

# **Workers ACTION**

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## **The left and the general election**

- **Macedonia – the multi-ethnic state under threat**
- **Down with Plan Colombia!**
- **Renationalise steel!**
- **Britain's rural crisis**
- **plus Palestine, Tory crisis, May Day, reviews . . . and more**

# Workers ***ACTION***

No.12 – June / July 2001

**PO Box 7268**

**London E10 6TX**

[workers.action@btinternet.com](mailto:workers.action@btinternet.com)

To contact Workers Action,  
please write or e-mail to the  
address above

Workers Action welcomes  
articles for publication and  
correspondence

Editorial team:  
Charli Langford  
Philip Marchant  
Richard Price

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# EDITORIAL

## Police May Day madness

For weeks leading up to this year's May Day demonstrations, the supposed threat of violence was the main news story on most TV channels, with news editors desperately trying to find anyone they could portray as representing the 'May Day Rioters', as they were constantly referred to. You could be forgiven for thinking that this was the first demonstration ever to take place in London given the build up to it.

In reality it was nothing exceptional. There can't have been a single year over the last few centuries where there hasn't been a demonstration of at least a few thousand involving some minor public disorder. Indeed, the May Day 2001 demonstration would pale into insignificance compared to any number of marches up until the beginning of the 1990s. What seems hard to fathom is precisely why there was such a fuss. The Labour leaders all expressed their moral outrage at the 'violence' of the previous year's demo, but what else would you expect from New Labour? In point of fact, the previous year's demonstration was reasonably peaceful, with most of the 'violence' being the planting of flowers in the lawn outside parliament, graffiti that pointed out that Churchill was a murdering war-monger, and further graffiti on the cenotaph which asked: 'Why glorify war?'. None of this is earth shattering stuff, and you must question the effectiveness of a strategy to bring down a global giant like McDonalds that depends upon smashing the windows of one of their branches and terrorising their abysmally paid workers.

The Met issued a series of press statements claiming that 'police intelligence' had uncovered ever more bizarre plans for 'anarchist violence' involving machetes, radicals from across the world and the threat of mob rule. The chorus of red-baiting was assisted by Ken Livingstone and his sidekick Lee Jasper, who until recently was arguing the Met should be disbanded.

On May Day itself even by the police's own reckoning there were some 6,000 police to 5,000 overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrators. Despite this massive show of strength, and the denial of civil liberties by keeping thousands of people effectively under mass arrest without charge for hours on end with no food, water or toilet facilities, the police were still unable to prevent a few windows being smashed. Any rational person would conclude from the day's events that, first, the operation was a failure and, second, that the police are massively over-resourced. But both the Labour leadership and 'Red' Ken concluded the opposite on both counts.

Longer term, the police response has implications for civil liberties. They ran a campaign to whip up hysteria in order to give themselves *carte blanche* to do whatever they please against demonstrations in future. This may backfire, as there is a widely-held view that they completely over-reacted and any future attempts at swamping central London with police may prove more difficult. The police and the government have already scored an own goal in giving so much publicity to the confused anti-capitalist movement.

Within the anti-capitalist movement itself, there are great opportunities since the view that the multi-nationals have far too much power is now fairly mainstream. This movement will be unable to achieve any of its aims, however, without developing a strategy that sees the organised working class as the central vehicle for progressive change.

At a time when the trade unions have been more passive than at any time in the last century it is completely understandable that radical movements are likely to grow with no links to organised labour. Few people under the age of 30 will even remember the trade union movement engaging in major struggles, let alone winning anything of lasting significance. Yet the alternative of simply continuing to organise protest whenever and wherever the IMF, WTO, G8, etc, meet cannot continue indefinitely. First and foremost, multinationals, and global capitalism more generally, are quite stable enough to deal with such protests, and second, you need to be fairly wealthy to start with to spend your time travelling the world to demonstrations.

The one thing the far left should be able to offer is a strategy to orient towards the organised working class, but so far it has largely uncritically tail-ended this movement rather than providing a lead. At the same time, there are lessons from the anti-capitalist movement that the left needs to learn, such as how to organise on an international level. This is the flip side to orienting to the labour movement. Groups such as the SWP may be able to get their sister organisations around the world to involve themselves in the anti-capitalist movements in each country, but have not been able to get trade unions to work together internationally in building real solidarity. Such a genuinely organic movement of the working class can only emerge when trade unions start involving themselves in militant struggles again, but revolutionaries have a responsibility to start fighting for international solidarity in the here and now.

# Beware siren voices – vote Labour

by Neil Murray

So the election is called – despite the fact that the government still has a mandate for another full year. This gets forgotten amidst all the hype about ‘postponing’ because of foot and mouth disease. As with so much from this government (and, of course, any other), the issue of when to call an election is treated cynically and opportunistically – from the standpoint of ‘when could we get the best result?’. Time indeed to revive the old Chartist demand for fixed-term parliaments, as is already the case in most parliamentary democracies.

## Standing on its record?

Labour is going to the polls asking for more time to do what was expected of it first time around – tackling the problems of a crumbling National Health Service, a failing transport infrastructure and an inadequate education system.

Yet on each of these its prescription is no answer to the real problems. While failing to attack the profits of the drug companies and private health schemes which milk the NHS, new hospitals are built using Private Finance Initiatives which hand even more profit to private companies. Despite the deepening crisis of the railway system and opinion polls showing a large majority in favour of its renationalisation, the government rewards Railtrack for its failures and pushes ahead with the plan for a Public Private Partnership scheme (privatisation by any other name) for the London Underground. And in the teeth of widespread concern about future air safety, the privatisation of the national air traffic control system is going ahead. Far from abolishing

public schools and spreading their resources among state schools, the government increases the degree of selection in education and pillories teachers for opposing performance pay and wanting a fixed working week.

In other areas the government’s record has been equally bad: the introduction of tuition fees for students; the Asylum Act with its accompanying demonisation of asylum seekers and Straw’s intention of scrapping the Geneva convention which underwrites the right to asylum; the restriction of the right to trial by jury; the new ‘anti-terrorism act’ which criminalises those fighting oppression abroad and their supporters; the failure to scrap the Tories’ anti-union laws, instead adding to them and introducing the worst international model, from the US, on union recognition – the list goes on. An ‘ethical dimension’ to foreign policy was quickly forgotten and support for Bush’s ‘Son of Star Wars’ policy looks highly probable. ‘Cool Britannia’ has become a joke, exemplified by the Dome and the emerging Wembley fiasco.

Against this, the list of ‘positive’ achievements looks meagre indeed, and all have strings attached. The long-awaited introduction of a minimum wage did benefit thousands of low-paid workers, but it is set too low and discriminates against younger workers; the welcome reduction in unemployment, which would probably have happened with the boom in the economy anyway, came at the price of the New Deal, forcing the unemployed to take low-paid and unsuitable jobs; a decent rise in pensions in April 2001 only came after the government suffered vilification for last year’s 75p increase, and it still refuses to restore the link with earnings. The

Macpherson enquiry and report were welcome, but seen together with the attitude on asylum seekers it hardly amounts to a thorough-going anti-racism.

While the Scottish parliament and Welsh Assembly were inaugurated, albeit with fairly restricted remits, abolition of the House of Lords, or even its replacement with a democratic second chamber, fell victim to the obscenity of Blair’s meritocracy of appointed peers. The abolition of Section 28 and fox-hunting fell because Labour lost its nerve in the face of resistance by a small but influential minority. Support for the monarchy was a byword for this government.

The government’s strength has been the economy, which means its strength rested on something largely outside its control. Chancellor in a period of boom, Brown played it carefully, keeping to Tory spending plans in the first two years, thus delaying any attempt to tackle inherited problems. One of the reasons Labour wanted the election now is a fear that a recession might be on its way, which would blow it off course. The government’s attitude to the steady drip of closures and redundancies in the manufacturing sector, where, at most, they have appealed to some unknown ‘better nature’ of the capitalists, shows how little they would do to protect the working class if recession did hit.

The growth in the economy did produce an improvement in living standards for most of the working class, but at the same time the gap between rich and poor and the number of children in poverty also grew, aggravated by the government’s refusal to raise income tax on high earners and companies.

## So what is the Labour Party?

All this amounts to pretty standard fare for a Labour government: ensuring the well-being of capitalism while providing a few reforms to its working class base. This particular Labour government is primarily distinguished

by two things – the explicitness with which it embraced big business and the free market, and the lack of opposition to its programme from the unions.

Those who argue that this is the most right-wing Labour government ever need only look back at the record of the others – the Wilson government, for instance, attacked working class living standards and tacitly supported the war in Vietnam, while the great reforming Labour government of 1945-51 used troops against strikes. None of this makes the record of the present government acceptable to socialists – on the contrary we are its implacable opponents, but in order to fight something it is best to understand what it is.

Because of its more explicit links with big business, some on the left argue that Labour is no longer any kind of workers' party, even one with a capitalist programme. Yet the most superficial examination shows that Labour still relies primarily for its support, organisation and membership on the working class and its organisations, primarily the unions. Even when it comes to financial support, despite the well-publicised £2m donations from three businessmen, 30 per cent of its regular income comes from the unions and 40 per cent from membership subscriptions and donations under £1,000. The unions still retain 50 per cent of the votes at Labour's conference.

### **Wot no opposition?**

While the Tories are extremely unlikely to come even close to challenging Labour for power in this election, serious opposition to government policies has come only from the most right-wing, pro-Tory groups – the fox hunters and the fuel protestors. There have been strikes and demonstrations against government policy, but these have generally been short-lived and localised. Strikes still bump along at an historically low level, with the vast majority down to workers in two sectors, post and rail.

The reason for the lack of wide-

spread working class opposition to Labour's programme has to be looked at. Certainly, part of this is due to Labour's 'success' with the economy. While many working class people believe that Labour has not delivered on their expectations that it would reverse the damage done by the Tories to public services, their personal circumstances may have improved. So although issues such as privatisation, closures, cut-backs, etc, may be of concern to workers, they are seen as of lesser importance as long as the economy is strong.

The Blairites achieved power in the Labour Party, and then the country, on the back of a period of sustained defeats for the working class, most seriously the great miners' strike of 1984-85. The union leaders certainly saw no alternative to moving to the right, ditching any active opposition to Thatcherism with 'New Unionism' and giving their full support to Kinnock as Labour leader in attacking the left and party democracy and dropping any commitment to 'socialist policies'. John Smith built on this. Blair has taken the process much further (and would like to take it further still), but could not have done so without the foundations laid by his predecessors and, more importantly, the support of the union leaders.

At every stage, whether it was the ditching of Clause 4, the gutting of Labour Party democracy, or specific policies, the unions could have prevented Blair getting his way. Instead, despite occasional critical noises, they have refused to do anything to seriously disturb the government.

When Blair invokes, as he frequently does, the Winter of Discontent of 1978-79 and the consequent Tory election victory as the image of what would happen if the working class and its unions opposed his programme, this is to scare the union leaders, who have no greater fear than that of seeing their members acting to protect and further their own interests. Faced with the choice of engaging in industrial struggle or

squashing it in order to get a Labour government and keep it in power, they see no choice. Only when the pressure from the membership becomes such that to block it completely would mean risking their positions will they sanction action, and then only to try and keep it within safe limits.

Despite some victories by the left in the unions (such as the election of Mark Serwotka as general secretary of the PCS), such pressure does not exist. In several unions, conference has passed resolutions extremely critical of government policy, but this is not (as yet) reflected in activity (strikes, demos, etc) at the base, allowing the bureaucrats to largely shrug it off.

None of this means that the working class is happy with the Blair government. It is more a matter of toleration – in the words of ex-moderniser Brian Gould, 'no-one loves the New Labour government'. What is very clear is that few would like to see the return of the Tories, knowing they were responsible for creating the mess which Labour was expected to clear up. Elections during the term of this government have seen a high number of abstentions (leading to the victory of the Tories by default in the elections to the European parliament) and a large-scale defection of Labour voters to the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. With Labour predicted to win the coming election by a margin not far short of its 1997 landslide, the chances are that this phenomenon will be even more in evidence, most noticeably in safe Labour seats. If it looked vaguely as if the Tories might win, we would see a different picture, although very few would actually become enthusiastic about more of the same from Blair.

### **The left losing its bearings**

In this situation, much of the left has lost its way. Ignoring the low level of strikes and the small turn-out on demonstrations, it claims that the working

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**Beware siren voices . . .***Continued from previous page*

class is currently raring for a fight with the government. Rather than tackle the real problems of the real movement, it believes it can construct an alternative by simply going around them. Despite the bluster, this is a position born out of weakness and frustration rather than strength.

An indication of this is the way in which much of the left relates to the anti-globalisation / anti-capitalist movement. Instead of trying to persuade people of a strategy which can actually overthrow capitalism, it tails the movement. The protest becomes everything, the goal nothing. For socialists the basic task has to be to build up workplace organisation and political understanding, yet this is neglected in favour of a concentration on building for Prague, Nice, Genoa or Qatar.

The formation and expansion of the Socialist Alliance in England and Wales is a product of this frustration and search for short-cuts. Members of the Socialist Alliance mistake their own hatred of the government for the mood of the working class. While the Socialist Alliance primarily brings together current members of far left groups, it has undoubtedly found a resonance among ex-members of the far left and former supporters of the Labour Left. In about 160 constituencies it is presenting itself as the 'socialist alternative' to New Labour. However, its platform is generally much closer to the 'reform within capitalism' of Old Labour than to a full-blooded socialist transformation of society. While it is seen by several of the participating far left organisations as the precursor of a new party, it is perceived by many who support it, or who will vote for it, as merely the opportunity to register a protest vote, 'a shot across Blair's bows'. The components of the Socialist Alliance will obviously claim all its votes as support for their own particular version of the 'project'. Yet even prominent supporters of the Socialist Alliance have said that they wouldn't

be standing in the election if there were any danger of Labour losing to the Tories.

The Socialist Alliance will see it as some kind of success if it retains its deposit in some constituencies. Since this requires a candidate to gain five per cent of the votes cast, it would be a limited 'success'. The 2.5 per cent obtained in the London elections last year is also described by the Alliance as a 'success', and this was achieved in the peculiar (and favourable) circumstances of Ken Livingstone standing for mayor as an independent. Clearly it was not a very substantial protest vote, even if it did garner them a few more supporters.

The question for serious socialists, however, is not quibbling over whether a few extra percentage points represents something substantial, but what the Socialist Alliance contributes to the fight for socialism.

Despite its supporters' ever-shriller claims that the Socialist Alliance is something new and exciting, the attempt to bypass the existing labour movement is hardly new. Many have tried in the past (Communist Party, Independent Labour Party, Workers Revolutionary Party, International Marxist Group, Socialist Workers Party, among others); all have failed. Several, especially the ILP, have started from a far more substantial base than the Socialist Alliance, but with dire results.

All have come adrift because of their failure to understand the hold the Labour Party has over the working class movement in Britain. In the process of building the Socialist Alliance some of its components have forgotten all they ever knew about the united front (while others never got close to understanding what it meant in the first place). So campaigns around job losses, cuts, asylum seekers, etc, are often turned into an adjunct of the Socialist Alliance rather than a serious attempt to draw in sections of the movement with a different political perspective (or with none) but who agree on the issue at hand. Particularly, they are barely interested in drawing Labour supporters and even Labour

Party bodies into such activity (not easy, but not impossible). Instead, Labour Party members are often faced with the barrier that to participate in the campaign they have to align themselves with an organisation standing candidates against the Labour Party. The Socialist Alliance totally fails to distinguish between trying to persuade people of your politics during the course of a campaign and imposing those politics on people from the outset. Where it has been possible to sustain real united front type campaigns, those involved in the Socialist Alliance have often lost interest. Their tendency is to argue that 'only the Socialist Alliance is campaigning on this issue', an attitude which severely limits the strength and effectiveness of the campaigns, does a gross disservice to those affected by the issues, and undermines the fight against Blair inside the labour movement.

The only advice many Socialist Alliance supporters give to Labour Party members is that they should tear up their membership cards. This might boost the Socialist Alliance figures, but it would hardly make a dent in Labour Party support.

Where the 'strategy' of the Socialist Alliance is really seen to break down is with regard to the trade unions and their relationship with the Labour Party. Here there is confusion. Some parts of the Alliance argue for immediate disaffiliation of the unions from the Labour Party, others come up with confused schemes for the division of political funds according to the wishes of the membership (presumably allowing for union funds to go to the Tories and the BNP, and with no possibility of political accountability), while others at least pay lip service to the need to fight for accountability in the union-Labour Party relationship.

There is not the slightest chance of the larger unions voting to disaffiliate from the Labour Party at the current time, and even in smaller unions (such as the RMT) whose conferences might vote for such a policy the bureaucracy would more than likely be able to block its imple-

mentation. In the unlikely event of a union actually disaffiliating from Labour, the left would not be able to agree on what it should affiliate to nationally, let alone get the support of the membership in a ballot if they could. So we would be left with unions which were unaffiliated politically, with, at best, individual branches taking decisions about supporting particular candidates. Hardly a victory, to lose the smidgen of political representation which the unions currently have.

But the problem goes deeper. While the left builds up the Socialist Alliance it directs activists away from any involvement in the union-Labour Party relationship. This means not taking up delegacies to local parties, or standing for delegations to regional and national Labour Party conferences, or in some unions (such as UNISON) even voting on what the policy of the union should be. This allows the bureaucrats a lot more room to do as they wish in their relationship with the Labour Party, rather than being held to account for their votes in policy forums, the National Executive, etc. Once again, this weakens the fightback in the labour movement which the Socialist Alliance claims it wants to see.

In those unions not affiliated to the Labour Party, while the relationship does not exist on a formal basis,

it is just as real, and if anything the leaderships are even less willing to act against the Labour government.

Some union bodies have sponsored the Socialist Alliance. Yet beyond the problems outlined above, for most this remains a paper commitment. Labour-affiliated unions cannot spend their money on other candidates and certainly none of the branches sponsoring the Socialist Alliance feel strong enough for a head-on conflict with their bureaucracy over this. Non-affiliated unions do not have political funds and therefore cannot spend money on any candidates.

The tragedy of the Socialist Alliance is that it represents a failure of the left – a failure to provide a perspective for those critical of Labour and beginning to recognise its true character. Instead of providing a strategy for actually fighting the right wing in the labour movement – Party and unions – much of the far left is leading more militant sections of the working class away from such a fight. For instance, Dudley hospital workers taking part in one of the few long-running strikes in the country have been persuaded to support a Socialist Alliance candidate in the election. While the strikers' frustration with Labour is perfectly understandable, this course of action can only diminish support for their struggle.

The Socialist Labour Party is also standing in this election. Continuing its policy of refusing to work with anyone else on the left, the SLP will field over 100 candidates, often in the same constituencies as the Socialist Alliance. Yet the SLP is a shadow of what it was even at the 1997 election, having shed most of its membership and any credibility it had. The only candidate who will provoke much interest is Arthur Scargill himself, standing against Peter Mandelson in Hartlepool, although anti-Mandelson votes are far more likely to go to the Liberal Democrats who now control the local council.

In Scotland, the Scottish Socialist Party, seen as the model by some components of the Socialist Alliance in England and Wales, is standing in every seat, however remote, to prove that it has a national presence. But only Tommy Sheridan is likely to obtain a sizeable vote.

While Workers Action advises workers to vote Labour, we understand that some will want to register a protest vote. In Wyre Forest, for example, where the campaign against the closure of Kidderminster Hospital has built up massive support, that protest vote will be large, far outweighing any support the Socialist Alliance will get. Others will either abstain altogether or vote for parties which may have some policies that are to the left of Labour's but which are not part of the workers' movement – Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the Greens or even the Liberal Democrats. Compared to this, a vote for the Socialist Alliance would at least have the advantage of being a vote for a workers' party, though not one with a serious base in the working class. However, there is a big difference between simply making a protest vote and believing the Socialist Alliance's claim that this offers a way to build a socialist alternative to Labour. For that to happen, it is essential that a strategy be followed that links a fight in the unions and the Labour Party with struggles and campaigns beyond the structures of the official labour movement. **WA**

Network of Socialist Campaign Groups

## Forum Meeting

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**Details from the Workers Action address**

# Keep the Tories in quarantine!

by Nick Davies

**T**ony Blair goes into the electoral poker game with a strong hand. Inflation, interest rates and (whatever we think about the quality of the jobs that have been created) unemployment are the lowest they have been for a generation. But the card that will transform a strong hand into an unbeatable royal flush is the state of the Tory party.

Despite the feelgood factor in the economy, the Blair government has had its difficulties. However, with the exception of a brief blip during the September 2000 fuel crisis, its opinion poll leads over the Tories have remained at anything from 10 to 27 per cent. The government's problems come and go: cancelled operations, the railways close to collapse, foot and mouth disease, and not one but two Peter Mandelson resignations, yet no amount of Tory new initiatives, relaunches and tax bribes can get that opinion poll lead down. With the predictable exceptions of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*, the media views the Conservative Party with indifference or contempt. Privately, most shadow cabinet members have written off the next election and backbenchers are simply looking at maintaining their majorities. The once mighty army of envelope lickens seems to have had enough. Not even the government's hamfisted attempt to finish off the Tories' beloved country 'sport' is able to rescue many local party organisations from meltdown.

In Workers Action No.8 we commented on the obvious reasons for continuing Tory unpopularity. There's the feuding over Europe (which is why the City and the pro-Euro wing of manufacturing industry trusts New Labour and not them, which says as much about Labour as it does about the Tories). More fundamental is the foul stench of corruption, incompetence and greed which still hangs over the Tory party. Voters

catch this stench in their nostrils every time they step inside a school or hospital, catch a train, buy beef, or twist their ankle in a pothole. It's an old cliché that at election time, the Tories always try to appeal to what they see as the greedy, short-sighted tendencies in the electorate. However, they must be bitterly disappointed at the refusal of most people to blame New Labour for their difficulties, and there's been the BSE report to remind even the doziest political amnesiac of the human cost of Tory arrogance and secrecy.

Hague has a problem. How does he attack New Labour? On the economy, he has very wisely decided not to appeal to nostalgia for interest rates of 15 per cent, double-figure inflation, mortgage repossessions and unemployment of three million, and so his sword remains sheathed for lack of argument. Hague's utter determination to be Prime Minister produces an opportunism beside which Blair appears as a statesman of stern, unbending principle. Speeches about 'inclusivity' and a trip to the Notting Hill Carnival were soon forgotten once he hit on the strategy of galvanising the Tory hardcore support, which means its most racist and reactionary elements. Hence the appeals to bigotry in his support for Clause 28 and the repulsive Dutch auction on asylum seekers between Ann Widdecombe and Jack Straw. Having mocked the French fuel blockades – 'we don't have that here' – he was within ten days lauding the British fuel protesters as 'fine, up-standing people'. Having started a hue and cry over the farmer convicted of murder for shooting a burglar, he later admitted that he wanted neither to change the law, nor criticise the judge or jury.

Demonstrating that patriotism is always the last resort of the scoundrel, Hague is wrapping himself in the Union Jack, saying 'No' to the Euro in the name of a thousand years of English his-

tory, but only until after the next Parliament, because, after all, you never know what might come up. One of the openly racist elements in the Tory party, John Townend, took his cue from Hague's 'foreign land' speech, only for Hague, worried about an exodus of the few black or Asian Tories, to slap him down. Hague has found he can't have it both ways. Townend is openly wondering what he has done wrong, while the black Tory John Taylor is accusing Hague of capitulating to the racists in the party. Either Hague is a racist, or he is not but is playing the race card to get votes. It is difficult to know which is worse.

But are the Tories having the last laugh? Lord Young, once at the heart of the Thatcher regime, has said that Thatcher's last victory was the victory of Tony Blair. Certainly Blair is building on what Thatcher started, and such is New Labour's move to the right that many socialists are going around saying that as there is no difference between New Labour and the Tories, they won't vote Labour. Of course, in terms of government policy, there really is no effective difference, but in the electoral context, that is not really the point. Labour voters staying at home, and Tories who stayed at home last time turning out to vote will let the Tories back in in some seats and reduce Labour's majority. We must try to stop that happening, and many workers, whatever their disenchantment with Labour, still want to keep the Tories out. They still feel a keen bitterness at the memory of the Thatcher-Major years. With Labour in for a second term, with a big majority, it will be less easy for Labour leaders to defer to the *Daily Mail*, and easier for the labour movement to put pressure on Labour to deliver something. That is why Workers Action still says: vote Labour and keep the Tories out. Despite the mass cull of May 1, 1997, the Tories should be kept in quarantine, for ever.

WA



## Wales

# Plaid steals Old Labour's clothes

by Laurence Barrett

On this side of the Severn Bridge, Labour's election prospects don't look so rosy. The party leadership has already thoroughly alienated the membership by rigging the leadership election to impose its puppet, Alun Michael. In the 1999 Assembly elections Plaid Cymru capitalised on Labour's problems by storming the Labour strongholds of Llanelli, Islwyn and Rhondda. When the dust had barely settled from Michael's resignation, the leadership, without any consultation whatsoever, announced a 'partnership' (i.e., a coalition) with the Liberal Democrats in the Assembly. There is a feeling, amply borne out by statistics, that except for Cardiff Bay, Wales is not sharing in the economic upturn enjoyed in England. Now, 6,000 steelworkers face the dole, and foot and mouth threatens to wipe out farming and tourism.

Rather than saving the disappearing steel jobs, Labour is trying to give itself left cover by concentrating its fire on the Tory party (which is not important) and Plaid Cymru (which is). Over the past few years, Plaid Cymru has been trying, with some success, to reinvent itself as an all-Wales social-democratic party, rather than a party of the rural, Welsh-speaking north and west. It has taken up the left-wing space formerly occupied by Labour and its efforts in translating its Assembly successes in the industrial south into the Westminster election may find a reward. Rattled, Labour MPs and AMs are indulging in a spot of Nat-bashing, trying to patronise Plaid Cymru's new-found socialism as unsophisticated. But just how sophisticated does it need to be? Surely trying to stop job losses and wanting to restore the link between pensions and earnings is 'sophisticated'

enough for most voters. Come election day, Labour will have to work hard to get its core vote out. Getting them to vote Labour and not Plaid will be a bonus.

However, a blot has appeared on Plaid Cymru's otherwise pleasant electoral prospect in the form of Simon Glyn, a Plaid Cymru councillor from Gwynedd, who, in a radio interview opined that there was a 'problem' with English immigration in Welsh-speaking areas. Such immigration would have to be 'monitored'. Leaving aside the very real problem, in both English- and Welsh-speaking parts of Wales, of local people being priced out of the housing market, the language used by Glyn caused uproar, and embarrassed many in his party. Clearly wishing he were somewhere else, an uncomfortable Plaid Cymru President, Ieuan Wyn Jones, told a TV reporter that Glyn had apologised. Glyn said he had done no such thing. Glyn has now irritated his party leadership even more by accusing Plaid of neglecting the Welsh language in the quest for votes down

south. Some prospective Plaid voters must now be wondering which is the real Plaid Cymru, the one in the north, which wants to keep the English out, or the one in the south, which wants their votes? Grateful for the breathing space, Labour politicians are meanwhile saying 'look, we told you so!'. The other question Plaid cannot answer is which 'Wales' are they for? The Wales of the Cardiff Bay business community, or of the working class communities in West Wales and the Valleys?

Socialists in Wales should work for a Labour victory at the election. At the same time, they should campaign for democracy and accountability in the party. Labour MPs and AMs who say they share these aims are welcome, but they must be put on the spot: what comes first, their principles or their career prospects in the Assembly or Westminster? Socialists should also work, whenever possible, with socialists in Plaid Cymru in campaigns to protect jobs, services and the environment in Wales. **WA**

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## Comment

# Are farmers a special case?

**Richard Price** looks back on the foot and mouth epidemic and considers some of the wider implications

As the foot and mouth crisis slowly subsides and images of burning pyres of culled livestock slip from the front pages and TV screens, lessons will begin to be drawn on all sides. For British farming, already in the grip of a recession and reeling from the BSE epidemic, it is a further blow to its tarnished international reputation. The Blair government, in contrast, has emerged relatively unscathed, with the Tories unable to make capital out of the situation. Not only did William Hague not appear to have any better solutions to offer; the attempt to gain party advantage out of what was seen as a 'national' crisis backfired, even among traditional Tory voters.

That is not to say that justifiable criticisms cannot be made of the government's handling of foot and mouth. It could have clamped down on the movement of livestock quicker, and it was slow to respond to the crisis facing other parts of the rural economy, notably tourism. But the government ended up not being widely blamed because few people in parliament, MAFF or the National Farmers Union questioned the strategy of culling infected herds. Only a radically different approach to the spread of the disease – either letting it run its course, or embarking on a programme of mass vaccination – could have made much difference.

In fact, the main strategic arguments put forward about foot and mouth have nothing to do with animal welfare or food safety, and everything to do with markets for British meat and livestock, and the need to preserve at all costs Britain's status as a foot and mouth-free country. Few would go along with George Monbiot in welcoming the outbreak of foot and mouth. But he does

seem to have a point when he argues that prioritising export markets for livestock farmers, while continuing to import large amounts of meat, is illogical, and that British farmers would do better to develop domestic markets.

The fact that little blame attached itself to the government was also a function of the relatively low level of sympathy shown in urban Britain for farmers. Since it became clear that BSE was caused by turning cattle into cannibals, the perception has been building that farmers are at least partially responsible for their own problems. Farmers did little to dispel the image of 'Me First' subsidy guzzling, by voting for Tory governments that kept millions unemployed by slashing subsidies to industry.

The growing tensions between the country and the city over the past four years have been marked by the campaigns of the Countryside Alliance, the debate over fox hunting and the fuel blockades. There are to be sure some genuine grievances and real problems – not only the depression in agriculture, but also the lack of public transport in rural areas and the closure of schools and post offices. These are problems that cannot be solved by 'free' market economics, but require state intervention.

Curiously, the more the British have fallen in love with a rural never-never land of pre-industrial handicrafts, home-made jam, wholemeal scones, chunky jumpers and earthenware pottery, the less sympathy they have tended to show towards the farming lobby. The farmers' case for assistance above and beyond what other sections of the population can expect rests on the notion that farmers are not merely engaged in busi-

ness; they are 'stewards' of the land they farm, and guardians of the rural way of life.

But this kind of special pleading by the predominantly Tory shires was undercut by 18 years in which the Tories laid waste to the 'way of life' of entire communities based on coal, ship-building, steel and manufacturing. 'Why should the countryside be treated any different?' reasoned many city dwellers. Concerns over intensive farming methods, including the massive use of fertilisers and pesticides, and around animal welfare issues, have also tended to undercut the image of farmers as the salt of the earth. The mad cows have come home to roost.

It was noticeable that very early into the foot and mouth epidemic fingers were being pointed in the direction of intensive farming methods and not just by environmentalists and socialists. While agribusiness wasn't necessarily responsible for the outbreak, other factors associated with intensive farming – notably the vast distances animals are now transported and the fact that there are fewer, bigger abattoirs in Britain – assisted the rapid spread of the disease.

There are also economic tensions between the city and the country. Food has become relatively cheaper. Whereas in the 1960s, food made up 50 per cent of the household budget, it has fallen to as little as 20 per cent today. This change has been accomplished – along with a far wider choice of products – courtesy of the big supermarket chains, which have radically altered patterns of shopping. The supermarket giants in turn have farmers in a headlock, driving prices to the producer down so that only larger more efficient farms can compete. Consumers, of course, want it both

ways. They want cheap food, which makes the prospect of subsidising small farmers to produce less efficiently unattractive. But they are also increasingly concerned about food safety and quality – hence the steady growth of the organic sector.

The single most important consequence of the foot and mouth crisis is likely to be that the concentration of farming into ever-larger agribusiness units will be accelerated. To this extent, the crisis serves the interests of neo-liberalism, by weeding out the weak and consolidating the strong. *The Guardian* (April 11) reported that ministers expect that by 2005, 25 per cent of farms – mainly smaller ones – will have merged or closed, with 50,000 people leaving the industry. While favouring a reform of the present system of EU subsidies in the interests of efficient farmers, the government sees the process as the inevitable consequence of the growing ‘liberalisation’ of international trade in agricultural products.

In attempting to come up with a ‘socialist answer’, the left has tended to advocate support for small farmers. But nobody should run away with the idea that some kind of ‘worker-peasant alliance’ is on the cards. Small farmers have almost no tradition of collective or co-operative organisation in Britain. In an industry in which the National Farmers’ Union quite clearly advocates the interests of big farmers, the pattern of vertical allegiances uniting small with big farmers remains. In addition, the number and social weight of small farmers is less in Britain than in any other European country. Finally, there is the tricky question of whether or not the labour movement has any interest in preserving the existence of small farmers – or whether it regards their passing as simply the inevitable consequence of the development of capitalism.

Wary of the Stalinist charge of ‘underestimating’ peasants and small farmers, the non-Stalinist left has tended to hold out hope that small farmers can become the allies of urban workers. Yet it was Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* who described the French peasantry – in spite of its role in 1789 – as ‘a sack of potatoes’, destined

to provide the social basis of reaction. And when the German socialist movement debated the agrarian question in the 1890s, it was the left and the centre which opposed a strategic alliance with small farmers, and the right wing which came out in favour.

Without doubt, rural counties contain some of the worst poverty in Britain. If socialists are to find allies in the countryside it is surely to exploited agricultural workers, along with workers in the tourist industry, services and shops to whom they should look. The steady erosion of small farmers has been going on over a long period of time and we must expect it to continue. Unlike, for example, rural France, their land is

not so much going out of cultivation as being bought up by big farms. Diversity in agriculture as a means of resisting the juggernaut of agribusiness is only likely to be ensured in the short to medium term by much tighter health and safety regulation of farming practices and by specific assistance to organic farming.

Of course, socialists should be in favour of compensating those farmers in genuine need, who have suffered as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak and the policy of culling. But the arguments for preserving small farming as a ‘way of life’, are no more compelling than those for preserving small shopkeepers in the face of competition from supermarkets. **WA**

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## Postal workers: CWU left must organise

# More strikes are likely as mail monopoly is undermined

by a Postal Worker

Over the last few years, when the level of strikes has been at a historic low, postal workers have been responsible for a large proportion of disputes, way beyond their weight in the workforce.

As a highly unionised public sector workforce which hasn't suffered the defeats of others (mining, steel, docks, etc), mainly concentrated in large towns and cities in large workplaces, postal workers have felt strong enough to walk out countless times. None of the disputes in recent years has been national, and most have been unofficial, unballoted, 'illegal' strikes.

The causes have been many, often in response to harassment and bullying by management, sometimes in response to management's unilateral attempts to change working conditions.

Occasionally, the Communications Workers' Union (CWU) has sanctioned ballots and action. Far more often, strikes have taken place outside of its control and against its advice. Postal workers see their national union denouncing their action rather than being supportive. Despite union policy for the scrapping of the anti-union laws, national officials seek to 'protect' the union from legal action by distancing it from unofficial action.

Even when national issues are involved, the union leaves branches to fight alone. Against the wishes of a large minority of the membership, the national union won acceptance of *The Way Forward* agreement with management, which promised a shorter working week and five-day working, but in exchange for greater productivity. Having brow-beaten the membership into accepting

this agreement (which was rejected in a first ballot), the national officials have then left branches to fend for themselves when management have moved to get the productivity 'gains' without conceding those things which benefit the workforce. Such attempts at a unilateral imposition of changes in working conditions have been the cause of many strikes around the country and the stage looks set for many more, particularly in London, which has the highest concentration of postal workers.

Royal Mail management has been attempting to discipline and streamline the workforce in preparation for the recent opening up to competition through the appointment of a regulator who can issue licences to competitors. The national union gives the impression of wanting to assist in this, but of being held back by the militancy of the membership.

What is missing in this is any real organisation of militants on the postal side of the CWU (which was created by a merger between the Union of Postal Workers and the NCU telecoms union). While the Broad Left is strong on the telecoms side of the union, it has yet to make any serious inroads into the postal side. Branches from Merseyside, Oxfordshire and South East Wales involved in recent extensive strike action called an unofficial meeting of branches in March, but the postal side has more often been characterised by 'networking' among leading militants. The effect of this is a lack of accountability and clarity of policy. It also means that when it comes to major elections in the union the candidates do not reflect the militancy and concerns of the membership.

The election of a general secretary to replace Derek Hodgson is currently

taking place, but there are only two candidates, John Keggie, the current Deputy General Secretary (Postal), and Bill Hayes, a national postal official. While Hayes is regarded as slightly to the left of Keggie, both worked to convince the membership to vote for *The Way Forward* agreement and Hayes has a reputation for incompetence on industrial issues. Many of the more militant branches are supporting Keggie despite his record because of Hayes's reputation. The left on the telecoms side of the union did not feel strong enough to put up a candidate, a reflection of the problems of a union divided between two major industries.

The strikes in the post are not going to go away in the short term. The task for militants is to build on them, to move beyond the 'do-it-yourself reformism' of localised strikes to building a national movement within the union which can hold officials to account and fight for the interests of postal workers, undiluted by concern for the profits of Royal Mail. **WA**

North/NorthWest London CWU

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Labour must renationalise steel

# Corus of disapproval

by Laurence Barrett

Steelworkers in Wales might be forgiven for being cynical about Labour's 'good news' on jobs – 3,000 of them are going to lose theirs. That total will be doubled by the lost jobs in dependent industries, as well as by the drip-drip of redundancies over the last year or so.

Corus, the Anglo-Dutch company formed by the merger of British Steel and Hoogovens which owns all of the Welsh steel industry, says that there is overcapacity in steel in Europe. It also blames the strong pound and the lack of domestic demand due the shrinking of Britain's industrial base. The giant works at Llanwern is to be drastically slimmed down, as will that at Shotton on Deeside. Ebbw Vale and Bryngwyn will close completely. At Port Talbot, spared this time but shedding jobs over the past year, no one feels safe. The prospect is mass unemployment and the devastation of whole communities. Ebbw Vale, in particular, is dependent on its steelworks.

What has enraged steelworkers, however, is that only last year Corus paid a £700m dividend to its shareholders, and earlier this year gave two of its executives golden handshakes totalling £2m. Corus, and in particular its unpleasant chairman Brian Moffat, is cast by Labour in London and in Cardiff as the villain of the piece, and quite rightly so. But a lot of the huffing and puffing by Labour about Corus's 'short-termism' is to disguise the fact that Labour has done nothing to save a single one of the threatened jobs. This is hardly surprising from a government that worships big business and has helped to create a climate where corporations have no accountability to their workers or the community, only to their shareholders. Instead, £66 mil-

lion has been released by the government to 'regenerate' communities after the steel jobs have gone, but many steelworkers know that this means that they are heading for B&Q or the call centre. Labour MPs and AMs who would not be prepared to defend steel jobs use 'globalisation' as an alibi for their lack of action, those who might simply throw up their hands and say they don't know what to do.

The response of the ISTC union leadership has been no better. Its proposed solution, which had the support of the Lib-Lab leadership in the Assembly and the Labour leadership in London, was a union buy-out of the Llanwern plant. Everything was wrong with this. The union would become an entrepreneur, running the plant as a profit-making business. In fact, Mike German, leader of the Liberal-Democrats in the Assembly and Rhodri Morgan's deputy, declared that 'almost all in the Assembly wish the unions well in these entrepreneurial efforts'.

But a worker-run Llanwern would face price-cutting by Corus in an attempt to drive it out of business and eliminate competition. Where would the money come from to re-invest in new plant or maintain the existing plant to cover price reductions in any fight with Corus? Why would banks finance a small operation likely to be driven to the wall by its much larger rival? Llanwern would be in direct competition with Port Talbot for the same market. One workforce would have been competing against the other to reduce prices and win contracts. The result would be further wage freezes and job losses. What's more, Llanwern is already reputed to be the most productive plant of its kind in Europe. This solution simply divided steelworkers against each other and was a diversion from the need to defend all jobs. Pre-

dictably, Corus rejected the buy-out plan. Why would it allow a rival to set up shop 40 miles down the M4?

However, while ISTC leaders were fancying themselves as the next Tyrone O'Sullivan, what potential there might have been to save steel jobs was being frittered away. With no lead from the union leadership and with an already historically low level of class struggle activity it was not surprising that support groups did not emerge, as they did in the pit closure crisis. Now, steelworkers are being balloted on industrial action, but any action would begin from a perilously weak position. The only realistic demand to back up strike action is for Labour to renationalise the whole steel industry, starting with Corus, since any plan for steel has to start from the premise of an integrated industry. Nationalisation must be without compensation except in cases of proven hardship. Renationalisation should be carried out in the context of developing a trade union driven plan for steel production across Europe, East and West, with a central aim of preserving jobs in the industry, and producing according to need, rather than to provide fat dividends for shareholders. **WA**

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# Experiencing Eminem

by Mike Short

Have you ever wondered what your reaction would be if you met someone whose views or actions you strongly objected to? I would like to think that if I met Prince Philip tomorrow, I would kick him on the shins. I'm not a violent man, but I think a kick on the shins would provide just about the right level of humiliation for that reactionary old racist. But when I consider what I would say to one of the most disgusting figures currently in the public eye, Eminem, I find myself at a loss.

Three weeks ago I attended the Brit Awards – the annual shindig of the British pop industry, plastic to the core (with just a bit of frankly very boring guitar music – Coldplay – around the crust). I felt pretty incongruous – despite my youth, I am more into Bob Dylan than Westlife. However, hanging out as I was with the great and good from one of the trendiest Labour constituencies, I don't expect Michael Cashman and company found me to be much of an annoyance. But still, I could not help but feel out of place, and none more so than when the white American rapper Eminem performed.

I was genuinely surprised that some of the people in the same party as me were looking forward to seeing Eminem. I should point out that my objections to the man are purely political, and this is a political article; I do not like rap music in particular, but I do not have any objection to it as a musical form which people can enjoy. When it comes to Eminem, I could not care less about his musical genre of choice. But when I protested to my colleagues that Eminem was homophobic and misogynistic, moreover that via his music he encouraged violence towards the objects of his hatred,

I was hit with what is best described as a barrage of reactionary tabloid clichés. 'He doesn't mean it'. 'It's all ironic'.

How did my colleagues know this? Have they ever read or observed Eminem attempt to paint himself as some sort of social satirist, with hidden meanings, reversed messages between the lines, and dark humour all interwoven into his lyrics? (I didn't phrase my retort quite like this, you'll be relieved to hear.) No. In fact, the only people who make these explanations are fans of the rapper. Eminem sings disgusting and potentially very dangerous lyrics; he offers no justification or qualification, from which we can only assume he means it. People like the lyrics; they realise how distasteful they are, and so they invent an excuse. To excuse yourself admits a weakness – hence the ideal solution is to excuse the performer instead. But Eminem seeks no excuse, and deserves one even less. His songs are anti-gay, anti-women, and pro-violence towards gays and women.

At the Brits, Eminem received a rapturous reception and performed a song for us. When he came on, I moved away from my table, as I was keen to shout my protest at him and did not want to embarrass my colleagues too much (very New Labour, I must admit). So I moved nearer the stage and began making what was very much a one-man protest. This was a waste of time, other than for getting my adrenaline pumping in a way which I have only really experienced at demonstrations, as the music was extremely loud, and I soon noticed some security men prowling about.

Instead, I decided to wander around the arena, trying to gauge the reaction of people to Eminem. This proved to be, without any exaggeration, one of the weirdest events of my life. The teenagers at the front of the house

were going absolutely wild. I have seen footage of Beatlemania, and I guess this was something similar. Even the motivations of the thirteen year olds were probably similar – they were going wild about the latest pop star. But at the time, the Beatles were saying *She Loves You, Help, I Feel Fine*, for god's sake! Eminem, on the other hand, was inciting violence against certain groups of people. Did any teenage girls go out there after that and beat up a gay person? Well, probably not. But this country is a long way from eradicating prejudices such as homophobia and sexism. It is without question a social good that all people are treated equally and can live free from the fear of violence, and free from any form of prejudice simply because of what type of person they are. To achieve this will take a hell of a lot more struggle. Should we as a society be paying Eminem to preach his prejudiced gospel? Given that it threatens the mental well-being, self-respect and, yes, physical safety of some people?

The young people, then, went wild. They went hysterical. It is difficult to describe quite how disturbing it was for me to witness such a reaction to this man, considering the sentiments he was expressing. I am not interested in the face-mask or the switched-off electric drill; these were just pathetic attempts at scaring people, made by a pathetic man. In fact his intentions in that regard were, in my mind, a touch ironic, as he did not need such sidelines in order to scare. Of course, I realise that there was not a direct relationship between the lyrics and the reaction. But in a way this is more worrying than if there had been – at least then it would be clear what we faced. But as it was – do these young people listen to the lyrics at all? If so, to what extent? Do they approve of the prejudices? If so, what hope is there for those of us who desire – and strive for – the creation of an equal society? What scares, or at any rate worries, me most is the possibility that these questions cannot be answered. Eminem will probably fade away like most modern pop stars. But the effects of his bigotry may remain. ■

# Colombia: the multinationals, the USA and the 'war on drugs'

by Simon Deville

Throughout the 1990s, Colombia was the recipient of the largest US military aid package in Latin America. Unsurprisingly, throughout that period it has also had the worst record on human rights. By 1999 this aid package overtook that of Turkey, making Colombia the leading recipient of US 'military aid' anywhere in the world with the exception of Israel. Plan Colombia, whilst packaged as a plan to fight the drugs trade, is in reality a \$7.5 billion package for 'counter-insurgency', in an attempt to make the region safe for the multinationals. Given the history of the US in the area, it is a fairly safe bet that we will see Colombia's human rights record deteriorate even further from its current low.

For nearly five decades Colombia has been embroiled in a civil war, primarily caused by the failure of successive Colombian governments to resolve the land question; just three per cent of the population owns 70 per cent of the land. Massacres carried out by the army ('*La Violencia*') led to the formation in the 1950s of self-defence militias that were later in 1964 to form the two main present-day guerrilla organisations. The two insurgent groups are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Between them they control somewhere between 40 and 60 per cent of Colombia. The FARC is the larger with an estimated 17,000 combatants. It is primarily a peasant-based organisation whose base is in the south of the country. Its roots lie in what was the Moscow-backed Colombian Communist Party, though it has developed a more independent position since the fall of

Stalinism. Its attempts to broker a peace deal over the last decade have continually been scuppered. In 1991, Colombia adopted a constitution that allowed the FARC to form a legal organisation, the Patriotic Union (UP), which gained significant support in the elections. Subsequently, however, paramilitary death squads and the military have assassinated about 3,000 of its activists, including its presidential candidates, mayors and legislators.

The ELN was based primarily upon students and intellectuals who identified with the Cuban revolution. It is a smaller organisation than the FARC, believed to be around 5,000 strong. Its base is in the north-east of the country.

President Pastrana entered into peace negotiations with the FARC in 1998 and the ELN in July 2000. Given the past record of 'peace deals' in Colombia, and the fact that Pastrana did this at the same time as launching Plan Colombia, many are understandably suspicious that this is simply a ploy to buy Pastrana time until he can smash the guerrillas.

## US backs the death squads

The right-wing paramilitaries have existed since *La Violencia* in the 1950s, though they have grown since the 1980s when the US began backing them – as was US policy throughout Latin America. Most of their leaders were trained either in the US or in Chile. They are an alliance of private armies serving the interests of the large landowners and the narco-bourgeoisie, though they operate under the umbrella of the United Self-Defence Organisations of Colombia. The death squads work more or less with impunity and clearly are hand in hand with

the military. They are estimated to be around 4,000 – 5,000 strong and are said by most sources to be responsible for at least 80 per cent of civilian deaths (last year over 6,000 were killed in 'socio-political violence' according to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, and around 300,000 are driven from their homes each year). Their victims are not just supporters of the guerrillas but trade unionists, community activists, human rights workers or anyone who opposes them in any way. More recently the death squads have declared that they consider overseas human rights workers to be a 'military objective'. This view is publicly encouraged by the military. General Hector Fabio Velasco Chavez, head of the Colombian Air Force, wrote in a magazine editorial in February that 'senior members of the armed forces now not only have to contend with armed groups operating in Colombia but simultaneously must cope with attacks from some NGOs that are trying to hoist the flag of human rights'.

Recently the paramilitaries have been on a recruitment offensive in the north. Amnesty International reports that in January this year a group of unarmed civilians in the city of Barrancabermeja were held at gunpoint and told: 'We have come to stay. We are creating employment . . . and anyone who doesn't want to work for us won't be forced to, but will be killed . . . If you denounce us to the police or the army we don't care because the police and the army support us, because we are achieving what they failed to achieve in twenty years.'

Similar tactics are used to drive people off their land, though often this is accompanied by the paramilitaries

*Continued next page*

### Colombia: the multinationals . . .

*Continued from previous page*

torturing and/or killing people 'as an example to the rest'.

### Plan Colombia

President Pastrana put forward the *Plan Colombia: A Plan for Peace, Prosperity and Strengthening the State* in 1999. The plan calls for \$3.5 billion in international 'aid' to be matched by \$4 billion that the Colombian government claims it will find itself. The United States has already agreed to contribute \$1.3 billion over two years; however, the European Parliament overwhelmingly rejected support for the plan earlier this year (by 474 votes to one).

Plan Colombia outlines an overall strategy covering ten areas: economic, fiscal, military, judicial and human rights, counter-narcotics, alternative development, social participation, human development, peace and international. It has been much trumpeted as a package to deal with the violence related to drug trafficking that has 'leached the resources that the country would need in order to complete the construction of a modern state', though no serious commentators believe this. Even a cursory glance at Plan Colombia shows that it can only serve to escalate the violence and cause environmental devastation to the region. The document argues that the violence is caused by the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, but leaves out entirely the role of the Colombian military and police who clearly work hand in hand with the paramilitaries. Whilst the document goes on at great length about the fight against the guerrillas, there is little mention of how the paramilitaries are to be dealt with. Of the \$1.3 billion of US money, 80 per cent is to be spent directly on the Colombian military and police.

### US policy changes

One of the differences between the Clinton and the Bush administrations in relation to Colombia has been their attitude to the guerrillas. The Clinton

administration very much pushed its line that the emphasis was to stop coca and opium production. Bush and a number of his close advisers have criticised the Colombian government for entering into peace negotiations with the FARC and the ELN. Robert Zoellick, US trade representative now in charge of regional policy, has stated: 'We cannot continue to make a false distinction between counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics efforts. The narco-traffickers and the guerrillas compose one dangerous network.'

The problem with this position is that, even according to the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), 'all branches of Government in Colombia are involved in drug related corruption'. In 1998, DEA inspectors found 415kg of cocaine and 6kg of heroin aboard a Colombian air force plane and it is widely rumoured that the Colombian air force itself is effectively a drugs cartel. Even if it were true that the FARC and the ELN were part of a 'dangerous network', the way to fight drugs would not be to pump billions of dollars and military hardware into a rival network. The reality is somewhat different, however. The collapse of the markets for traditional produce such as coffee and sugar has meant that the only way many peasants with just a few acres of land can make a living is through the production of coca. In the areas it controls the FARC levies its own taxes in exchange for defending the farmers. However, the narco-trafficking centres in the north remain untouched by the Plan.

### Scorched-earth policy

The main emphasis of anti-drugs strategy is to fumigate areas in the south that the government claims are large coca farms. This fumigation has been going on, led by 22 Huey helicopter gunships supplied by the US, since December last year with disastrous effects. From June the US will supply a further 16 Blackhawk helicopters. The fumigation has been indiscriminate, hitting small farmers and those growing legal crops. The Monsanto-produced herbicide glyphosate is being used, which is claimed to be safe, though farmers have

already reported numerous health problems since the spraying started. When glyphosate is used in combination with other chemicals, as it is in Colombia, the effects are far more harmful. Even Monsanto advises against the use of glyphosate in this type of aerial fumigation.

Once areas have been fumigated, people are forced off the land, as they are unable to grow crops. Thus they are simply pushed further into the Amazon basin where even more of the rainforest is cleared or to live as refugees either within Colombia or in neighbouring countries. There are already around two million refugees from the conflict, most of whom were forced off their land by multinationals or agri-industrialists using the paramilitaries to do their dirty work. The influx of refugees is in turn helping to destabilise the economies of neighbouring countries. The strategy of fumigation is not something new to Colombia. Between 1992 and 1998, around 660,000 gallons of glyphosate was used to fumigate 147,000 acres of opium and coca fields.

### The economic strategy

Colombia is in an economic crisis, with coca production being a significant part of the country's economy. In order to achieve stable development at the same time as destroying coca production, the government proposes that alternative production will be introduced as part of stage two of the plan. It argues that a buoyant economy can be achieved through the introduction of neo-liberalism and the privatisation of large sectors of the economy. The fact that neo-liberalism has simply increased unemployment and impoverishment throughout the rest of Latin America appears lost on the authors of the plan.

The economic strategy only makes sense when considered from the point of view that: 1) the government has no intention of ending drug production; 2) that this is simply a plan to deal with any resistance to the multinationals and agribusiness; 3) the plan is aimed at serving the interests of this privileged elite regardless of the



consequences for the majority of the population.

The FARC has tried to discuss with the government about helping small farmers transfer to alternative crops, but to little avail. The collapse of the markets for traditional crops such as coffee found a ready and lucrative substitute in coca, especially with the massive growth in the cocaine market from the 1970s onwards. Whilst it would be difficult to transfer over to other crops, it is not impossible. Such a process could be made easier if the government was prepared to spend a fraction of the resources it has focused on counter-insurgency into subsidising small farmers.

There is further potential for economic development based on the country's rich resources – oil, gas, coal, nickel, gold, etc, though with such industries controlled by the multinationals, any economic benefits would not impact upon the local population. In fact, the involvement of BP and other multinationals has simply fuelled an increase in violence, as they have been exposed for using the paramilitaries to deal with trade union activists working in their companies, and with environmental campaigners and so on.

### **Drive out the multinationals, redistribute the land!**

The only course for Colombia that would help the population would be to drive out the multinationals and redistribute the land, which in turn would mean the defeat of the military and the paramilitaries. But the strengthening of regional agreements under the domination of the US, as with the Free Trade Agreement on America made in Quebec in April, are going to make it far harder for any country to develop a social or economic path other than one ruled by the multinationals.

War on Want is campaigning alongside the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), the main trade union confederation in Colombia, around human rights violations, with a specific emphasis on the victimisation of trade union activists. For further details see [www.waronwant.org](http://www.waronwant.org) **WA**

## **Bush's big business agenda**

by David Lewis

**B**eneath Bush's flippant exterior, and in the areas that matter, his first 100 days has set the pattern and put in place much of the apparatus for an administration which, US commentators are saying, makes Reagan look like a moderate. He has declared war on the environment by tearing up the Kyoto agreement, stopped all funding for foreign aid agencies that are pro-choice on abortion rights, refused to sign the War Crimes Treaty for fear that US service personnel might be arraigned abroad for carrying out US policy, ratcheted up the process of globalisation by signing, along with 33 other heads of government, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and torn up the arms treaties that have controlled the power and proliferation of nuclear weapons. He has paved the way for a new cold war with Russia and China, with the latter targeted as the main foreign enemy.

The Bush administration is like none before it. Bush himself is the front man for a setup which is run by Dick Cheney, the Vice-President. Cheney was Gerald Ford's chief of staff and George Bush Sr's defence secretary. Before taking office he headed an oil company, so it is not surprising that one of his key initial tasks has been to run a review of US energy strategy. The review will, according to the *Guardian*, set policy on everything from nuclear power to oil drilling in protected lands and the future of international oil sanctions. It will recommend drilling in Alaska, exploratory drilling in the Rocky Mountains, including the Lewis and Clark national forest in Montana, and an easing of air pollution controls. It will raise the possibility of lifting US sanctions against Iran, Libya and possibly even Iraq (unfortunately for Cuba, it has no oil). It will call on America to build dozens of power plants and reinvest in nuclear power.

Behind Bush, Cheney and their teams of bureaucrats, a conspiracy theorist's worst nightmare is hard at work. According to the New York Institute for Democracy Studies ([www.institutefordemocracy.org](http://www.institutefordemocracy.org)), the Federalist Society has been hard at work on behalf of Bush since before he 'won' the election. The Federalist Society is an organisation of ultra-right wing politico-lawyers. Less a conspiracy than an openly anti-democratic legal shock force, their activities, which they publicise on their web site ([www.fed-soc.org](http://www.fed-soc.org)), cover every imaginable area of law, including administrative law, civil rights, corporations, criminal law and procedure, environmental law, free speech, election law, religious liberties and telecommunications. Bush's campaign in the courts over the Florida votes was organised and headed by many of their leading members. They organised the theoretical arguments which underpinned Bush's repudiation of the Kyoto protocol. The author of the IDS study, Julie Gerchik, is reported as saying that 'the agenda is to dismantle everything built since the New Deal'. To frustrate any future more liberal administration and ensure that their work has a lasting effect, their widest objective is to dismantle the constitutional framework which has developed in the United States since the 1930s.

Clinton in office was constrained by the need to avoid alienating his support among liberals. Bush has no such fears and can rush in where Clinton feared to tread. Clinton was unable to dump Kyoto or to refuse to sign the International War Crimes Treaty; Bush was able to do both. The world is a more dangerous place now, not because Bush is more gung-ho than Clinton but because Clinton was more affected by the pressure the progressive, ecologically-minded, liberal middle class professionals could exert. **WA**

# Will Macedonia unravel?

by Nick Davies

In March, Labour MP Donald Anderson spoke in glowing terms to BBC radio about how the brave and worthy attempt at a multi-ethnic state that was Macedonia deserved all the support it was getting from Western governments. Had they been listening, past and present citizens of the multi-ethnic state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, left by these same governments to go to the wall and now run as a UN colony, would not have known whether to laugh or cry. Clearly, for Western governments, some multi-ethnic states are worthier of support than others, if they fit in with imperialist strategy in the Balkans.

So, on April 9, Macedonia signed a Stability and Association Agreement with the EU, putting it far nearer the front of the queue for EU membership than it deserved to be, according to the EU's own criteria. Most importantly, NATO has been helping the Macedonian army drive out of the hills around the north-western city of Tetovo the Albanian insurgents of the NLA. After the fighting in March, the NLA is digging in again, this time around Kumanovo. Western governments have persuaded the Macedonian government not to declare a state of war, but to continue the talks with the Albanian political parties begun after the last lot of fighting. It looks as if a wider coalition government will emerge, taking in more of the Albanian parties. As for the NLA, Robin Cook, George Robertson and Javier Solana have been falling over themselves to denounce them as terrorists. On May 8, *The Guardian* reported George Robertson as describing the NLA as 'a bunch of murderers in the mountains'.

Macedonia is not Kosova. The Albanian minority is 20 to 30 per cent of the population, depending on whom you believe. It is concentrated in the north-west, around the cities of Tetovo and Gostivar. It does not face anything like the same levels of discrimination.

According to the Macedonian government it faces no discrimination at all, as the Albanian DPA (Democratic Party of Albania), led by Arben Xhaferi, has five seats in the Macedonian government. The line of the Macedonian government has been that the NLA guerrillas are just ex-KLA men from over the border with itchy trigger-fingers, bent on stirring up trouble with the contented Macedonian Albanians, with the aim of creating a Greater Albania. The NLA denies this, pointing out that its leader Ali Ahmeti was born in Macedonia. Moreover, the NLA denies that it wants a Greater Albania at all, but equal rights within Macedonia, amounting to autonomy for the Albanian north-west. This is usually expressed as a demand to be mentioned as a constituent people in the fundamental law of the state. Presently this law says that Macedonia is a state of the Macedonian Slavs and Macedonia's minorities. It does not make specific mention of the sizeable Albanian minority, lumping it in with Macedonia's smaller Turkish, Serb, Vlach and Roma populations.

Less concretely, Albanians complain that they are not allowed to 'feel Albanian'. They complain, with some justification, of disproportionate levels of unemployment, especially in public services and the professions, even where they are in the majority. They say they

miss out on higher education and one key demand is for an Albanian language university in Tetovo. The NLA complains that the project of all Macedonian governments since independence, be they Social-Democrats or the presently in power nationalist VMRO, has been the consolidating of a Macedonian nationalism, and that the DPA is only in the government as a multi-ethnic fig leaf so that the EU and the aid agencies will give Macedonia a clean bill of health. It says the DPA members are more interested in drawing their salaries than defending the rights of the Albanian population. In fact, the Albanian parties, possibly worried at the erosion of their support, felt obliged to support the demands of the NLA, if not its methods.

It may be that the NLA is only saying that it is for autonomy because it knows that if it tries to break up Macedonia, NATO will be down on it like a ton of bricks. Basically, if they want more rights, someone might listen. If they want territory, they've got no chance. On the other hand, it appears to be a widely held view among Macedonian Albanians that poverty stricken, gangster ridden Albania is best avoided at all costs. In a surreal game of bluff and double bluff, NATO may well be pretending that the NLA actually wants a Greater Albania, even if it does not, so that NATO has an excuse for imposing a military presence in the region.

The existence of the state of Macedonia is a product of the collapse of Yugoslavia, and represents the attempts of the Macedonian ruling bureaucracy to consolidate itself using Macedonian

## Book Bargains

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nationalism and capitalism. The very existence of the state represents a defeat for the working class in the region. But should socialists be gung-ho about the break-up of Macedonia still further? The alternative to the whole, stable Macedonia desired by NATO could actually be far worse. Macedonia was fought over by Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. Serbia and Greece won and divided most of Ottoman Macedonia between them. Serb nationalists believe that Macedonians are 'really' Serbs. Bulgarian nationalists believe that Macedonians are 'really' Bulgarians (in fact, the language is similar, and in the early 20th century many Macedonians advocated union with Bulgaria). Both the Yugoslav and Bulgarian governments have promised to respect Macedonia's territorial integrity, because they recognise the state's existence as an accomplished fact, and because they need to stay in with the West, but if Macedonia begins to unravel, what then?

Socialists should demand that Albanians in Macedonia have self-determination, including full autonomy, as well as full employment, political and cultural rights, up to and including the right of secession, if they want it. However, we should not advocate that the right to secede is exercised. We should not necessarily advocate a Greater Albania, which could only come into being by pitting Albanian against Macedonian Slav with yet another round of ethnic cleansing, and so the corollary of any attempt to create a Greater Albania will be an increase in Macedonian chauvinism. Whatever the hypocrisy behind the West's hymn of praise for Macedonia, it may be that a single Macedonia, be it unitary or federated, is preferable to the alternative. Workers in the Balkans cannot gain from a further fragmentation of the region, and the creation of further mini-states. Workers can only gain from an increase in integration, with open borders. The alternative to ethically pure statelets – from which the only winners are imperialism, local political elites, and the gangsters who thrive on smuggling – must be a genuine, voluntary, socialist federation of the Balkans. **WA**

## Discussion article

# The danger of a new war in the Middle East

by Yossi Schwartz

The election of Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel symbolises the failure of the Oslo Agreements, which were based on the US belief that they could impose a *Pax Americana* on the Middle East. The implementation of the Agreements in Palestine meant the creation of a series of Bantustans controlled indirectly by the Israeli state, which continues to play the role of regional cop for imperialism. The Israeli bourgeoisie was ready to give up part of the territories conquered in 1967 in exchange for the opening up of the Arab markets. The Palestinian Authority (PA) was ready to play the role assigned to it by imperialism, by betraying the main demand of its programme (the establishment of a secular democratic republic in the whole territory of historic Palestine) as did most other radical petty-bourgeois movements in the last decade, from the ANC in South Africa to Ochalan in Kurdistan. The bankruptcy of the PLO shows the incapacity of the radical petty-bourgeois nationalist movements to carry out the democratic revolution: in periods of retreat in the revolutionary struggle of the working class, these movements turn to imperialism and are ready to become their servants. But contemporary imperialism – defined by Lenin as 'moribund capitalism' – is incapable of providing a solution to the unresolved democratic problems and to satisfy the minimal material needs of the masses in the semi-colonial states, comprising more than 90 per cent of the world's population.

The main objective of the Oslo Agreements was clearly defined by the

late Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin, who declared in an interview that the PA would be able to repress the Palestinians 'without appeals to the Supreme Court and without human rights' organisations'. Their failure was due to the opposition of the Palestinian people to accepting the renunciation of the right of return for the four million Palestinian refugees, the dismantling of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, and sovereignty over West Jerusalem. Barak, in turn, was unable to accept these minimal demands – which in themselves do not represent by any means the granting of the right of self-determination to the Palestinians – not only because of the opposition of the right-wing settlers, but because of the character of Zionist ideology, whose ultimate objective was and remains the ethnic cleansing of all Arabs and gentiles from Biblical Eretz Israel. The failure of the faked 'peace process' based on the repression of the national liberation aspirations of the Palestinians in turn led to a wave of chauvinism in the Jewish public and to the election of war criminal Ariel Sharon as Israeli Prime Minister.

Since Sharon's election the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) have implemented a 'strong hand' policy in the north (against Hezbollah) and especially in the occupied territories, including the assassination of Arafat's personal bodyguards using rockets fired from helicopters. The consequent increase in acts of personal terrorism on the Palestinian side was employed as an excuse to decree the closure of the territories with the aim of bring-

*Continued next page*

**The danger of a new war . . .**  
*Continued from previous page*

ing the Palestinians to their knees by starvation. This brutal policy, which has been correctly described in the mass media as a war crime, has only temporarily been reversed as a result of the pressure of European imperialism.

On the political side, the Sharon government has repeatedly declared its opposition to the dismantling of settlements and to the acceptance of even a formally independent Palestinian statelet. Arafat has been branded a terrorist and any negotiation rejected 'as long as warfare continues'. The Labour Party's participation in the 'national unity' government was opposed by parts of the Israeli bourgeoisie because it increases the alienation of the Palestinian public and of sections of the Jewish public from the Zionist parties, and led to the split of some prominent leaders from the party. Nevertheless, the party's Central Committee decided to take part in the same government with Rehavam Zeevi (who called Arafat 'Hitler') and with Avigdor Liberman (who called for the bombing of Egypt and Iran) and has fully endorsed Sharon's demagogic and criminal policy.

There have been open talks in Israel about Arafat's capability to effectively repress the Palestinian masses, and the possibility of the military re-occupying the territories. Under the pressure of the popular uprising and the Israeli repression, the PA is undergoing a process of 'Lebanonisation', as a result of which different armed groups appear within the PA's apparatus having only a partial allegiance to Arafat. There is a growing alienation of the Palestinian masses from the PA, which has still not completely undermined Arafat's leadership because of his Bonapartist role between the insurrectionary masses, the Zionist state, and American and European imperialism.

The developments in Israel and the territories are closely linked to the political changes in the United States. The Bush administration is the naked

representative of big capitalists, especially of the oil companies with large interests in the Middle East, which are exerting pressure to bring Saddam Hussein down by military means. The world economic crisis will also enhance competition between the different imperialist powers, and as a consequence there will be a growing imperialist intervention in the region to assure control of the oil resources.

The recent visit of Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Middle East, aimed at increasing pressure on the Iraqi regime, took place ten years after the imperialist slaughter known as 'Desert Storm'. But unlike ten years ago, Europe (excepting Great Britain) and the Arab countries are no longer ready to wage war against Iraq because it would hurt their own economic interests. Besides, the outbreak of a new imperialist war in the midst of a Palestinian Intifada would threaten the stability of the puppet Arab regimes in the region. Nevertheless, the war hawks within the Bush administration (especially Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld) are putting pressure to wage a new war against Iraq and finish the job of liquidating Hussein's regime – a job which was left unfinished ten years ago in order to avoid the break-up of Iraq into Shiite, Sunnite and Kurdish regions, which threatened the stability of the region and especially of the Turkish regime of national oppression.

The last elections, where close to 40 per cent of the electorate either abstained or put a blank ballot, led to the appearance of a political vacuum in Israel. As a result of this alienation from the traditional parties, a number of 'left-wing' Zionist politicians from the Labour Party and Meretz, such as Yossi Beilin and Yossi Sarid, have been advancing the idea of creating a new social-democratic party. But both the organisations and the politicians who stand at the front of this initiative have been responsible for the massacre of the Palestinians during the last

Intifada and for the implementation of policies destined to dismantle the welfare state and to abolish labour legislation. Their lack of credibility enhances the counter-revolutionary role of the petty-bourgeois radical organisations, both the local Pabloites and the radical NGOs, which are calling for the intervention of European imperialism in the region.

Against all the currents which directly or indirectly serve the interests of Zionism and imperialism in Palestine and the Middle East, the position of the revolutionaries is:

- 1) *Towards the Palestinian Authority:*  
 The Palestinian masses have to be organised in order to bring Arafat and the PA down, but at the same time both must be defended against Zionism aggression, without giving them the least political support. The Marxist position towards the PA is identical to Trotsky's position towards the Popular Front government in Spain: it must be brought down by a social revolution and at the same time defended against the attacks of fascism.
- 2) *Towards Iraq:* Iraq has to be defended from imperialism without giving the least political support to Saddam Hussein's regime. Only through a social revolution of the workers and peasants can the Iraqi people successfully repel the imperialist aggression.
- 3) *Towards European intervention:*  
 The call for European imperialism to intervene in the Middle East must be condemned as a legitimisation of the repression of the Palestinian struggle. The intervention of any imperialist power in Palestine means that it will co-operate with the Palestinian Authority and Israel to put down the Palestinian popular uprising. The only real protection for the Palestinian people, as well as the only way of insuring the success of their fight for self-determination, is the joint struggle of the Arab and Jewish workers against the local bourgeoisie and imperialist intervention in the Middle East.

**March 22, 2001**

# Contractors are workers too!

# Letters

PO Box 7268, London E10 6TX

Dear comrades -

The RMT's London regional council has been advertising in *Socialist Worker* and leafletting in London under the slogan 'Keep scum contractors off our tube'. This slogan can be interpreted in many different ways. If it is aimed at workers it is a sad day for trade unionists when they start blaming another group of workers for the problems in their own industry. Perhaps the RMT should ask itself the following question: why did it not take action to stop tendering in the first place?

I have seen the following scenario in many well-organised work places. First the company decides to bring in contract cleaners and the unions let it happen. Then contract catering, followed by contract security, but still no action from the unions. When tendering and contracts are issued which conflicts with the craft unions all hell breaks loose, and to quote the RMT, 'scum contractors are brought in'. The unions then blame everybody bar themselves.

As a contractor and an active trade unionist I refute the allegation that

we are scum. Perhaps the RMT want to remember the electricians when the Jubilee line was being constructed. All contractors (of what ever industry) are supervised by a company employee and ultimately he / she is responsible for the standard of work – so let's not pass the buck. As fellow trade union members we should be fighting side by side for better pay and conditions for all our members. The adage of divide and rule is very apt in this situation, with companies playing one group of workers off against another, taking advantage of workers' insecurities. Who wins in this situation?

Would it not be better for the RMT to call for contractors' wages and conditions to be brought up to their standard and kept in line with regular workers? Should they not be attacking companies and not employees?

Contractors (in all industries) work in a very harsh and insecure work environment where employment rights are very few (except on the big unionised construction sites). A long job is measured in weeks or at the most a cou-

ple of months, with some people simply taken on for one shift. Should not the RMT be campaigning against this rather than attacking fellow workers?

When workers are forced into redundancy from major companies they leave with good redundancy packages and a pension, but their most likely work prospect given their experience is as a contractor, often with a company sub-contracted by the same company that made them redundant – in fact, some sub-contractors take on the redundant workers to curry favour with the main company. So workers become contractors themselves. Perhaps when they have got their 3 months work they should spare a thought about the number of years they called people like themselves 'scum'. Meanwhile contractors who have worked all their lives in the industry are now on the dole. Now who is taking whose job? United we stand divided we fall. Until we stop these sectarian outbursts the bosses will always have the upper hand.

Bill Davies

South Wales

**Demonstrate against the new Asylum Seekers' camp**

## Repeal all immigration laws!

On June 29, 2001, the biggest concentration camp for refugees so far in Britain will open next door to Harmondsworth Detention Centre. It will be able to keep 550 asylum seekers and others in prison. Whole families will be kept there, as will people who are ill and bed-ridden. Even bail applications will be done on site behind the barbed wire. This mass imprisonment of refugees is part of a racist competition between the main parties and a campaign of hatred by the right-wing print media.

**Picket Harmondsworth Detention Centre**

**Saturday June 30  
12 noon**

Called by the Close Down Harmondsworth Campaign and other groups

The centre is north of Heathrow, on the A4 / Colnbrook by-pass.

# Flaws in 'globalisation' thesis

*Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain* by George Monbiot, Macmillan, 430pp, 2000, £12.99

*No Logo* by Naomi Klein, Flamingo, 490pp, 2000, £8.99

Reviewed by **Nick Davies**

Both Monbiot and Klein have tapped into and reflected the feeling of anger and frustration felt by millions of young people at the apparently limitless power of corporations. These books examine different aspects of the development of corporate power over the last decade or so. While both are strong on description, their analyses of the phenomenon known as 'globalisation', and their proposed solutions, are somewhat less convincing.

George Monbiot seems to be popping up all over the place these days, as a *Guardian* columnist, activist, and author. *Captive State*, which came out towards the end of last year, is a well-written and well-researched account of the suppression of democracy by the power and greed of corporations. To illustrate his argument that 'The struggle between people and corporations will be the defining struggle of the 21st century', he tells a series of horror stories, some already well known, others that had been kept under wraps.

There's the corporate welfare scheme, the Private Finance Initiative, under which any new hospitals are built at public expense for private gain, there's the control of the food industry by the supermarkets, control of the food chain itself by the biotech companies, the rigging of the planning laws in favour of developers, and the toll bridge to the Isle of Skye, which many local people did not want, but they got anyway. It cost British and EU taxpayers £25 million, but its financiers, the Bank of America, look set to trouser a tidy £88 million in tolls. In this case, as with the others, the corporate trump card is 'commercial confidentiality': we don't have the right to know by

how much they're ripping us off.

The amount of valuable information about the way that corporate power is now exercised in Britain is a tribute to Monbiot's skills as an investigative journalist. For that reason alone, the book is worth reading. However, it has two principal weaknesses. The first is in Monbiot's conclusion. 'Corporations are only powerful because we allow them to be,' he argues, and they will only cease to be so 'when people reassert their control'. 'Our strength,' he continues, 'lies in our citizenship, in our ability to engage in democratic politics.'

After the savage indictment of corporate power and greed in the preceding pages, this, as a call to arms, or even to the streets, is a tad feeble. It says nothing about the labour movement. It is somewhat redolent of US Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader's call for a 'deliberative democracy', peopled, presumably, by earnest and incorruptible legislators, neither bought nor threatened by corporations. This seems to be harking back to a golden age that never was, when people had 'control' over corporations, yet, as Monbiot acknowledges, Gladstone's efforts to regulate the rail industry were obstructed by the MPs who had directorships in railway companies, while at more or less the same time, that well-known socialist Abraham Lincoln wrote: 'I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country . . . corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow.'

This point takes us to the second, less obvious, and more complex problem with the book. Monbiot suggests that

corporations are taking over what is left of the power and responsibility of elected governments, whose power, he argues, is shrivelling. On the face of it, this seems convincing, as many corporations have a turnover far bigger than some African, or even European, countries. They move capital across continents without let or hindrance, to where the wages and environmental standards are lowest, and pay as little tax as possible. But hold on: where did the Private Finance Initiative come from? Who set up the Education Action Zones, which allow companies into schools? Who set up the Export Credit Guarantee Scheme that allows the taxpayer to subsidise Balfour Beatty to build dams that nobody needs, but will make thousands homeless? Who sets Corporation Tax levels in Britain at below the EU average? The obvious answer is that first the Tories and then New Labour created a climate where business can virtually do what it likes. In the USA, George W. Bush might as well have campaigned in the election wearing the names and logos of oil and pharmaceutical companies on his clothing, as a football team wears the name of its sponsor. However, in taking Monbiot to task for overstating the case for corporate independence from government we should not overstate the opposite case. Corporations confronted by governments they don't like will organise flights of capital, or engineer runs on the national currency, but they've been doing that for years. So what, if anything, is new?

Monbiot is only half right in what he says about a new era of corporate dominance. Like the globalisation theorists, he argues that they, not national states decide. But are nation states ceas-

ing to regulate, or is it simply a different kind of regulation? Bodies such as the WTO have recently acquired sweeping powers, but they are made up of representatives of nation states and dominated by the most powerful states, predominantly the USA. The USA, particularly, presents its own agenda, the agenda of its leading corporations, as an international agenda. Globalisation represents the internationalisation of the policies of deregulation and privatisation pursued domestically by Thatcher and Reagan during the 1980s. They pursued these policies as the political representatives of their domestic capitalist classes. So, in the WTO, disputes are fought out not between companies, but between governments. The governments of the powerful states, such as the USA, have to win at the expense of the governments of the less powerful, such as Zambia or Bolivia. That is the point of the game. It is designed as an unequal contest. So it is the US government, not Chiquita, which is in dispute with the EU over banana imports, and the US government which is fighting on behalf of the pharmaceutical companies in their disputes with the Brazilian and other governments concerning the enforcement of the WTO's protocols on drug patents and intellectual property rights. Global trade disputes are therefore warfare, still conducted by governments, in the interests of corporations, by the rich on the poor, by other means.

Of course, this argument does not detract one bit from the enormity of the damage done by the corporate juggernaut to the rights of workers and to the environment all over the planet, and described so powerfully by Monbiot, whatever the faults in his analysis or the inadequacies of his solutions.

Naomi Klein's book is both interesting and exasperating. Worth reading is her description of how brands and products have become decoupled. This decoupling is both conceptual, in that brands are now seen in schools and shopping malls as an overarching lifestyle choice rather than just the name of a pair of trainers, and literal, in that the production has been outsourced to contractors in export processing zones in Asia or Central America. Her description of the factories where well-known clothing

brands are made is powerful: armed guards to keep workers in and unions out, fourteen-hour days, compulsory pregnancy tests (so that pregnant workers can be sacked on the spot), in fact, no rights at all and wages that barely buy enough to eat. Especially moving is Klein's description of the cries of anger and despair by Haitian garment workers on learning just how much the Disney products they made were sold for in the USA. Especially funny is the account of the teach-in organised by the staff of a Canadian Catholic school on the exploitation behind the students' beloved brands, only for the students to find that their school uniforms also bore the legend 'Made in Indonesia', so did that mean they shouldn't wear those either?

Why exasperating? Well, a lot of the time Klein writes as if she has just discovered Truth. On her own admission, she spent her time in university at the end of the 1980s preoccupied with identity politics and only later woke up to this global capitalism lark. Trade unions in North America and Europe who might have been fighting it a lot longer than she has are regarded as a slightly staid, old fashioned, but worthy allies. Instead, the way to fight the tyranny of the brands is by propaganda, consumer boycotts and by ad-busting. Defacing billboards can be funny and inventive but it hardly represents a strategy. Boycotting, such as that of Pepsi Cola because of its involvement in Burma, or Nike, because of its use of sweatshops, is a useful propaganda tool, but as Klein herself admits, 'anticorporate activism walks a precarious line between self-satisfied consumer rights and engaged political action'.

Klein and, more importantly, many of the people who have read her book have grown up in a world where, especially in North America, the labour movement is weak and trade unions are seen as marginalised health and safety pressure groups with a sideline in car insurance. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that labour movement action doesn't really figure as a response to the ruthlessness of corporations. The same applies to her proposed solutions: embarrassing or shaming corporations into raising health, safety and environmental standards and allowing unions

— in other words, asking that they become nicer capitalists. There seems to be no fundamental objection to capitalism so long as they just get on with making sportswear or jeans, extracting oil, or whatever, and do it honestly and decently.

The other problem is that like George Monbiot, Naomi Klein exaggerates or misreads the extent to which corporations have become independent from governments. If corporations are completely sovereign, the argument runs, there is no point in 'normal' politics. Why not just use the media to make propaganda directly against the corporations, or smash their windows?

Many in the revolutionary left have adopted this approach lock, stock and barrel. After all, anti-globalisation 'happenings' are much more fun than plugging away in Labour Party or trade union branches, aren't they? Those of us who still believe that revolutionary Marxists should maintain a prime orientation to the labour movement have to argue for international solidarity with the super-exploited workers of Asia and Latin America, and labour movement action against corporations which pollute or super-exploit, as part of the task of rebuilding and politically rearming the labour movement. International working class action against the corporations, and the governments that give them what they want, will in the end be more effective than a fire-eating juggler giving out leaflets. It will be more exciting too. **WA**

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# New gods for old?

*Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, by Stephen Jay Gould, Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999, £14.00 hardback

Reviewed by **Charli Langford**

Stephen Jay Gould is one of today's best popular science writers; certainly he is the most prolific. His *Wonderful Life* and *The Mismeasure of Man* are superb; he is also the author of the longest-running series of contemporary science essays, having just completed his 300th (and last) for the monthly *Natural History*, where as well as discussing issues in his own field of evolutionary biology he has also argued compellingly and entertainingly against the anti-science of the creationists and against efforts to provide scientific justification for racism and eugenics.

In *Rocks of Ages* he moves some way from his usual terrain, and into a discussion of the roles of science and religion. He argues that there is no way that science and religion can be synthesised into a common schema of analysis and explanation, but they have different and completely separate domains and should therefore never come into conflict. He borrows the term *magisterium*, meaning a domain of authority in teaching, from Catholic theology and he describes his principle as NOMA, or non-overlapping magisteria. Science and religion, he claims, do not overlap because science is concerned with the factual nature of the modern world and the theories that explain it, while religion is concerned with meanings and moral values. He also suggests that there are other magisteria – art, for example, which is concerned with the meaning of beauty.

## 'Creation science'

The first question one might ask is: why bother writing a book like this? The answer is that it is mainly for home

consumption. Gould is an immensely well-known figure in the United States; he has received the ultimate accolade of fame there, appearing in an episode of *The Simpsons*. He is acutely aware that in the most technologically advanced country on earth a large number of people still maintain the religious mindset that Europe shrugged off some 300 years ago. The 1920s laws in Tennessee and some other states forbidding the teaching of the theory of evolution were only rescinded in 1968 by the federal Supreme Court – not because the laws were superstitious and irrational, but because they breached the first amendment to the constitution which guarantees the right of free speech and separates the state and religion. In the late 1970s Arkansas and Louisiana law required that equal time be given to the teaching of evolution as to the teaching of a new subject called 'creation science' which was not at all religious and only coincidentally was identical to a literal interpretation of Judaeo-Christian-Islamic Genesis; this law was rescinded in 1987 on the Popperian basis that creation science was not a science because its theories failed the test of falsifiability'. In the latest round of this battle, the Kansas Board of Education in August 1999 voted to remove evolution and the 'big bang' theory of the creation of the universe from the schools' science syllabus. They hope to get round the constitutional problems by not stipulating a biblical alternative and relying on the tendency of over-worked teachers to omit anything not explicitly required by the syllabus.

Gould has been a central figure in this fight. *Rocks of Ages* contains much anti-creationism. It is therefore

particularly sad to report that his latest work falls a long way short of his usual standards of rigour and even-handedness. On the central argument of the book, even his prose style drops to a level of mere competence.

## Redefining religion

This is because Gould – as have so many intellectuals before him – has fought shy of confronting established religion. Instead he offers a *modus vivendi*, a truce between the rational and the irrational. He seeks to define the role of religion in life and to identify the boundary between the magisterium (let's make life easier and call it 'domain' henceforth) of religion and that of science. The futility of this can be seen when it becomes clear what he considers religion is, and what some religions have to give up in order to fit within Gould's terms. He says:

'Science covers the empirical realm: what the universe is made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). . . . religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value.' (p.6)

This definition of religion is very questionable. 'Ultimate meaning' and 'moral value' in Gould's text appear together but are in fact are very different propositions. 'Ultimate meaning' refers to the 'why?' questions, answerable only in terms of individual personal beliefs. Any attempt to collectivise these implies a supra-individual consciousness – ie, a god. 'Moral value' lies in the 'how do we proceed?' arena, where in most cases large numbers of humans are working together.

Gould's description of the domain of religion is generally very slipshod. He is acutely aware of the tools and methods of science, but he gives us nothing of the tools and methods of the religious domain – surely something of an omission for a text seeking to put science and religion on an equal footing? After an example of various scientific questions about the history of life on earth, he goes on to say:

'But the same subject of our relationship with other organisms also raises a host of questions with an entirely



different thrust: Are we worth more than bugs and bacteria because we have evolved a much more complex neurology? Under what conditions (if ever) do we have the right to drive other species to extinction . . . Such questions . . . engage different concerns that simply cannot be answered, or even much illuminated, by factual data of any kind . . .

'These questions address moral issues about the value and meaning of life . . . their fruitful discussion must proceed under a different magisterium, far older than science (at least as a formalized inquiry), and dedicated to a quest for consensus, or at least a clarification on assumptions and criteria, about ethical "ought," rather than a search for any factual "is" about the material construction of the natural world. This magisterium of ethical discussion and search for meaning includes several disciplines traditionally grouped under the humanities – much of philosophy, and part of literature and history, for example. But human societies have usually centred the discourse of this magisterium upon an institution called "religion" ' (pp.54-56)

### Moral value

Why should anyone think that moral value derives from religion? The moral basis of most societies is essentially a reactive woolly liberal consensus which fails completely to provide a lead on new questions that arise – such as whether human embryo research is a good thing or not. The religious voice within these arguments has been taken over by the most right-wing elements to such an extent that it seems to be seen by the majority as indicative of what *not* to do – the recent debate in Britain on repeal of Section 28 being a case in point.

The Old Testament god of the Jews, Christians and Muslims was a vile sexist, racist, homophobic, blood-thirsty creature and one of the best measures of a society's progress lies in how far it has moved away from him in terms of what it considers morally ac-

ceptable. Today, those states whose rulers derive their moral code most directly from religion turn out to be among the most barbaric on the planet. In the United States, it is the most reactionary states of the south that house the rabid religious Christian right, and these are the states that potential Presidents appeal to when as Governors they show they are 'tough on crime' by signing some unfortunate's death warrant. Discrimination against Palestinians and other non-Jews is written into the Israeli constitution. From the fundamentalist Islamic world, lopping the hands off thieves and executing adulteresses by stoning can scarcely be said to be civilised. But even these states have shown revulsion against Jahweh / Jehovah / Allah's demand for punishing the children and grandchildren of criminals. Clearly even the least enlightened of people have rejected scripture as the sole determinant of morals.

Fortunately, no state has yet put together Christian doctrine on original sin, baptism, and the tendency of humans to sin further as their lives progress. The logical outcome of this conjuncture would presumably be the mass baptism and then slaughter of the new-born.

(It is necessary for the sake of intellectual honesty to record that such reactionary stuff is not always the case among religion-based people – Quakers, for instance, have tended in modern times to support the labour movement and nuclear disarmament, and also were prominent in the anti-slavery movement. The Primitive Methodists were a progressive pro-union split within Wesleyanism. Unfortunately, none of these movements ever became the prime influence in a state. Islam, during the European darkness called the Middle Ages, played host to a flowering of Jewish communities in the Middle East with a tolerance that shames most of later European and US society.)

Those who most clearly reject religion and deny the existence of a god will usually say there is no 'ultimate meaning', yet are frequently among the most concerned with questions of moral

value. Workers Action readers almost certainly would constitute such a group, since most are materialist (in the philosophical sense, not the capitalist acquisitive sense), revolutionary socialist activists. It is likely that the majority of readers are atheists and yet at the same time are among those most concerned with moral value in the arena of social policy on the planet. Congratulations, people – you have immediately falsified Gould's assertion.

Or maybe not. In a quick bit of backtracking (which immediately follows the previous quote) he says:

'I most emphatically do not argue that ethical people must validate their standards by overt appeals to religion . . . we all know that atheists can live in the most firmly principled manner . . . But I do reiterate that religion has occupied the centre of this magisterium in the traditions of most cultures.' (pp.57-58)

Gould then proceeds to illustrate his argument from exclusively Christian tradition – in fact, much of his book deals with Roman Catholic theology. Given that his immediate opponents are US Christian creationists, basing his book on Christian tradition may be sensible, and he does apologise for this limited range, citing his own limited knowledge as excuse. Your reviewer, too, is grateful for this limitation, as it reflects my own knowledge. Nevertheless, for a work of universal application some exemplification from other world religions is expected.

### Doubting Thomas

Long-time Gould readers will be aware of his penchant for historical illustrations of his arguments. To illustrate the domain of religion, he tells the tale of doubting Thomas. After his death, Jesus appears to all his disciples except Thomas who was elsewhere. So when they next saw Thomas they told him the tale and Thomas didn't believe them with the famous lines about having to see the crucifixion nail-holes and putting his hand into the spear-wound. A week later Jesus turns up again complete with stigmata and gives Thomas

*Continued next page*

### **New gods for old**

*Continued from previous page*

his comeuppance. Gould comments: 'Poor doubting Thomas. At the crucial and eponymous moment he acted in the most admirable way for one style of inquiry – but in the wrong magisterium.' (p.16)

### **The limits of god**

Gould then writes approvingly of Thomas Burnet (1635–1715), who was a clergyman and a scientist. Burnet was trying to construct a scientific explanation for Noah's flood and he had a major problem with the quantity of water involved. Being a Gouldian, he refused to allow religion onto science's turf and he rejected the easy solution of assuming god simply created more; instead he evolved a theory (subsequently falsified) of water previously held under the Earth breaking through to create the flood. Gould uses Burnet's view as an illustration of the proper separation of the domains of science and religion; an omnipotent god was able to see how future history would all pan out and would have created enough water in advance. For Gould, god created the laws of the universe and set the whole thing off, and then operated a complete hands-off policy. This view of god is clearly more elegant than that of the cosmic odd-job person forever intervening with a miracle to fix some bungle, and it accords with the theological conception of godly perfection. In consequence, claims Gould, the science domain covers the entire universe from its creation to its final disappearance, and the brief of science is to discover the laws god has hidden for it. God is not allowed to intervene.

This of course is complete anathema to most people who practice religion. All religions have stories which imply meaning and morality; they have gods and prophets that generate these stories, and a priesthood that winnows them, ensures that they don't get too self-contradictory and interprets the meaning to the laity. Within most religions there are numerous transgressions of Gould's rule against messing

with science, and there is a general exhortation to the faithful to trust god rather than Gould, who claims that the quick prayer to get you through your exams or to keep granddad awake while he is driving down the motorway is utterly pointless, because god isn't going to lift a finger on your behalf. The whole catalogue of miracles is also out – which is particularly difficult for the Christians since the central point of Christian belief, Christ's rising from the dead, is a no-no.

Which leads back to doubting Thomas. At the point when the disciples tell him the tale Thomas thinks: 'They're telling me that someone who was dead is now alive again, and he's got wounds he should be dead of. Now, I'm in the known universe, and at some point between its creation and demise. Therefore I'm in Stephen Jay Gould's magisterium of science and miracles don't happen here.' According to Gould, Thomas did precisely the right thing. So why does Gould say 'Poor doubting Thomas'?

### **Straight from the heart?**

The truth is that Gould is not writing about religion at all. What he calls religion is a moral discourse, wide enough to include atheism yet denying a role for a god. He is touting a form of humanism that is open to those with religious beliefs. The problem with all this is where the 'moral value' comes from. God is out – thankfully, given the generally unpleasant moral nature of gods and the corrupt, self-aggrandising natures of their priesthoods – but what's left? Gould writes a great deal about Darwin's argument that nature is independent of morality, is neither moral nor immoral, but amoral and claims 'we cannot avoid the much harder, but ultimately liberating, task of looking into the heart of our distinctive selves'. (p.204)

There is a major problem here, of course. What does Ariel Sharon see in the heart of his distinctive self? Or Slobadan Milosevic? Augusto Pinochet? Adolf Hitler? Ayatollah Khomeini? Having taken an ultimately individualist position on morals, Gould

gives us no means to deny the validity of whatever these thugs come up with.

### **Societal controls**

In fact, morals are clearly collective. They are constructed by society to give answers to questions of ownership, rights and duties – all of which are collective questions. Through this they give a yardstick for what is acceptable behaviour, and they are a central part of the means by which the state controls society. That is not to say that they are a conspiracy by the ruling class; moral values will arise in any society as part of the mechanism of binding that society into a unit and defining its relationship with other societies. Moral value is one of a number of already-existing societal controls which a ruling class can sometimes use in its own interest. However, it is often a poor control – under the current neo-liberal offensive, for example, moral arguments are more used by workers to defend existing gains against claw-back attempts by government. Change in moral climate is far too slow to make morality a control-instrument of choice in a society in rapid change. Thatcher, Major and now Blair have taken many years to undermine universal healthcare, for example.

Morals are a determinant of religion, rather than the other way round. Religion develops within an already-existing moral framework, and it is then used to back up and help enforce that framework through the demands of the god(s) and gurus, if not their actual practice. When Moses went up the mountain he probably really did spend forty days up there with his chisel because it would take that long to do a nice copy of the commandments. It would have taken considerable chutzpah to suggest that god was a second-rate stonemason.

### **Atheists**

Gould seems to have a serious dislike for atheists – which is strange, since his call for religion to cease its transgressions into the scientific domain and eschew miracles is also the agenda of

most atheists. Against the generalised background tone of a pleasant and tolerant person documenting his thoughts, his comments about some other scientists strike a jarring note. He writes of the 'many folks and movements [who] hold narrow and aggressively partisan positions', among whom he 'also include[s], among my own scientific colleagues, some militant atheists whose blinkered concept of religion grasps none of the subtlety and diversity' (pp.68-69), and later, 'I do get discouraged when some of my colleagues tout their private atheism (their right, of course, and in many ways my own suspicion as well) as a panacea for human progress against an absurd caricature of "religion" erected as a straw man for rhetorical purposes'. (p.209) His description of the creationists is markedly less hostile. Chris Lavers, in a *Guardian* review (Feb 3, 2001), strongly takes Gould's side: 'These scientific fundamentalists will undoubtedly take extreme pleasure in savaging Gould for his liberal woolly-mindedness'.

It seems from *Rocks of Ages* that it is Gould, much more than his scientific opponents, who is displaying an eccentric view of what religion is. Against a more conventional understanding of religion it is clear that the NOMA principle does *not* hold. At what point in the evolutionary development of the human species did god intervene to insert a soul? Was Jesus resurrected? Woolly-mindedness within moral, philosophical and scien-

tific discussion *is* a problem. There is a major fallacy in the liberal, let's-be-nice-to-religious-people anti-atheist view. Although it is true that you cannot scientifically disprove the existence of a supreme being, it does not follow that the two options of existence and non-existence are equally likely. In rather the same way it is impossible to disprove David Icke's belief that George W. Bush is a 12-foot-long Annunaki lizard from the lower fourth dimension with mass hypnotic powers (reported in *Guardian Weekend*, March 17, 2001). But if there are reasons for assuming that one of these beliefs is more likely than the other, then these reasons should be stated and can be evaluated. Conversely, if there is no reason for these beliefs being of different likelihood, then a similar level of agnosticism should be maintained for each.

Conventional wisdom says that supreme beings are jealous of each other. According to their priests, they tend to deny each other's existence, and since they are all in the same omnipotence business they should know. Believing in a false god is the worst thing you can do. But adherence to Jehovah implies atheism towards Wotan, Zeus, Kali, Isis, Lugh and the rest. Given the odds against picking the right one, it seems that denying them all is the best option on grounds of safety as well as rationality.

Gould uses NOMA to attempt to cut off science from questions of morals, and in this he is correct – knowing

what scientifically is gives no guide to knowing what morally should be. But that does not mean that scientists should be excluded from such discussions; scientists will have their own moral opinions as much as anyone else. However, it is *not* correct to cut off scientific criticism of religion – whether under NOMA or any other principle – and anyone who attempts this is a hypocrite. Religious miracle stories derive their power precisely from the violation of scientific truth, and science has not just a right but also a duty to dispute these truths with the priests in front of those the stories are designed to impress. It is this confrontation that the Gould book will undermine and that is why its confusion between religion and morals makes it fundamentally anti-scientific.

Gould is a superb science writer, but this book is his nadir. Read anything of his but this! **WA**

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\* Falsifiability: a single instance of valid observation of a result that differs from the prediction of a scientific theory is sufficient to prove that theory false. A scientific theory can never be proven true; the best that can be said of any theory is that it has withstood attempts to prove it false. The better theories are those which are most falsifiable but which have not yet proven false. Falsifiability is a measure of how many opportunities a theory has to be proved false – for example, Newton's theory of planetary motion is a better theory than Kepler's because Kepler described the elliptical path and orbital speed of the planets, while Newton derived similar results to Kepler from his laws of motion and gravitation. Any observation of a planet behaving unpredictably would invalidate both theories, but Newton's could be falsified by any other instance of the laws of motion or of gravitation not being obeyed. There are more opportunities to prove Newton false.

That does not mean that all statements are theories: the statement 'all points on a circle are the same distance from the centre' is not falsifiable because it follows from the definition of a circle.

# A revolutionary childhood

*Daughter of Revolution: A Russian Girlhood*  
Remembered by Vera Broido, Constable, 1998,  
216pp, £16.99

Reviewed by **Richard Price**

In the afterword to these memoirs, Vera Broido writes: 'As, in my ninety-first year, I bring this book to a close, I am very aware how remote the world it deals with must seem. There can surely be very few still alive who knew Siberian exile under the Tsar, or who lived through the Russian Revolution as a member of a family of revolutionaries. Those who can remember what life was like in Moscow and St Petersburg during the Civil War cannot be very numerous either. Even the Berlin and Paris of the 1920s now seem very far away. In fact, the experiences described here belong to the furthest reaches of living memory. All the more reason for recording them while there is still time.' (p.213).

But Vera Broido's life is not remarkable only for its longevity, but also for the array of characters with which it has intersected. It seems scarcely credible that someone who was 'firm friends' with Pavel Axelrod – one of the founders of the Russian revolutionary movement, born 20 years before Lenin – can still be alive! She recounts that Axelrod in turn introduced her to an elderly Dutch plantation owner from Java, who he claimed had financed the Marx's First International (p.147) – which takes us back nearly 140 years!

These are personal rather than political memoirs, but they are bound up intimately with the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. As the daughter of two prominent Mensheviks, she experienced many of the dangers and turns of fortune that they experienced. Her parents were arrested in 1901 and exiled to Siberia – from where they promptly escaped. They sided with the Mensheviks in the split 1903 and returned to work underground in Russia in time to take part in the 1905 revolu-

tion. On one occasion, her mother Eva was counter-speaker to Lenin at a meeting of shipyard workers, and apparently carried the day.

The author was born in 1907, and was seven when her mother, who supported Martov's internationalist wing of the Mensheviks, was sentenced to three years administrative exile in Siberia for opposing the world war. (Her father supported the defencist right wing of the party, and carried out 'legal' work in the 'Workers' Group' during the war.) The portrait of Siberian exile is beautifully written in the inimitable style of Russian memoirs – although the account of political exiles cheerfully getting drunk together (pp.69-70) won't please those who like their Marxism to remain puritanical. In Siberia the Broidos were in contact with many leading figures of the revolutionary movement, past and present, including Tsereteli, Fyodor Dan, Yekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya and Yelena Stasova.

Not surprisingly, the memories of someone who was ten can add little to our knowledge of the events of 1917, and the author doesn't attempt to render them more profound in hindsight, even though her mother was secretary to the Menshevik Central Committee. Instead there are vivid accounts of the hunger and suffering of the Civil War years, of hearing Chaliapin sing and Maxim Gorky speak, of meeting revolutionary heroines Vera Zasulich and Vera Figner. Despite her mother's misgivings, Vera joined the Red Scouts and ran errands to and from the Smolny Institute, then headquarters of the Bolshevik Party. During the siege of Petrograd in 1919 her mother, despite her opposition to the Bolsheviks, took her turn at guard duty, rifle in hand. (p.122)

In 1920, Vera and her mother made the highly dangerous crossing into Poland during the Russo-Polish war, and eventually reunited their family in Berlin, then home to thousands of displaced and exiled Russians of every political persuasion. It was the headquarters of the Menshevik Party and editorial meetings of *Socialist Courier*, the Menshevik paper in exile, regularly took place at the Broidos' house. Ironically, the Soviet Trade Ministry employed quite a few exiled Mensheviks, including her father. But whereas Vera's mother worked energetically alongside Menshevik leaders such as Martov, Abramovich, Dan and Nikolaevsky, her father increasingly drew the conclusion that 'the defeat of the Mensheviks was irreversible, and that their activities at home and abroad were futile'. (p.179)

Something of this outlook must have rubbed off on Vera, because she didn't – unlike so many other children of Russian revolutionaries – become active in politics, despite her warm feelings towards Martov, Dan and Axelrod. Instead, she was attracted to the artistic avant-garde in Berlin. She became friends with Alexandra Exter, one of the pioneers of Constructivism in Russia, who had become disillusioned by the conservative direction art took in the Soviet Union after the early 1920s. Subsequently, Vera lived for several years in a *ménage à trois* with Raoul Hausmann, one of the founders of Dadaism, and his wife.

These memoirs end in 1934. By the age of 27 Vera Broido had already experienced far more than most people manage in a lifetime. She went on to edit her mother's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (Oxford, 1967), and write a study of women and the revolutionary movement in Russia, *Apostles into Terrorists* (Temple Smith, 1978). She married the well-known historian Norman Cohn, author of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, and her son is the rock music critic, Nik Cohn.

But this remarkable life had some very dark sides. Her half-sister Galya died of meningitis in 1916 while Vera and her mother were in Siberia. Her other half-sister Sanya became a Bolshevik only to be sent with her daughter to

*Continued next page*

# Hackney Unison still in struggle

The following message was received just as this issue of Workers Action was going to press. We have edited it slightly to fit into the space available. The last paragraph details what you can do to help

After six months in dispute Hackney Unison members remain defiant despite management 'terrorism'. Management are still trying to remove overtime and plus payments, remove all bonuses, cut annual leave, and increase the working week. For many workers it would mean a cut in wages of £1,500 immediately and a pay freeze for years to come. People for whom it is an essential requirement of their job that they own a car will be told they cannot claim essential car user payments. Flexi-time provisions will be reduced as management claim it is abused by people who take the afternoon off to play golf (!)

After repeated ultimatums, management assumed the dispute was over when in April both the TGWU and GMB unions signed up for the cuts. Unison however refused to give away its members terms and conditions and

## **A revolutionary childhood**

*Continued from previous page*

a labour camp for eleven years under Stalin, while Sanya's husband was shot. Her mother, Eva, returned to Russia in 1927 aged 51 to carry out underground work for the Mensheviks, but was arrested after six months and imprisoned without trial. She finally underwent three trials between 1940 and 1941 and was shot in September that year, along with many other surviving oppositionists.

These memoirs serve above all to remind us of a period when the term 'intelligentsia' wasn't employed (as it is all too frequently on the left today) as a term to sneer at people who bother to read books, but defined a social stratum which dedicated its existence to the struggle of the oppressed. **WA**

called another one day strike on international workers day, 1 May, which was overwhelmingly supported. A march and rally was addressed by Jeremy Corbyn MP as well as speakers from the Liberal Democrats and the Socialist Alliance (proving that in Hackney you have to be either a Tory or new Labour to support these cuts.)

Management responded by abandoning collective bargaining, and threatening to dismiss all workers who had not individually signed away their employment rights by Monday 14 May. This was of course an empty threat, but one which caused a certain panic among some workers when on Tuesday of last week managers across the council systematically called workplace meetings and urged staff to 'think of yourselves, think of your family, think of your mortgage, if you don't sign by Monday you will be out of a job by Tuesday.' The union responded by explaining that the threat was empty, providing detailed legal advice from Unison legal, and by calling brief lunchtime meetings to undermine management lies. An email exchange between the union and management took place in which management came off worse as they refused to answer a series of six simple 'yes' or 'no' questions.

Management also refused Unison time-off to hold a branch meeting to provide advice to our members. We therefore held it during the lunch hour today (Monday 14), and despite management harassment over 350 people attended. The mood was defiant and confident, as speakers from across the council denounced management and urged those present to take standard rejection letters back to their workplaces.

Management had claimed that over 50 per cent of workers had now signed acceptance slips. Our estimate

was 20 per cent (that is, less than the number of non-unionised workers). Even our estimate may have been generous to management as the post room reported a mere 15 forms arrived in the post today. The Town Hall front reception desk reported only 70 being handed in last week.

The gun has been held to our head for six months, and today the overwhelming majority of council workers have refused to give away their employment rights. We have held management at bay for six months, and we are not ready to give up now. We have held six days of strike action and are seeking authority from Unison to being a rolling program of sectional action (on enhanced strike pay) if management serve 90 day notices on our members. The next four weeks will be a critical for Hackney, and for public service workers generally. We will not subsidise tax cuts for the rich by allowing pay cuts for the poor.

Management believed they could break our spirit, they have failed, now they will try to break our dispute. We have already paid out over £80,000 from our strike fund. We desperately need donations from branches to ensure that we can continue to pay strike pay as the dispute escalates.

Many of our members, and even our shop stewards have never been involved in a dispute involving this much pressure. We need to know we have friends out there, people who we may never have met, but who believe in the struggle we are waging. We need an avalanche of messages of support. Please rush messages of support, donations for our strike fund, and invites to speak at labour and trade union meetings to Hackney Unison 3rd Floor Netil House, 1 - 7 Westgate Street, London E8, or at [rsunion@unisonfee.net](mailto:rsunion@unisonfee.net)

**John Page, Branch Secretary**

# George Grosz and the Bolsheviks

From the First World War to the victory of the Nazis in 1933, George Grosz (1893–1959) was a central figure in the German avant-garde.

**Richard Price** introduces the artist's impressions of Russia shortly after the revolution

One of the founders of Dadaism, Grosz' caricatures of bloated bourgeois and reactionary generals became internationally famous for their combination of savage wit and acute satire. This account of his visit to Russia in 1922 is taken from his autobiography *A Small Yes And A Big No*, first published in the United States in 1955. Although marked by his later political disillusion with Marxism, it is an interesting reminder of a period when the Russian Revolution was still trying to win over the literary and artistic avant-garde, and build bridges to 'fellow travellers'.

It is in fact the most political section of an autobiography that – either as a result of the anti-communism of the 1950s or of the author's own evolution – tries to depoliticise Grosz's past. Here and there Grosz attacks both the leadership of the Bolsheviks and the masses themselves. Lenin, for instance, is referred to in an aside as a 'manipulator of the masses'<sup>1</sup>. The victory of Hitler seems to have been a watershed in Grosz's development, and he laid the blame at the door of the working class, remarking sarcastically that: 'The "proletarian masses" did not lift a finger against him.'<sup>2</sup> Later in the book he warms to the theme that the working class in the modern world is 'a herd of obedient sheep that choose their own butchers with a sense of immense satisfaction'.<sup>3</sup> After leaving Germany weeks before Hitler came to power, Grosz emigrated to the US, where he enthusiastically turned his back on Europe and 'assimilated' into US culture. By way of a personal excuse, he cites his individualism as the reason for his retreat from politics – individualism at odds with the 'age

of numbers without names and of robots without brains'<sup>4</sup> he claimed was ushered in after 1914.

All of this was a far cry from the radical young artist fired by opposition to the imperialist slaughter nearly four decades earlier. Grosz's autobiography barely mentions his collaboration with John Heartfield, and his brother Wieland Herzfelde who played an equally important role in the German artistic left. Yet according to Herzfelde, coming into contact with Grosz in 1915 had an enormous impact upon them. His drawings were '... a revelation. At the same time, a cold shower; shocking, sobering, tingling and invigorating. My brother and I had been accustomed to thinking of art as that which makes beauty visible and audible ... Grosz suddenly made us stop seeing the everyday world as dry, dull, and boring, and start seeing it as a drama in which stupidity, crudity, and sloth played the starring roles.'<sup>5</sup>

Grosz later claimed that 'John Heartfield and I invented photomontage in my South End studio at five o'clock on a May morning in 1916'.<sup>6</sup> (In fact, their 'discovery' of photomontage occurred around the same time as work by artists such as Raoul Hausmann and Gustav Klutsis.) Together, Grosz and Heartfield collaborated on a series of radical journals which were dogged by censorship and court cases – first *Die Neue Jugend* (*New Youth*), founded in 1917; then *Jedermann Sein Eigner Fussball* (*Everybody His Own Football!*), banned after one issue; and then *Die Pleite*.

Grosz and Heartfield joined the newly formed Communist Party on the last day of 1918 – a fact again

omitted from Grosz's memoirs. An article entitled 'Der Kunstlump' ('The Art Rogue') written by Grosz and Heartfield appeared in 1920, and provoked a major debate within the party on the significance of proletarian art. In common with Dada, Grosz and Heartfield had set about denouncing 'bourgeois art' in general. The debate was concluded when August Thalheimer, the editor of the Communist daily *Die Rote Fahne*, declared that the proletariat, rather than rejecting, must reform an inherited bourgeois culture.<sup>7</sup> The debate ran in close parallel to debates in the Soviet Union about 'proletarian culture', with Thalheimer taking a position similar to that taken by Trotsky in writings such as *Literature and Revolution*. By the time of his visit to Russia, Grosz had evidently adopted this position himself.

Although Grosz gives the impression in his autobiography that his visit to Russia marked the beginning of his break with revolutionary politics, he was active on the German left up to the Nazi seizure of power. In 1923 he was, together with Heartfield, put in charge of new KPD satirical weekly, *Der Knuppel* (*The Cudgel*)<sup>8</sup>, and the following year they founded The Red Group with Erwin Piscator.

Even in emigration, Grosz remained on friendly terms with Heartfield, who was internationally famous as a Communist artist. He wrote in 1945: 'At a time when friendships are so rare and everyone had to look after themselves, I was deeply touched by your friendship. It is good our friendship has not been destroyed by political moths. Sometimes I feel very depressed when I look at the émigré

*Continued next page*

by George Grosz

# A visit to Russia – 1922

Many of the personalities I met during my visit to Leningrad perished in the ensuing struggle for power, among them Zinoviev, who once held absolute sway over the city. He was a man of medium build, inclined to corpulence. Like most other top commissars, he gave the impression of being greatly overworked and of taking too little fresh-air exercise: he looked pale and had a weak heart. It was the age of a thousand departments in which people worked day and night, especially night, for most Russians are night birds. Zinoviev himself was an affable man and spoke German very well. He asked us round quite a few times, and it was in his car that we toured Leningrad and the environs. Unfortunately I have little of interest to say about the man himself – like most commissars, he was a colourless figure with no private life worth mentioning, one who invariably told foreigners nothing save what he thought they ought to hear. No wonder so many Soviet officials sounded like red-bound pamphlets brought to life, and were even proud of the fact. In the age of the masses, they felt, they could do no better than try to repress what little individuality they had left. Most would

have liked to wear grey cardboard discs for faces, and to exchange their given names for red numbers.

One day, a small group of foreign writers and artists was invited to a special meeting on closer cultural contacts between the Soviet literary establishment and sympathisers in the West. Before Zinoviev turned up, we were entertained by his secretary, Tivel, a charming, parakeet-like little man (they had dressed him in a brightly-coloured Caucasian uniform which was meant to lend him greater weight). In a previous life he must indeed have been a parrot, for he jumped about skilfully just like one: from bench to bench, on to the table, and then on to the window-ledge which he treated like a perch. Sunflower seeds that he popped into his mouth from time to time made the resemblance even more striking. He never kept still, and could twitter away in all sorts of languages, just like a clever parrot.

He had orders to put the correct gloss on all his master's short orations. Zinoviev himself addressed us in a squeaky voice which seemed to have

been squeezed between two wet blankets, but what he said was, as usual, highly intellectual and sometimes a little condescending. (Though he did not actually say so, he clearly implied that Western fellow travellers like us were uncertain company.) He acquainted us with a sweeping plan: all literary output was to be published in a single great super-colossal journal – since he took none of us very seriously, he felt free to indulge in a bit of braggadocio and ballyhoo. The editorial offices were to be in Berlin or Paris and the size and layout of the journal were to reflect the 'gigantic cultural front of the Soviet Union'. The finest and greatest minds would be anxious to collaborate, if not now then certainly in the very near future when, disappointed by the cultural decline in their own countries, they would come flocking to join the cultural front of the Workers' and Peasants' Union. An international editorial board would be formed immediately, with all necessary powers, and also with funds – indeed with considerable funds – for the journal was to bring together everything that had hitherto been dispersed and treated in an unworthy fashion. We would have to discuss the details among ourselves; his secretary Tivel would be on hand with advice and practical help. He, Zinoviev, must unfortunately now take his leave of us, for he was expected at a very urgent session of the Leningrad Workers' and Soldiers' Council: his car was already waiting. 'Long live the Soviet Union and the World Revolution!' 'The World Revolution!' crowed parrot Tivel from the window-ledge, and the door slammed shut behind the People's Commissar.

Our group consisted of eight writers and artists from various capitalist countries. Arthur Holitscher was elected secretary of the German section – not only was he elderly and respectable but he also believed nearly everything he was told. (Later, when he learned the truth, he became all the more

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## George Grosz and the Bolsheviks

*Continued from previous page*

newspapers and see how the various groups are fighting each other. It is somehow my fate or perhaps my nature that I must remain a "lone wolf" . . ."

In 1951 Heartfield suffered a heart attack, and Grosz visited him in hospital in East Berlin.

Grosz's reticence when it comes to politics in *A Small Yes And A Big No* may not only have been an attempt to duck the prevailing anti-communist hysteria in the US. It may also be that he did not want to draw undue attention to his friendship with Heartfield who, together with his brother, had been excluded from the ruling SED (Communist) Party in East Germany along with many other 'Western emi-

grants' who, in the midst of Stalinist purges throughout eastern Europe, became suspected in hindsight of 'treasonable connections' with the West. Such was the crazy symmetry of the Cold War. **WA**

### Notes

1. G. Grosz, *A Small Yes And A Big No*, Zenith, 1982, p.71
2. *Ibid*, p.189
3. *Ibid*, p.221
4. *Ibid*, p.73
5. Ed. P. Pachnicke and K. Honnef, *John Heartfield*, Abrams, 1992, p.19
6. John Heartfield, *Photomontages of the Nazi Period*, Fraser/Universe, 1977, p.7
7. Pachnicke and Honnef, *op cit*, p.20
8. Heartfield *op cit*, p.123
9. Pachnicke and Honnef, *op cit*, pp.311-312

### A visit to Russia - 1922

*Continued from previous page*

embittered and disillusioned.) Martin Andersen Nexø was the natural spokesman for Denmark. He did not, admittedly, swallow everything quite as readily and unreservedly as Holitscher, but he was one of nature's head clerks. Max Eastman was there too, and I remember him chiefly for his beautiful American boots with their red rubber soles. I cannot say much more about him because he took little part in the discussions and paged through an English-Russian dictionary while the rest of us went at it hammer and tongs. Perhaps he knew more than we did. In any case, he looked very nice, had white hair and a friendly smile which distinguished him pleasantly from the many fanatical and credulous apostolic faces around us.

Needless to say, the whole super-colossal project was, as the reader may well have guessed by now, just a Potemkin village, a mirage, so much hot air, a device to side-track us and keep us busy. For, as the 'artists' among us were quick to notice, the workers and peasants had not the slightest use for 'individualistic' art. All they were interested in was consumer durables, and they would gladly have exchanged the lot of us for a dozen American commercial artists to lend colour to their slogans.

\* \* \*

Leningrad was very 'Russian', in the sense that the great writers had led all of us to expect. Here I saw the very houses that Dostoevsky had described, houses with something of the remorseless, rather melancholic humour, but also with the refinement, spaciousness and size of an earlier age. I had been quartered with one Rotkegel, a former German sailor and revolutionary. Once the Social Democrat Noske had made common cause with the arch-reactionary Freikorps to restore 'law and order' in Germany, Rotkegel had had to leave his homeland, and since besides revolutionary energy he was also possessed of organisational talents, he was given an administrative post here in Leningrad and assigned a large, elegant apartment that had seen better days. Signs of faded, slightly moth-eaten splendour abounded

everywhere: man-sized gilded French mirrors with bullet holes through the top and the glass crazed into cobweb patterns; gilded trays holding brushes and combs with double-eagles and the monograms of noble families, silver flasks and flagons, signed photographs in dusty plush frames and once-costly, fraying rococo silk curtains. The good Rotkegel slept comfortably in a French double bed, where he had his breakfast served on a silver tray while studying the progress of the world revolution in *Pravda*. Snowflakes drifted outside, a gigantic tiled stove gave off a pleasant heat, and a small vodka was not a bad thing to start the day with.

Naturally, not every proletarian lived as comfortably as that; only those who had rendered the Revolution outstanding service. For them there were restaurants, beer in strange long bottles, tender crayfish and various types of borsch, with sour cream or with meat, fish, vegetables or gherkins. The pickled mushrooms were also a great delicacy and so, of course, were the many types of caviare. In one window pieces of lamb and kidneys turned on a spit – shashlik, the national dish of the Caucasians. Many foreigners, too, ate out in these restaurants – side by side with well-fed natives in leather jackets.

One day we ourselves went to a leading restaurant, just after the official proclamation of the end of the so-called New Economic Policy. [As this account dates from the early 1920s, Grosz presumably means the start, not the end of the New Economic Policy – Eds.] We sat down under some old, rather dusty, artificial palms, round a table covered with a floor-length damask cloth, and waited to be served. Suddenly, I saw a small brown dot with legs come crawling over the white edge of the cloth, and then travel very slowly right across the table. We sat in complete silence and the senior Russian official who had invited us said nothing either. It was as if we had all tacitly agreed to ignore this crawling dot which was, in fact, a bed-bug. This indifference to vermin seemed to be quite common; it was as if people said to themselves: 'Even if we kill this one, what difference will it make? *Nichevo!* There's no point – millions

more will take its place, so why bother . . . ?'

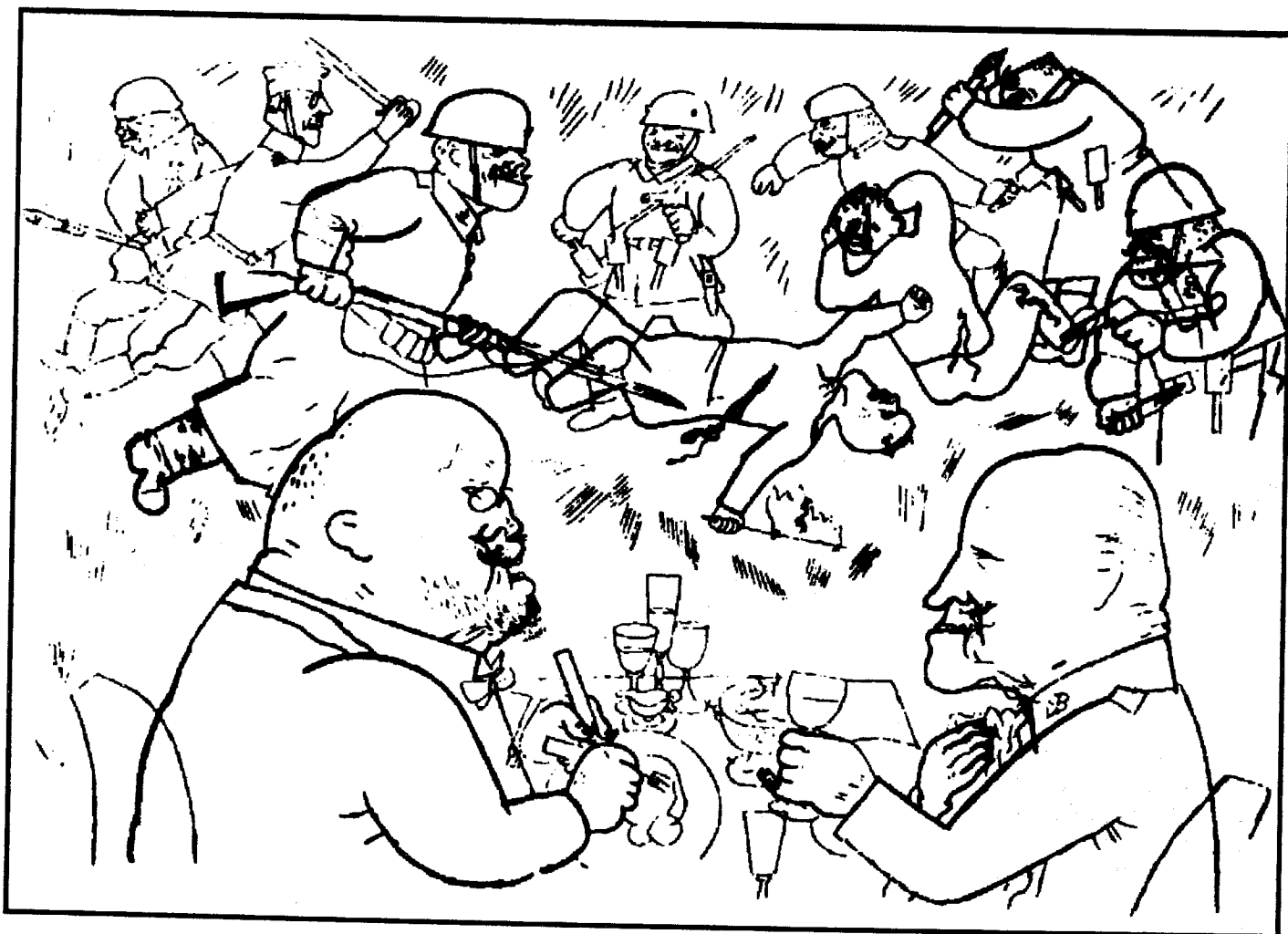
\* \* \*

At the time a new artistic movement known as Constructivism was causing quite a stir. Its very name proclaimed that it supported the constructive forces in their battle against darkness. The movement was centred on technological progress and preferred the look of an electric turbine to that of a landscape. People had no place in the creations of this school, or, if some members did depict them, they transformed them into wheels, cylinders, or puppets subservient to machines.

In Russia, Constructivism had numerous adherents. Its leader was one Tatlin, a strange, uncomplicated sort of Russian. He came from a well-to-do family and had travelled in Germany before the First World War as a member of a famous balalaika band and Russian choir. He told me they had played before the Kaiser's court. Later he became a painter and also studied at a technical high school, but did not become more widely known until he exhibited his 'monumental project' in Moscow. Not that he himself called it by so old-fashioned and romantic a name; to him it was *The Tower of the Third International*. The model was more than ten feet high and was made up of a series of intertwining angled rods. *The Tower of the Third International* leaned appreciably to the left, an inclination that enthusiastic critics said was highly symbolic. Visitors to the exhibition were handed a brochure which told them that this slanting edifice when completed would be twice the height of the Woolworth Building, then the tallest skyscraper in the USA; that it would never stand still but that the relative position of its parts would keep shifting, that is, one section would turn from right to left, and the other in the opposite direction. These movements were the precise expression of the permanent forces within the revolution. A hammer and sickle made of glass would top the whole edifice (from a purely orthodox point of view, this addition was a compromise and a breach of the Constructivist doctrine).

The project was welcomed with enthusiasm. Colossal, absolutely colossal





**Communists Fall and Shares Rise**, also known as **Blood is the Best Sauce**. Grosz, 1919

sal, said the leading Russian critics. Just one man poured water into this wine of general euphoria. That man was Leon Trotsky, the most powerful and popular of the Russian leaders next to Lenin – who cared little about art unless it was propaganda. Trotsky, who kept his feet firmly on the ground and who on occasion could be scathingly cynical, looked at *The Tower of the Third International* and asked why it was supposed to keep turning, and why always in a circle about itself. When no one could provide a satisfactory answer, the whole gigantic project was given the cold shoulder, and so was Constructivism at large. Tatlin dropped out of the limelight and other Constructivists who could not go abroad, first to Berlin, then to Paris or London. Meanwhile, the masses had their way: traditional painters previously described as *petit bourgeois* were brought back from exile, allowed to oust all the

abstractionist fanatics, and encouraged to give the masses what they understood.

When I called on Tatlin, the great clown, he was living in a tiny, neglected old house. Some of the hens he kept slept on his bed, laying their eggs in one corner. We drank tea, and Tatlin chatted about Berlin, about Wertheim's Department Stores and about his presentation at the Kaiser's court. A rusty wire-mesh mattress leant against the wall behind him; a few hens perched on it, their heads buried in their feathers. The whole made an excellent frame for poor old Tatlin as he started to strum on his homemade balalaika. It had begun to grow dark outside the curtainless windows, whose panes had been partly replaced with small wooden slats, and against this background, Tatlin looked not so much the ultra-modern Constructivist as a piece of real Old Russia, a character straight out of Gogol. The room seemed

suddenly filled with melancholy humour. I never saw Tatlin again, nor ever again heard anyone mention the then so-hotly discussed subject of his art. Tatlin is said to have died a lonely and forgotten man.

\* \* \*

I remember Lenin very well. There he was suddenly standing amongst us in one of the Kremlin's red halls. Each one of us had been carefully chosen, sifted and issued with special passes. The great Russian leader was not very tall, had a Tartar cast to his features, and otherwise seemed quite ordinary. There was nothing in him to inspire reverence or fear; indeed his eyes would light up with a small, inscrutable glint – but Tartar eyes are like that even when they are not smiling.

Lenin, escorted by several secretaries, shook each of us by the hand. I

*Continued next page*

### A visit to Russia - 1922

*Continued from previous page*

noticed Bukharin and Radek. Everything happened very quickly and informally. Lenin then delivered an address. I was standing next to the American correspondent Albert Rhys Williams, a friendly fellow who told me in confidence that Lenin (who spoke to us in German) was apt to lose the thread from time to time, or was unable to find the right word because of his illness. Now and then – we were some distance away from Lenin – we could hear someone softly prompting him with words or dates.

I felt a little depressed, for Lenin reminded me of an aunt with a brain tumour who suddenly developed a similar speech defect. When he had finished his address, which lasted about an hour, I think, there was loud applause and immediately afterwards, supported by his doctor, Lenin left the platform. They told me he liked my work, and particularly my book *The Face of the Ruling Class*, which he probably saw as another blow at the hated capitalist system. Like so many others, he greatly overestimated the effectiveness of art in the new Middle Ages we were about to enter. The time of the caricature as an instrument in the struggle for freedom and progress was long past: if people were to be aroused nowadays, then the trick was best done with photographs and suitable captions. But be that as it may. Lenin's condition deteriorated soon afterwards and he never recovered.

Leon Trotsky had, outwardly at least, much more the bearing of a 'dictator'. When I heard him speak he was wearing a simply-cut uniform in the clay-yellow cloth used by the Red Army, and no medals – of which there were very few at the time in any case. As he spoke he drew himself up to his full height; as a great orator he knew how important it was to strike the right posture. Unlike Lenin, he was every inch the soldier and emphasised his words with abrupt gestures. He spoke in Russian and had all his words translated for us.

Another of the Russian leaders, Radek, invited me to the Kremlin. He

was a very shrewd man and obviously knew how to deal with 'artists'. That was no doubt why some of my work lay scattered across his desk as if he had just been browsing through it when I came in, presumably to suggest that he was in the habit of looking at it at least once or twice every day. He made the most flattering remarks to me and I received them with modest delight, for he was a great man at the time, and we artists, ambitious as we are, melt as soon as anyone in power says kind things to us – whether he be red or any other colour.

I had brought along some tins of good English tobacco, for I knew that Radek was a great pipe smoker. His enormously thick glasses seemed to obscure his eyes, his side-whiskers made him look like a conventional early nineteenth-century bourgeois, and his head suggested that of a strange new species of owl. His study in the Kremlin was full of books, magazines and newspapers from all over the world. He nibbled at their contents like some great beetle and, having digested them, concocted them into leading articles and polemical writings.

I met Lunacharsky, then the People's Commissar for Public Instruction and Culture, on a trip to Leningrad in a splendid new government train. The engine carried a large hammer and sickle illuminated by spotlights. The carriages were brand new, everything was of superior quality, and very clean, with paper flowers on all the small tables. I shared a coupé with Arthur Holitscher, who had written a few good books about Russia, and who was one of the few better-known bourgeois writers to support the Soviet Union. At about midnight we were allowed to pay Lunacharsky a courtesy visit in his compartment. I could not help staring at his dainty little feet stuck into foppish black shoes with pointed patent-leather toes. Beside him stood a genuine Russian People's Commissar, a real worker type, whose feet were hidden in the coarse felt boots of the ordinary Russian soldier. The contrast between the flimsy Western pumps and the coarse Russian boots seemed symbolic.

Lunacharsky – in cultural matters

always a European – was anxious to build bridges to the West. I was reminded of Dostoevsky's mocking remarks about Turgenev and his Western outlook. In any case, Lunacharsky was a highly cultured man and one who championed the Russian cultural tradition – not easy at a time when so many of his fellows were eager to give short shrift to all traditional values.

\* \* \*

We spoke about the Proletkult, a newly formed organisation with the aim of developing a proletarian culture from its roots. But the whole thing was a misnomer – there can be no such thing as a 'proletarian' culture, for once a proletarian embraces culture, he ceases to be proletarian in the literal sense of that term: lowly, uneducated, common. No wonder that the Proletkult collapsed soon afterwards: cultural talent has nothing to do with class or economics – it is innate, a gift from the Muses.

My visit was drawing to a close. One day I was issued with the requisite papers and took a small steamer from Leningrad to Stettin. There was a heavy swell. I shared my cabin with a Graf Zeppelin, one of a strange crew of travellers who used to ply between Germany and Russia. He told me he had sold the Russians a number of airplane engines. For the rest, he was a rather reactionary gentleman.

My trip had not been an unqualified success. The book I was supposed to illustrate was never published. I had not been too disappointed by what I had seen, nor had I been overjoyed. The mote I then carried in my eye and through which I had viewed the capitalist world had refused to disappear even in Russia. I realised that the Soviet Union was not a country for the likes of me, and that, not being a proletarian, I had no need to be 'liberated'. My work can be banned and suppressed, I can be starved or beaten to death, but my spirit and my thoughts are my own – they cannot be locked up in a concentration camp, nor can the pictures in my head, and for that very reason I need no emancipator. As for Superman politics, they fill me with misgivings, indeed with loathing. ■

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