing which the Labour Party is making. Above all, it cannot be contained by the bleatings of a few peers with a social conscience in the House of Lords. Thatcher does not pay

heed to such things.

The brunt of the battle falls quickly onto three groupings: Labour councils, council workers in their unions and ratepayers. In the case of ratepayers a class division will quickly make itself felt, since many businesses and richer domestic ratepayers are going to gain from Poll Tax. No united front with them is possible. As for Labour councils, events have already shown their almost complete inability to forge a national and unified opposition to Thatcher. Liverpool, under Militant control, chose to go it alone. Whilst not selling out like many other councils, Liverpool has fallen into pro-Kinnock hands and is unlikely at council level to lead a new wave of struggle against Poll Tax. All the left-wing London authorities are in a state of turmoil. Many have begun heavy cuts and are not trusted by council workers and tenants. Brent is axing hundreds of jobs. Hackney sells housing stock. Southwark and Lambeth have financial scandals. So it goes on.

Scottish workers must not be left to fight on alone

There is a pressing need for Labour councils to translate verbal opposition to Poll Tax into unified, national action in 1989, and to support Scotland right now. But this cannot be a one-step process. First new and combative leaderships have to be forged in many Labour Parties and Council Groups. Perhaps there is not the human material to do this in terms of active members, since many have dropped out over the past years. Perhaps the pressure from the Kinnock leadership, carried through by Labour Coordinating Committee supporters in the localities, to make cuts and stay in office, will block such a move.

But the need for a largescale political refusal by Labour councils to implement Poll Tax, to refuse to sign their won death warrants, is crystal clear. The need for the Parliamentary Labour Party to step outside the safe (and barren) cloisters of the House of Commons and back such a refusal is also clear. Better to do this now than suffer the consequence of further tearing of the fabric of the Labour Party as local Party after local Party loses the support of its active

members.

Second, council workers and local government unions must prepare for battle as of now, and not from April 1990. If Labour councils do not wage a campaign of civil resistance then council workers will immediately be in the frontline. It is they who will have to administer the collection of Poll Tax.

In the first place, divisions between those who have to administer, directly or indirectly, the new tax should be avoided. Unions should seek to organise all workers, including those taken on as clerical officers for Poll Tax work. But unions should immediately come out against all cooperation with implementing the tax, opposing the employment of new workers for this purpose, and asking their members not to cooperate with the run-up as of now. Trade union members employed on Poll Tax work should be directed to have absolutely nothing to do with carrying out punitive measures against those who refuse to pay or avoid registration.

The situation being created in local government is explosive and divisive, but it is not the fault of the workforce there, who cannot be asked in a simplistic and crude way simply to boycott the Poll Tax. Jobs are at risk, union bosses are evasive, Labour councils are being two-faced. In this situation the first task is to put together a regional and national resistance, from within the local government unions, at workplace level.

As working class opposition to Poll Tax mounts, some on the left are already harking back to the heady days of the 'Can't Pay, Won't Pay' campaign, carried out when transport fares were put up in London under the GLC. What is being forgotten is that 'Can't Pay, Won't Pay' was a total failure. Firstly, fines were much smaller than will be the case for payment of Poll Tax. Secondly, few people took part in the actual civil disobedience, which was very public, whereas most people intending not to pay Poll Tax will keep this to themselves, for obvious reasons.

In practice, many people will not be able to pay, engendering a social confrontation which will dwarf the GLC fiasco. The first necessary stage is the airing of problems and discussion of tactics in tenants' associations, community and voluntary bodies, ad hoc committees, trade unions and all those who want to fight. Such a massive social movement will not easily find an expression in the dusty corridors of the Labour Party and cannot wait on the 'official' movement to give a lead, which may not be forthcoming.

The battles against Poll Tax and its related measures will be long and complex, battles both to defend democracy and keep sorely needed cash in workers' pockets. No quick victory is likely, but the issues are so central that a response must be given by the workers' movement at every level, however hard the effort.

By George White

Chesterfield: Going beyond the fight against Kinnock

WITH THE WIND-UP of the campaigns for leader and deputy leader at the 1988 Labour Party Conference, the political terrain facing the left could become somewhat more rocky. The hostility of Labour's apparatus towards initiatives like Chesterfield may be expressed more openly, and increased pressure will be exerted on the Party's left-wing to fall in behind Kinnock. In these conditions, socialists need to give thorough consideration to the problems of strengthening the Chesterfield movement and fending off these attacks.

In many respects, Chesterfield is an unusual regroupment on the left in British politics, with a much broader agenda than the more prevalent, specific initiatives such as the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy or single-issue caucuses. It reaches beyond the confines of the Labour left to militants in the trade unions and other social movements. Thus, in the historical conditions of three Tory election victories, the rightward lurch of the Labour leadership and the destruction of its traditional base in local government, Chesterfield can be

seen as an attempt to regroup the broadest layers of activists.

That said, the Chesterfield movement's policies were largely formulated by academic bodies such as the Socialist Society and Conference of Socialist Economists. Traditional sections of left activists have seized Chesterfield as a way forward but have yet to make their mark. This resulted in important divergences in analysis at the last Chesterfield conference. For example, in a contribution to the trade union discussion, on points raised in Sheila Cohen's and Mick Sullivan's document, Alan Thornett writes:

"My first problem is that the text primarily locates the problems of the trade union movement under Thatcherism primarily in objective conditions, citing the successes of the Thatcher government, the effects of the Tory anti-trade union legislation, the success of the managerial offensive and the effects of mass unemployment."

This is a valid criticism. The Cohen-Sullivan document fails to situate the problems facing the trade union movement in the context of the systematic betrayals by their leaders of workers who have fought the Tories. It therefore cannot get to grips with the problem of new realism, and risks accepting 'Thatcherite objective reality' as an accomplished fact - as many Labour politicians already do.

The thinking of some of Chesterfield's key theoreticians seems to rest on a version of reforming state structures which are completely irreformable, and which verges on a left Kinnockism. Richard Kuper of the Democracy and State Policy Group proposes:

"The civil service: recognising the political role of the civil service and at a minimum the need for it to be headed by senior civil servants sympathetic to the government of the day..."

"The armed forces: insofar as we support the necessity for armed forces we need to tackle every area of privilege, authoritarianism and prejudice within them to create a truly democratic force..."



Fall in behind Kinnock?

"The police and judiciary: the need for the police to be democratically accountable and for judges to be drawn from a wide social range, trained, and for the criteria for their appointment to be clear...

"Finally, the monarchy: here, the question which divides the left is not whether we wish to retain the monarchy - its residual powers have clearly to be democratised, its wealth socialised - but how much of a priority any commitment to a socialist republic should be given."

Clearly, revolutionary socialists would reject all this, recognising with Marx that the existing state machinery cannot be transformed in this way into a tool for the working class, but must be broken up and replaced with structures expressing the needs of workers' democracy.

Whilst these problems cannot be ignored, it would nevertheless be much too one-sided to concentrate exclusively on the current ideological framework of the Chesterfield movement, as though it had already formulated a finished 'programme'.

Some on the left are utilising what amounts to a sectarian criticism of the ideas being put forward in the Chesterfield debates to abstain from taking part. This entirely overlooks the possibility that the Socialist Conference could evolve and be linked to the pressures and needs of working people. The problem for militants is how they can most effectively support, develop and contribute to Chesterfield. How can they build regional Chesterfield-type regroupments in a way that goes beyond simply providing a local platform for national left figures? Above all, how can they use Chesterfield to develop a framework in which issues of the day, such as the seafarers' strike and the battles in the NHS, can not only be discussed but acted on - a framework in which the interests of workers can be most effectively expressed?

This problem in particular poses a discussion on the trade union input into Chesterfield. The first thing to note is that it does not match the level of involvement of Labour MPs. There was not one national union leader at the last Chesterfield conference. This includes the NUM, notwithstanding the attendance of Betty Heathfield. Even FTAT which nominated and backed Tony Benn for leader was not represented.

Such a situation reinforces the difficulties of taking Chesterfield fully into the trade union movement. Whilst the Trade Union Solidarity Network is centrally involved and able to bring the experience of recent industrial struggles on to the agenda, its ability

to mobilise among broad layers of workers is limited to rank and file action on a fairly small scale. As for the trade union broad lefts, which are an important force in some unions, most notably the CPSA, many of these, along with the Broad Left Organising Committee, are dominated by the Militant Tendency, who have walled their members off from a genuine contribution to the Chesterfield process, thus standing opposed to the unity of the left.

In the unions

These difficulties underline the problem activists may have in linking Chesterfield to trade union struggles.



Yet with the demands of workers in dispute increasingly requiring political solutions, Chesterfield provides a singular framework for discussing what the answers might be and where they might come from.

What real input 2,000 activists in about 60 different policy units at the last Chesterfield conference were able to have in determining the perspectives and campaigns on its agenda is difficult to assess. To these questions of structure there are no simple solutions. This, however, emphasises the usefulness of local Socialist Conferences to widen the participation and deepen the discussion. It also provides a new opportunity for militants to link up in definite activities with a wider layer of activists.

The structure of national and local conferences, however, will need to be modified, if Chesterfield is to be an ongoing affair reaching the broadest layers. Here the movement's campaigning edge must be developed to balance its ideological side. If the best community, trade union and political activists are to find their place in the Chesterfield framework, then their campaigning priorities will have to be high on its agenda. This means commissioning different kinds of policy papers from labour movement and community campaigns to refocus the discussion on a socialist challenge to the Tories.

This problem is particularly pressing for the trade unions, which as yet make only a minor input into Chesterfield. For many left bureaucrats, the Socialist Conference raises problems that they would rather not tackle,

because the logic of a strong trade union left regroupment leads to a real battle in the TUC and the Labour Party. For all their rhetoric, not one left union leader, even in the NUM, is prepared to take the step of openly organising a regroupment of this kind.

So critical is this question that the organisers of Chesterfield should not accept the limited input of trade union activists as a fixed state of affairs. Tony Benn and other leading activists need to take the Chesterfield agenda into the trade unions, making definite approaches to the broad lefts and similar currents to organise together against new realism. A first step in this respect would be to convene a Socialist Conference for trade unionists which could be a focus for discussion and mobilisation within branches, area committees, regional bodies and shop stewards' committees.

With the leader and deputy leader campaigns over, Labour activists too must define more closely their role in Chesterfield. A socialist approach to local government, for example, can be developed only on the basis of the stands taken by those councillors, in a minority where they exist at all, who are still actively opposed to the cuts. Similarly, the experiences of those militants fighting witch-hunts from the leadership provide a starting-point for a campaign to defend democracy in the Labour Party.

Written contributions, discussion and campaign proposals for Chesterfield should be encouraged from the widest possible layers of activists. This is the surest way of strengthening the left and securing its unity in action against the attacks of the Labour and trade union leaders, which are likely to intensify in the next period.

By Mike Pearse

THE LANDLORDS CALL TIME

IN MOST PARTS of the country buying a flat, let alone a house, is today impossible for anyone earning below the average wage. Decent housing has become a major problem - especially for those on low incomes: the majority of the working class, pensioners and the disabled, the unemployed, minority ethnic groups and single parent families.

Despite many promises, successive Labour and Tory governments since the war have not built sufficient good houses. The building boom of the 1950s and 1960s produced decent housing mainly for those who could afford it. Even the best council housing is cramped and poorly sited with insufficient or poorly landscaped green space around. Huge fortunes have been made by a few giant construction companies and materials suppliers. There are several million housing units below standard today and a shortfall of over one million units to house the population of Britain.

Under the 'post-war consensus', the Tories went along with the principle that some public housing had to be provided. Political problems in the inner cities and the possible recycling of public housing stock for reasons of profit have changed Tory policy. Thatcher is determined to massively reduce cheap public housing and so prevent the benefits Labour councils can provide to those who elect them.

Millions of council houses and flats are seen as a new source of profit for the established landlords and new capitalists that the Tories want to thrive in post-imperial Britain.

Tory plans for housing are therefore political as well as financial. Thatcher has leant on a popular desire to own a home, but nothing is said on the quality of housing already built and in which millions of people live. The 'Parker-Morris' standards set for council housing meant that millions of units were built with small rooms, tiny windows, often featureless and using poor quality materials leading to problems for the tenants. The badly built high-rise flats which destroyed established communities are not just badly designed and overcrowded. They use dubious construction methods. Some blocks collapsed in spectacular disasters; others moulder away slowly as the inevitable damp and condensation problems associated with concrete slab construction take their toll.

The Tories keep silent on these issues. The Housing Bill proposes to transfer control over existing housing to non-Labour authorities: Housing Associations (funded through the government-controlled Housing Corporation), private landlords (the Tory Party at large), or tenant co-ops (a fictitious entity). There are no new plans for housing renewal rehabilitation or development.

Improvements must come out of higher rents. The private sector will build new houses - for profits.

For private tenants, many safeguards currently available will be taken away, especially security and fair rents. The provisions for 'assured' and 'shorthold' tenancies mean a loss



of control over housing for those unable to buy a home. For council tenants, takeover by 'liberal' Housing Associations or private developers and estate managers means losing control over tenancies - transfer of housing to children will be reduced and evictions made easier - and they will have to pay high 'market' rents. In London, for instance, tenants now pay on average between £20 and £45 a week. The new 'market' rents start at £50 a week and rise to over £100.

Housing Action Trusts have recently been designated three areas near the City of London and three in metropolitan districts outside London. No choice of landlord is to be given and the government has stepped in to privatise huge areas of lucrative council housing. Tenants must pay up or get out. The system of subsidies to councils and housing associations is drying up, forcing these institutions to raise rents or face legal action.

Those receiving housing benefit will be trapped between steadily rising rents and restrictions on the amount of benefit that can be paid. The ease with which landlords can evict for non-payment of rent over a short period brings horrifying prospects for the poorest layers in society. Private bed and breakfast hostels will be an expanding area for capitalists preying on the homeless.

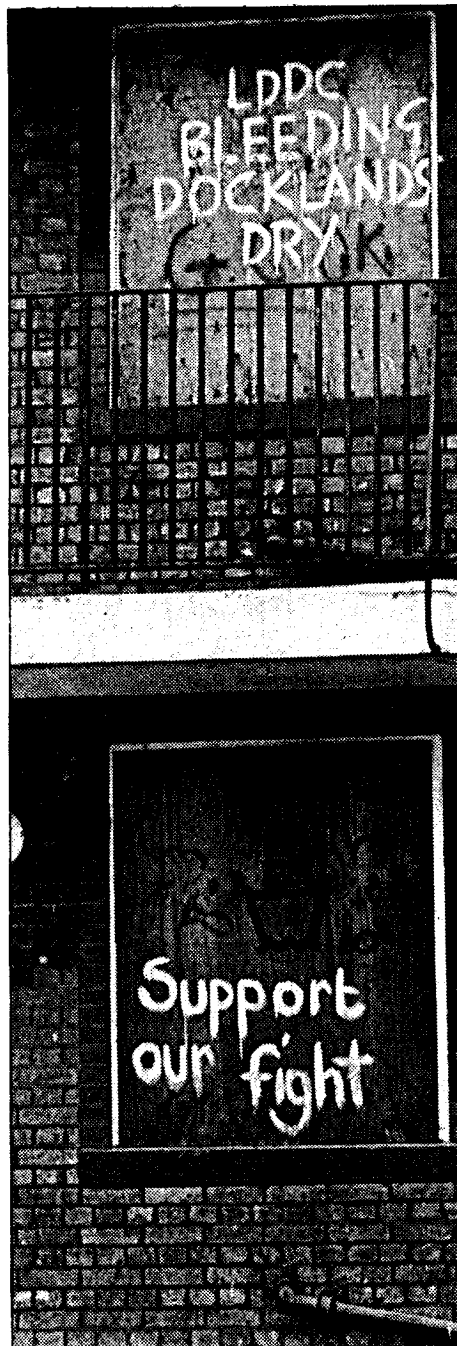
The response of Labour councils and the institutions which operate in the housing sphere has been predictable. Some useful leaflets and reports on the effects and the progress of the Bill have been published: the AMA leaflet on the Bill is particularly good. But concrete practical steps to prepare and organise tenants hardly exist. Current Labour strategy, apart from publicity and the appointment of the odd anti-privatisation officer or contract compliance unit, has been to restructure services in line with reduced budgets and bleat about the need to stay legal and live in the real world. The real world for tenants is the six designated Housing Action Trust areas - a very grim place. What will Labour councillors and Labour managers do to defend jobs and housing provision in these areas?

CAREERIST ATTITUDE

The Housing Committees of the Labour councils are paralysed due to lack of resources as a result of rate-capping and the reduction in subsidies and rate support grant. 'Creative accounting' is finished. The Tories want to place tenants against Labour councils in the inner cities and also create a steady trickle of tenants leaving through the Right to Buy scheme.

Resistance will not be organised by bankrupt Housing Committees or senior managers. These people do not usually live in council or rented accommodation and so have a careerist attitude to housing issues. As it stands, many councillors and managements are an obstacle to the ability of workers and tenants to fight together to maintain the services and oppose

the Bill. Neither will private sector housing workers find it easy to fight for private tenants' rights. Advisors to Labour councils, if they have anything to say at all, advocate panaceas such as restructuring (i.e., cutting down) departments, doling out heavier doses of decentralisation which decants workers from the Town Halls into neighbourhood offices. The reduction in resources, which is predictable, and the isolation workers face in the new offices is leading to a disaster on a large scale. An office on an estate which cannot deliver services is more than useless: it destroys the morale of the workforce. People have nervous breakdowns.



Docklands: the writing on the wall

Surprising as it may seem in the gloomy years since the miners' strike, tenants have successfully resisted attempts to privatise their homes. One of the first areas for privatisation was

Wandsworth in South London where the Tory council invited developers to take over estates. The offices set up by the developers were barricaded by thousands of angry tenants and the developers backed off. As the privatisation of public housing becomes law, we will see far larger confrontations between developers and tenants, first over the Housing Bill and then with the Poll Tax, starting in Scotland.

In small towns and rural areas, privatisation has been seen as an easy option, since smaller numbers of tenants are involved. With house profits more stable, smaller profits are involved too. Rightwing Labour and Tory councils have been quietly offloading housing stock for many years. Gloucester District Council is trying to offload its tenants to the North Housing Association. The MP Douglas French, a Tory, assured tenants that all would be well, the new landlord was "efficient, effective and professional."

TENANTS FEDERATION

Tenants' leaders have pointed out that only the landlords could make promises such as these. Nobody was fooled by statements that rents would remain "below market levels." The plight of the homeless in Gloucestershire will get worse as only one in nine tenancies go to the homeless under North Housing Association whereas the council allocated 40% of their tenancies to the homeless. In this instance then, it is clear that rents, tenants' rights, efficiency and provision for the homeless were at the centre of the protest by the Tenants Federation, revealing the concern the working class has for its conditions of existence as a class, not just as individuals. The tenants have voted consistently to stay with the council as a result, and this pattern is reflected throughout the country - hence the need for Housing Action Trusts as a new ultimatum.

With Thamesmead in Southeast London, built by the the GLC, the government were able to convince the residents to agree to the sale of the estate to a private landlord when the GLC was abolished in 1985. After two years' experience with the new landlord 64% of the tenants now say they would prefer to be with the local council (54% of both tenants and private residents voted the same way) whereas only 43% had voted for a public landlord in 1985. In 1985, it was the private residents (40% of the total residents) who voted overwhelmingly to go private. Today 45% would like to return to the council. Only 18% of all residents wish to stay with the current private landlord: fairly conclusive evidence.

The most vicious assault on working class housing has come from the Tory-run Westminster Council. This council has tried everything to offload its housing. Its offices have been turned into council house sales centres; tenants have been offered £15,000 to get out - a ludicrous sum when one

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considers the actual costs of buying a house - but enough to tempt some. Other tenants have been rehoused in inferior estates. Although over a third of the housing stock is up for sale to developers, the less desirable properties have remained empty - those next to dumps and industrial sites. Some estates have refused to be privatised. The Waterton and Elgin estates' tenants forced one developer to back off and are now lobbying others to stay away.

The Westminster method is a crude one. In the larger metropolitan areas and London boroughs where thousands of employees are organised, such methods would invite widespread industrial action.

For full control by workers and tenants

The Tories have successfully exploited dissatisfaction with the years of bureaucratic mismanagement and corruption in housing. At the same time, the cost of housing rises inexorably for private and public housing alike and the shortfall in housing needs is not being removed by new building.

The resistance private sector and council tenants will put up to the Housing Bill should not be doubted. Socialists must firstly organise on the ground with local communities, tenants and residents' associations and with campaigns against speculative developers (Docklands, HATs etc). It is also possible to engender a debate and spread ideas on the need for the self-organisation of communities, alliances between residents and with workers building, maintaining and managing housing. Independence from the institutions of the state and capitalists that are interfering with people's opportunities for decent housing - the banks, courts, government departments, estate agents and building societies, developers - is crucial. It is also necessary today to argue for a different relationship with the institutions of the Labour Party and the trade union hierarchy. The local state and its apparatus, the housing committee, the housing managers, the direct labour managers have to be under the control of workers and tenants. Cosy relationships exist between some full-time officials, tenants' leaders and the local state, and these are a problem which must be scrutinised by those bearing the brunt of the Tory attacks.

How often do revolutionaries explain and put into practise their strategic aims? With the new waves of struggle in defense of the institutions of welfare, the task of revolutionaries is not just to take our place in the organisations and development of

campaigns, action groups, shop steward committees, but also to propagandise against the worn-out and ineffective concepts of the Labour establishment.

No-one can turn the clock back. Over a million tenants have already bought council housing and that will increase as the Housing Bill bites. Direct Labour Organisations are being broken up, the workers scattered, the apprenticeships dried up and depots closed.

Our agitation must concentrate on the self-organisation of ALL workers and tenants. The concept of good quality cheap-to-rent public housing AND affordable private housing is essential. Tenants' and housing workers' control over their jobs and housing is at the centre of all the problems. Some of the best housing was built by Direct Labour schemes - built with care. It was expensive - housing is going to be expensive if quality is to be maintained. That was a real gain for the working class. In the present financial and political climate, these schemes are being destroyed.

What the experience of the public sector proves is that a public housing system, if properly managed and maintained, is worth having and revolutionaries have to agitate for that type of system.

The only guarantee, however, for such an ideal of public housing is for full control by tenants and workers over the building and management of housing. We are not utopian; this requires the destruction of the Tory regime and its institutions, and its replacement with a government that goes far beyond the confused and cowardly programme of the present Labour Party.

Managers have to be under the control of the shop-floors, demoted if unable to manage effectively - though not sacked from the workforce. Political leaders and managers should be drawn from those who actually live in council housing. Managers should cease earning huge wages, ensuring that place seekers and careerists are kept out. Management policy for estates has to be jointly agreed with workers and elected Tenants' Associations.

These ideas are only a proposal for discussion. This is a debate that has to go hand in hand with the practical organisation of resistance to the Housing Bill. These issues are related also to the other services provided by the local state and central government, and to the question of how the materials and construction industry is run.

Agitating for practical policies and actions such as those above, will help begin to generate the type of movement needed to defeat the Tories. Tenants and housing workers must have ideas on how things should be done, and not leave it to the leadership of the Labour Party and unions.

As they say, "10 million people call a council house a home; in the City of London they call it a nice little earner."

By John Pattison

NHS WORKERS UNITED TO DEFEAT TORY TRICKS

THE RECENT second upsurge by nurses around their pay award took many people by surprise. Those who saw in the nurses' strikes and demonstrations earlier this year the start of a general turning of the tide against Tory attacks on the health service were perplexed when the action seemed to evaporate following government concessions. Now that the government has reneged on its promises nurses are angry again. To understand why, it is necessary to look more closely at differentiations within the health service, the clinical regrading process and the role of the NHS trade unions.

The regrading exercise is the source of a deep frustration for many nurses. On the plus side, it offers job descriptions to many nurses for the first time and could mean that they get paid for the work they actually do. At the same time, the review is designed to keep nurses on the wards and limit their access to better-paid managerial positions.

The operation of the review on a district by district basis is already producing many inconsistencies, in terms of both staff and trade union input, and actual results. The only advantage here is that where concessions and victories have been gained in better organised areas, a precedent is created which finds demands for parity elsewhere. Generally this piecemeal method of operating the review should be fought as it will create a vast number of divisive anomalies.

One big problem is the way the review is treating the lowest paid nurses, many of whom are working well beyond their official job descriptions. Management's approach in many areas has been to rewrite the job descriptions to suit the new gradings, whilst ordering all extra duties to be dropped, thus excluding the possibility of upgradings. In other words, management are drafting job descriptions which match the grades to their budget requirements - with little reference to the real work involved. For many nurses at this level, the whole process is a lottery, with some even having to reapply for their own jobs.

There was already therefore a profound discontent before the government's deceit on nurses' pay became clear. 470,000 nurses were promised a 15.3% increase in April on the basis of £803 million extra funding. In reality, many are getting only 4.2%. What's more, health authorities need another £150 million just to complete the regrading process. It is this which is generating a new wave of industrial action.

Is there a problem involved in the way the nurses have fought for 'special case' treatment in the NHS? The 'professional attitude' of doctors, whose level of protest against underfunding has up to now generally gone no further than a letter to the Times, also affects nurses and this has provided a foot-hold for the RCN, linked to management. Other NHS workers have found it difficult to build on the separate militancy of the nurses around pay and regrading into a more general battle for adequate pay and against cuts and closures.

The problems trade unionists face in building unified action across all healthworkers are made worse by the hammering that ancillary workers have taken as a result of cuts and privatisation. The input of domestics, cleaners and porters into the spring upsurge was small and it is now six years since all healthworkers took united action together.

Some stewards who saw regrading as something of a bureaucratic diversion are now waking up to its potency as an issue which mobilises nurses - a key component of NHS workers. Much of the militancy stems from the belief that if management conducted the regrading exercise properly, many nurses could get a substantial increase, an attitude which is actually an expression of class consciousness and could lead to a victory.

The answer to the problem of sectoralism is not to downplay regrading and pay. A victory for nurses on these issues will substantially improve their morale and readiness to



The NHS up for auction

fight on other questions. Rather, NHS workers should argue for increased pay and improved conditions for all sectors.

These divisions, however, have been aggravated by the stance of the NHS unions. NUPE and the RCN, which is

not a trade union, yet nevertheless represents many thousands of nurses in staff-management negotiations, have attempted to make an input into the review from the outset. COHSE originally abstained from the process except for appealing against

management decisions. Now, under rank and file pressure, they have revised this policy.

The majority of nurses have taken a pragmatic approach, namely to go along with the review, but to withhold judgement until the results are announced. Even in areas where management has made concessions, nurses are still watchful as to the overall outcome and strike action is not ruled out if it is unsatisfactory. This approach is likely to be far more productive than the empty posturing of abstention.

The nurses' movement, militant though it may be, cannot be turned in one step into a general campaign against cuts and closures. As hospitals to be closed are progressively starved of resources, it is low-paid ancillary workers who suffer most in terms of jobs and conditions, and the community in terms of services. But it is precisely the unskilled workers who are more difficult to organise in view of the management offensive of the last several years. Nurses and skilled workers, much more likely to be transferred when a hospital closes, have shown that in current political conditions they are not automatically going to put up barricades to defend an already run-down facility. Yet without a determined workforce, even a well-organised community campaign to defend a local NHS service is unlikely to succeed.

DIVISIVE METHODS

Whether the government will eventually back down or the union leaders force a sell-out on the nurses remains to be seen. Even if the nurses do drop their industrial action in return for new concessions, however this will not mean a drop in their anger. What is important now is that activists take part in and support any and all picket-lines and demonstrations, however limited they may appear, without imposing their own schemas on the struggle.

Attempts to set up a national coordination following the last strike wave degenerated quickly into an unrepresentative wrangle between left groups. The health unions will not be in a hurry to set up such a framework, and in any event, given their divisive and competitive methods in the past, this is not necessarily the best way to reach the many nurses who give their allegiance to the RCN.

Rather, it is necessary to build on the current activity over pay and regrading to strengthen rank and file organisation in each hospital and district. Present developments provide an opportunity to rebuild functioning shop steward committees, drawing in new militants and effective organisers. This and the maintenance of an effective contact network across different areas could be a first crucial step in re-establishing proper representation and union structures that can prepare for the inevitable battles to come.

By Roy Pelling



5 HOSPITALS AXED IN WEST LONDON!

LONDON'S RIVERSIDE Health Authority is already a front-line guinea-pig for the government's Health Policy Review. The District currently has a 30% shortfall of nurses, a figure which is likely to grow, despite desperate attempts to recruit staff in Ireland. In addition, Riverside, which covers an area from Hammersmith to Westminster, has lost 1,239 beds since 1985.

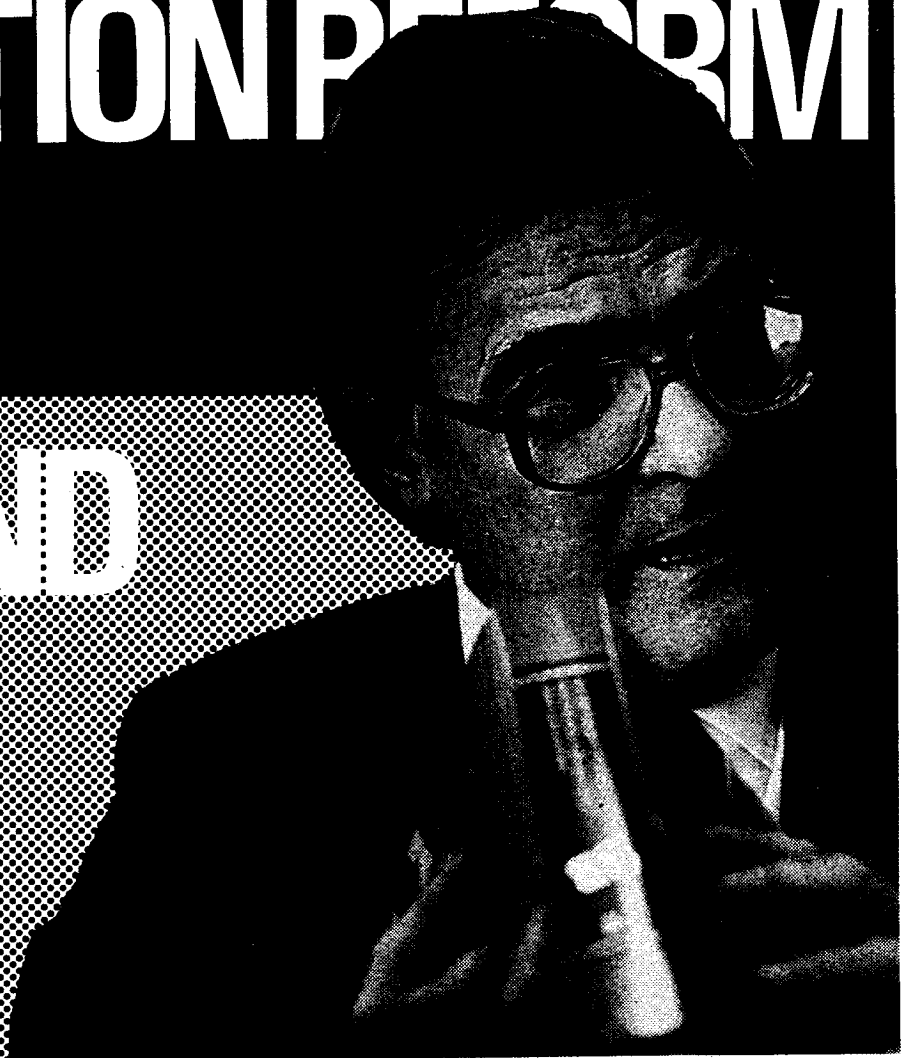
Now the government plans to close five hospitals by 1992, cutting spending by £9 million. This is despite spending almost £9 million on upgrading three of the hospitals prior to their sell-off! This scale of cuts is unprecedented; to take just one area: in 1985 Riverside had 1,694 beds for psychiatric patients. After these closures, it will have just

238 - a loss of 1,456! Needless to say, local authority Social Services Departments have not been consulted on this.

Private hospitals in the area are expected to fill the 'gap in the market', charging either individuals or the Health Authority at the private rate. Thus these cuts are as much about politically dismembering the NHS as about crude economics. The prospect in the longer term is the piecemeal dismantling of services, and full privatisation of nursing, ancillary and clerical staff. Geriatric care will be farmed out to private homes and run-down local NHS hospitals will be confined to the more awkward services that private hospitals can't handle - on the basis of ever-diminishing resources.

EDUCATION REFORM ACT

THE END OF AN ERA



GLIBLY HERALDED by the bourgeois press as Kenneth Baker's revolution, the most fundamental revision in the education system in Britain since the war is about to take place. The Great Education Reform Bill - now an Act - forms the core of legislation which strengthens the state in education provision and acts against the rights of working class children and adults to have access to a reasonable education.

Strategically, along with the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority, the Act marks a further step in the centralisation of the British state, in the same vein as the abolition of layers of local democracy, such as the Metropolitan Councils, by earlier Thatcher governments.

Under the Act's provisions, Baker will assume absolute authority over the fixed national curriculum which is taught in all schools from ages 5 to 16. Baker alone will select the members of the National Curriculum Council and of the School Examinations and Assessment Council. At least 85% of time available will be centred on the National Curriculum imposed by the government. Testing of children at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 will be introduced and the results published in league table form. Educationalists universally condemn testing as the "reintroduction of learning by rote."

The Tories are essentially introducing the free-market philosophy into education. While the best schools head the league tables and thus grow in popularity, the poorer ones, in the more deprived areas, will go to the wall in a cycle of decline.

The ghettoisation of working class children and youth is the natural outcome of proposals for state testing and for the end of admission levels. The latter means that schools must accommodate as many pupils as physically possible, involving increases in class sizes in popular schools, with 'overflow' and poorer, under-resourced schools for the children who are rejected.

The proposal for the local management of schools by governing bodies threatens to throw the state sector into chaos, increasing governors' control of budgets from the current 50% to more than 80%, including the setting of staffing levels. Additionally, governors would be able to hire and fire teachers. All of these provisions suggest the exclusion of ordinary parent-governors. They are to be superseded by what the Parent Teacher Association of Wales called "individuals who may know nothing of the school, simply on the grounds that they are thought to have some necessary expertise (e.g. accountancy)."

More than 80% of children are currently given places at the school

of their choice. The provision for scrapping admission levels will pave the way for more cases of racist parents seeking a form of educational apartheid, following the recent example of Headfield school in Dewsbury, where white parents withdrew 26 children from a school where 85% of pupils are of Asian origin.

Racially segregated schools formed through the ending of admission levels and provisions for the most successful schools to be able to opt out of the system in practice, cannot be far way under the Baker 'revolution'.

Opting out will be determined, in typical Tory gerrymandering style, by a majority of current parents voting. In other words, prospective parents do not count, and neither will abstentions. A school can therefore be taken out of the community by a possible minority of current parents under Baker's law. Ultimately at stake is the right to free comprehensive education as a social provision. Not surprisingly, the independent private sector is excluded from the terms of the Act, including testing and the national curriculum. Each community will have its top oversubscribed school and its under-resourced 'sink' school.

In the further and higher sectors of education, the Tories are ushering in

a system of management predominantly based upon commercial and industrial needs, at the expense of local accountability. The Act provides for at least 50% of governing bodies to be filled by industry, business and the professions. The Baker proposals further undermine the historic tier of education provision, the local education authority, thereby marginalising a source of potential opposition to government plans.

All funding of polytechnics and colleges will be determined by Baker's hand-picked representatives and all will be subject to the secretary of state's statutory controls over them, as well as his powers over the level of funding and conditions attached to funds. The increasing influence of commercial interests will inevitably result in cuts to the arts, as an education system is developed to match the exclusive wants of capitalism.

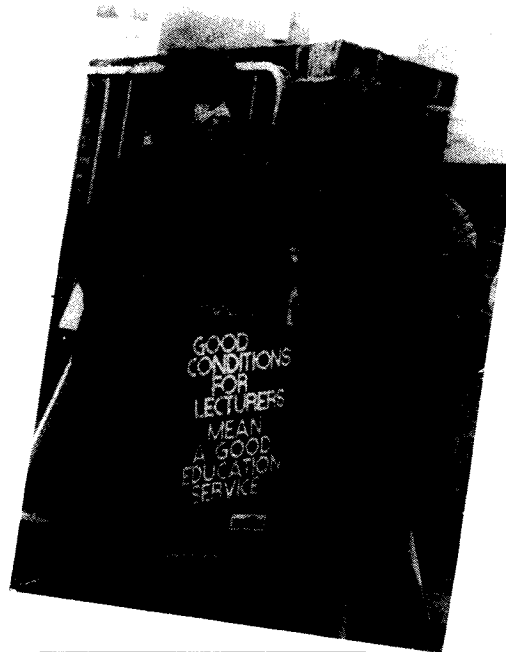
What do the proposals mean for workers in the education system? The government, as in other sectors, eventually aims to get rid of teachers' national negotiating structure. Under local funding, each school will negotiate with individual teachers, putting under attack national pay rates and the potential strength of a united national union. Earlier this year, Baker stripped schoolteachers of all rights to negotiate and proposes to reintroduce these rights only on the proviso that employers can impose settlements where teachers' union representatives do not agree.

Baker's aim is to break up national deals and start a free-for-all as teachers in different schools and areas compete among themselves. The same process has begun in the civil service with extra payments being made to staff in areas like London, where the Tories have trouble retaining workers.

The leadership of the teachers'

unions, faced with an offensive by the ruling class, have opened the door to attacks by Baker. The practice of endless days of action during the pay campaigns have worn down teacher militancy on a national scale. Baker's law opens a new period for union organisation in schools. The best areas will be exposed to numerous defensive battles whereas the cuts will be driven through in badly organised or demoralised areas, unless new tactics and methods of organisation are drawn up by the trade unions and working class communities.

Opposition to the bourgeoisie's plans for education will come from rank and file teachers and local parents' groups. Such a campaign has yet to take off, not least because, even at a routine parliamentary level,



Opposition to Baker

the Labour leadership has abjectly failed to organise opposition. Jack Straw, the Labour spokesperson on education, has limited himself to mild disagreement with this or that aspect of the attack. The issue of education, like health and unemployment, shows that the Kinnock leadership is refusing to mobilise and is instead seeking an accommodation to Thatcher and the internal needs of capital.

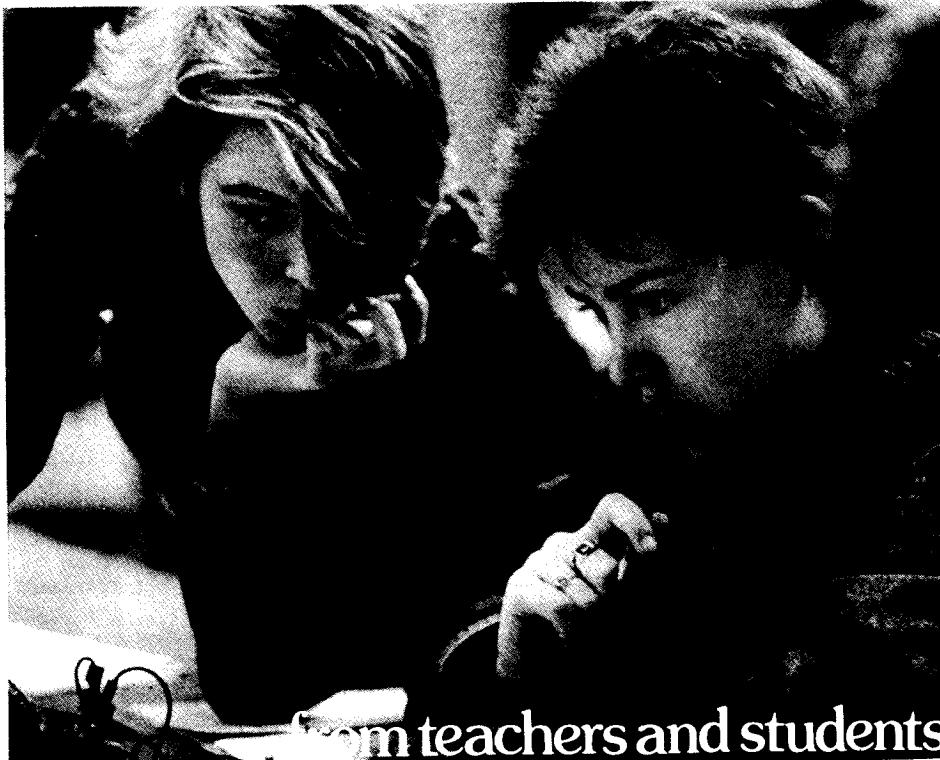
For the bedrock of the Labour Party, the Education Reform Act represents a further nail in the coffin of municipal socialism'. The life of local Labour Parties has historically centred on forms of local government in councils, schools, health authorities and other such bodies - ideal training grounds for careers in bourgeois politics. Primarily because of social democracy's refusal to confront the law, the Tories are steadily sweeping away this layer of government. Local councils are no longer safe havens for prospective Labour MPs, and in a similar way, Labour school governors will be allowed to run schools only within the budget and directives of Baker. As with local councillors, there will be no guarantees against surcharging if a school 'overspends' according to Baker. In other words, Labour nominees in councils or on school boards must comply with the cuts or face illegality.

Parents, teachers, pupils and students will find there is no access to a decent free state education, open to all, under the Baker legislation. Whilst it is impossible to predict the forms future struggles will take, the general dislocation of the comprehensive system is clearly threatened. On one hand, teacher and parents may organise to save doomed schools from collapse by opting out, attempting to use the legislation to defend themselves against the Tories whilst other groups will use the law for reactionary and racist ends. We will also see schools break the law by overspending.

The immediate priority is to organise in schools among teachers, other workers, parents, pupils and students and to forge links between individual schools. The Baker Act demands a national response and a nationally-organised network of groups fighting the law, not simply in words like Jack Straw or Ilea's Neil Fletcher. An alternative charter for education in Britain controlled by the workers in education and its users, should be discussed and drawn up, with the aim of breaking Baker's law.

The SLG has long called for the unification of the separate struggles in education, health and other areas of the public sector. This means a public sector alliance at trade union level to coordinate strike action, combined with revolutionary organisation on the ground and the formation of localised networks of strike support committees and assemblies of students, parents and workers in struggle.

By Steve Bush



from teachers and students



STOP THE DEATH-SQUADS IN COLOMBIA!



BOYCOTT ALL COLOMBIAN GOODS!

A PROMINENT Colombian trade unionist arrived in Britain recently, with four souvenirs from a death squad in his body. Asdrubal Jimenez, a lawyer for the banana workers' union in the militarized area of Antioquia, escaped with the help of Amnesty International.

The brother of an activist in the Colombian Committee for Human Rights here was not so lucky and is reported killed in mid-August.

The wave of killings by death squads and the military goes on. There is a growing, if limited, awareness in some sections of the media. An article in the New Statesman was a recent example of this.

The main effort of the Colombian Committee for Human Rights and the Colombian Solidarity Committee is to publicise the situation there. Colombia now has the highest incidence of

homicide for a country not at war.

The two committees have co-sponsored a report on the repression in the banana zone of Uraba. This report was launched at a press conference in the House of Commons in July and covers the struggles of the banana workers for a decent life and an end to repression. It highlights the appalling death toll in that region.

1988 is the anniversary of the massacre of 4,000 banana workers at Cienaga, which Gabriel Garcia Marquez enshrined for all time in '100 Years of Solitude'.

The report recommends the setting up of an International Tribunal, with the help of the U.N. and Amnesty International. It calls for the boycott of Colombian exports, such as bananas, coal, flowers and coffee, until the Colombian regime can guarantee the right to life, removes the army

from the banana areas and improves living conditions.

This Boycott campaign is something the Labour Movement here understands, flowing from the long fight over apartheid. The British Labour Movement should take it up for Colombia.

The SLG is committed to making this effort, through the mass movement, in an attempt to give solidarity with our comrades in Colombia.

The militarization of that country is a threat to the whole of Latin America and thousands of good trade unionists, socialists, democrats and their families are being wiped out.

We urge everyone to consider seriously taking part in developing a boycott campaign and a solidarity movement to help stop this carnage.

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20 YEARS SINCE THE SOVIET INVASION THOUSANDS TAKE TO THE STREETS

ON THIS TWENTIETH anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, ordered by Brezhnev, it is pleasurable for socialists to be able to take note of the outcome of decades of brutal repression in Eastern Europe and the USSR: Armenia in upsurge with millions on the streets; hundreds of thousands demonstrating for national and democratic rights in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; Jews, Crimean Tartars and others openly protesting in Moscow; largescale oppositional currents in Hungary; Poland in turmoil as tens of thousands go on strike yet again for adequate wages and the legalisation of Solidarnosc; thousands of East German youth taking part in unofficial Green and nuclear disarmament movements; unprecedented pressures for reform in the USSR; and not least, tens of thousands on the streets of Prague as a new generation, some not born in 1968, reminds the Husak regime it still cherishes the aims of the reform movement of that year.

Great unsolved economic and political contradictions, bottled up within the Stalinist system, which largely created them, are now coming out into the open. Glasnost, in and of itself, cannot solve such deep problems as the thirst for self-determination which all the peoples of Eastern Europe have, a desire which has not been erased by forced population movements, largescale changes in frontiers, Russification and other 'centralising' measures.

'Openness' brings to the fore calls for an end to national oppression which only a complete redrawing of the terms on which nations and nationalities in the Kremlin sphere relate to the Russians can achieve.



Perestroika, or economic restructuring, reflects the fact that important elements in the Soviet bureaucracy now know that the productivity of labour in the Eastern Bloc can never catch up with the capitalist world so long as repression, corruption and inefficiency continue. For countries like Poland and Hungary, which have borrowed from the IMF to prop up

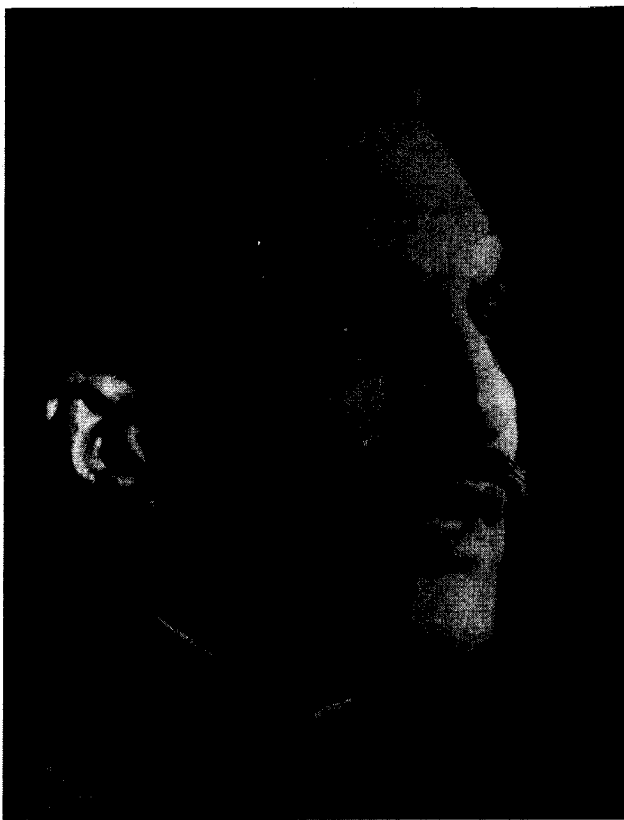
inefficient industry, largely for political reasons, intolerable austerity looms.

The Czechs are among the most cultured of European peoples. Czech industry was in the front line until the Second World War. Stalinisation resulted in the curbing of both culture and industry. 1968 was a movement not for the restoration of capitalism in Czechoslovakia, but a call for the humanisation of the state and for workers to have an input into the control of industry. The invasion delayed this process for twenty years, years of hardship, years of opposition which have seen socialists serving long jail sentences and academics punished for seeking to think independently.

But it was not the 1968 generation, or the old people who can remember when Czechoslovakia governed its own affairs, who formed the majority on the streets of Prague at the end of August, it was young people, who know that they form part of an ocean of young people, stretching from Leipzig to Vladivostok, which is set to change the course of history.

Richard Nixon calls Eastern Europe a 'powderkeg'. The explosive material was provided by the conflict between social and democratic rights and oppression by the Kremlin bureaucracy. Now the fuse has been ignited by Mikhail Gorbachev and his 'glasnost'. How long that fuse is remains to be seen.

By Ken Lovell



ZIA KILLED

PAKISTAN A CHANCE FOR DEMOCRACY

THE DEATH OF Pakistan's military ruler Zia has produced a bout of mourning amongst the world's imperialist leaders, typically expressed in the *Economist's* repellent tribute: "The passing of Zia the dictator will not be regretted. Zia the sometimes confused human being will be recalled with affection. Zia the soldier has a decent place in the momentous history of the region. He did more than most to save it from Russia. That is not a bad epitaph."

The Zia regime was a client of US imperialism and a major base for imperialist intervention in Afghanistan. Given the relative independence of the Indian bourgeoisie, American imperialism concentrated on bolstering the military regime in Pakistan as the main bastion of 'stability' in the region, especially after the fall of the Shah of Iran.

Zia came to power in 1977 in a military coup which ousted Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, populist leader of the Pakistan People's Party. Bhutto had won elections six years earlier in a wave of popular support for his promises to the mass of workers and oppressed, and his threats against the industrialists. This was all demagoguery. Once in power, he moved against every outbreak of trade union militancy, and closed down virtually every opposition paper. He launched the army against Baluchistan to put down the revolt of the oppressed Baluchis.

Bhutto's rigging of the March 1977 elections led to a boycott of provincial elections, mass demonstrations and a strike wave. This was the background to the coup led by Zia.

The military regime was a product of the break-up of the artificial Pakistani state which has no historical, cultural or linguistic justification. The borders of the entire region were artificially set by

imperialism with national groupings divided between countries (e.g. Baluchis in Pakistan and Iran, Pathans in Pakistan and Afghanistan). National oppression of the minorities in Baluchistan, West Bengal, and the North West Frontier Province and to a lesser extent Sind, has been a source of constant crisis. The dominant Punjabis constitute 60% of the population.

The break-up of the state in the civil war which led to the intervention of the Indian army and the formation of Bangladesh did not end the nationality problem. Civil war was raging in Baluchistan, the most underdeveloped and neglected region of the country, between Baluchi guerrillas and the Pakistan army. It was in this context that Zia imposed his 'Islamic' dictatorship of barbaric repression.

STABILITY IS THE ISSUE NOW?

Whoever killed Zia also blew away the highest ranks of the army. The problem for the ruling class now is that there is no 'natural heir' to the leadership. This is part of the legacy of Zia's banning of political parties. The only one with any organisation is the PPP.

An attempt is being made to put back together the Muslim League as a government party. The last Prime Minister, Mohammed Junejo, who was sacked by Zia, was expected to be their candidate. But the Muslim League is now in tatters with a minority of its national leadership

seeking to remove Junejo and his supporters.

What of the PPP which everybody expects to win? Benazir Bhutto can no doubt count on the fact that a new generation will not have experienced the rule of the PPP and her father's empty promises. When she returned to Pakistan in 1986 massive demonstrations welcomed her. But she pledged herself to a 'constitutional' road, saying recently, "Stability is the issue now."

Beyond the introduction of democracy, nobody knows what the programme of the PPP is. The ruling class fears a PPP victory, not because it is seen as a radical threat, but because the masses would view it as an opportunity to intervene directly in pursuit of their own demands.

The new chief of staff Baig has said that the army must "stay out of politics" and allow the elections to go ahead freely. A coup attempt remains an option for imperialism, however, as opposed to risking the election of Bhutto. Yet either would be likely to further destabilise the country.

The cost of becoming a US client regime has been enormous for Pakistan. 30% of the budget is spent on the army. Another 40% is devoured by debt repayments. At the start of Zia's rule 22 families controlled two-thirds of Pakistan's wealth: now it is concentrated in even fewer hands. Meanwhile poverty is everywhere and millions are forced to work abroad to escape unemployment.

Pakistan faces a protracted crisis which is both a product of the rule of the military and of the artificial nature of the 'Muslim state'. That crisis can be resolved only by the revolutionary action of the workers and oppressed against the bourgeois states of India and Pakistan.

By Sam Stacey