Workers ACTION

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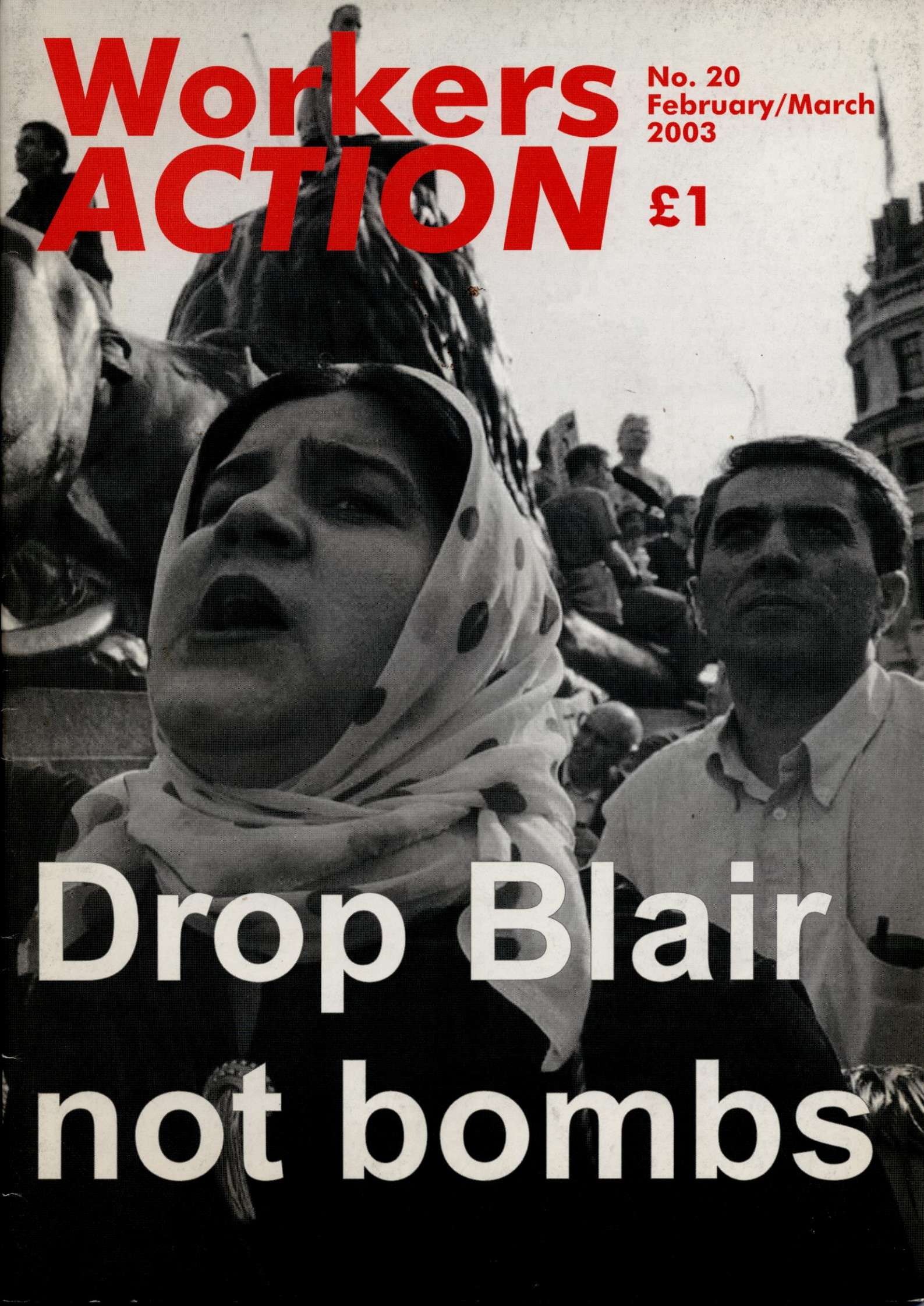

Drop Blair not bombs

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Contents

PO Box 7268
London E10 6TX
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

Workers Action – what we stand for

Workers Action is a Marxist tendency in the labour movement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Editorial

Stop the war, sack Blair!

The US and British governments seem determined to go to war – as each day passes war seems more and more inevitable. Increasingly, the validity or otherwise of the case against Saddam Hussein seems irrelevant, as Bush and Blair press on regardless. The lie Blair keeps trying to sell is that no decision has been made yet. As the preparations make it more and more difficult to pull back, Blair tries to buy off sections of the anti-war movement with the myth that this is just brinkmanship to force Iraq to disarm. Nobody should be fooled by this for one moment – for a war to be averted now would mean an enormous and humiliating climb down from Bush and Blair. Both administrations have a great deal invested in going to war and neither is going to give this up lightly.

The Bush administration and most gas and oil experts are predicting that over the next 10 to 15 years US oil production will dramatically decline, and that the United States will become increasingly dependent on imported oil. For a few years key Bush advisors have been working on a plan to reassert their control of the world's resources. September 11 was a wake-up call for the US administration not because of the threat of terrorist attacks on the US, but because it alerted them to the fact that there was growing resentment to the US in their major oil supplier in the Middle East – Saudi Arabia. September 11 also gave the US an ideal opportunity to step up their attempts at world domination (or full spectrum dominance as they call it). Aside from the ongoing capital flight and boss's strike in Venezuela, the US has sent troops into the oil fields of Colombia, with the full support of right-wing President Uribe; has secured contracts to build a pipeline through Afghanistan to the oil rich central Asian republics; and has added other oil rich countries such as Iran and Sudan to its 'rogue states' list for future potential invasions.

For an economy as dependent upon oil as the US, an ongoing 'war on terrorism' isn't just about diverting attention away from the current recession, but about securing an even greater share of the world's resources to avoid economic disaster in the next couple of decades. Iraq is the real prize; every updated assessment of its oil fields show it to contain even more than previously believed. Current estimates suggest that even if Iraq massively increases its oil production, it will still have oil for the next 100 years. Many speculate that its oil fields are bigger than those of Saudi Arabia. The oil may well remain the 'property of the Iraqi people' as Colin Powell claims, but the contracts to rebuild the oil industry, and the rest of the infrastructure clearly will not, and it will only be a matter of time before the 'international community' wrests control of oil from a puppet regime in Baghdad.

As for Britain, Blair has committed 35,000 troops – over a quarter of the armed forces – to war with Iraq. Already, estimates of £3.5 to £5 billion have been made as to the medium-term cost of British involvement. It might be a cliché but for a government that claims there simply isn't the money to allocate a few million to settle the FBU claim, they've been able to commit this at the drop of a hat.

Opposition across the world

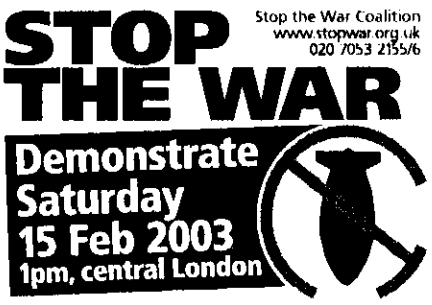
However, there is a real chance that war could be stopped in its tracks as the result of mass opposition. The anti-war movement is truly a global phenomenon, with demonstrations planned for February 15 in at least 56 major cities across the world. Whilst the decisive factor is going to be opposition within Britain and the US, opposition in each country has a knock on effect.

A war on Iraq looks increasingly as if it would destabilise the whole region, particularly since there is widespread suspicion that the US may have a number of other regimes in its sights once it has dealt with Saddam. Many commentators argue that this is precisely what the US administration wants (and clearly elements in the administration do). For the US to be able to re-draw the map of the Middle East in their favour, however, is a high-risk strategy that stands more chance than not of going pear-shaped.

The US has already shown that it can bully and bribe its way into getting pretty much what it wants from the UN Security Council. The existing resolution (1441) allows any member of the Security Council to interpret whether or not Iraq has committed a 'material breach' of the resolution, so, formally, both the US and Britain would have justification in saying they have UN support whether or not they get a second resolution.

Now, both Britain and the US are saying that they will go ahead with a war on Iraq with or without UN backing. It wouldn't be the first time that either state has engaged in war without UN approval. However, in both countries opinion polls have shown a massive difference in the number of people prepared to support a unilateral war as against those who would support one as part of a wider alliance.

The spat between Britain and the US on the one hand and France and Germany on the other makes it less likely that either France or Germany will endorse a second resolution. Bush's incompetence combined with Blair's arrogance appears to have annoyed Schroeder and Chirac



sufficiently that they may refuse to endorse the war. Although their opposition may not be completely principled, their stance has won the overwhelming support of their respective domestic opinion. Within Europe the anti war movement can make it difficult for Chirac and Schroeder to back down, thus strengthening the anti-war movement in Britain.

The debate in the US is slightly different and the decisive factor in opinion polls appears to be not so much what the UN does, but what Britain does. Whilst there was overwhelming support for Bush and for war with Afghanistan post-September 11, in the US there is now a growing opposition movement to a war with Iraq that has gained confidence from the global opposition. In January, there was an anti-war demonstration of over 200,000 in Washington, with the movement far more in its infancy in the US than elsewhere across the globe.

Bush uses Britain as an example of how much he is in tune with 'world opinion'. Whilst meaningless phrases about the 'International Community' opposing Iraq are bandied about left, right and centre, it is shown to be particularly fictitious when there are mass demonstrations from the US's 'key strategic ally'.

Has Blair bitten off more than he can chew?

Whilst Blair has been portrayed as being a restraining influence on Bush, or even his poodle, the reality is that each one is as committed to war as the other. The real difference over war with Iraq between the US government and their UK sidekick is that New Labour has to produce a different kind of spin, aimed at a different audience. It's not that the US government are any more honest, the lying propaganda spewing from the US administration and their tame media is overwhelming. However, in the United States, Bush has been able until very recently to maintain record ratings and distract attention away from the recession by threatening war.

In Britain, exactly the opposite is happening. Opposition to Blair's gung-ho stance on Iraq has intersected with resentment over a whole range of issues, including public sector pay, privatisation and the firefighters, and has developed into a general feeling that the government simply aren't trustworthy. Since Labour were elected in 1997, time and again Tony Blair has made ridiculous 'trust me' appeals as they force through more of their right wing, pro-business agenda, and time and again the electorate has given him the benefit of the doubt. In the summer of last year for the first time, trade union leaders started to challenge this consensus over a number of issues, marking a watershed. By the autumn of last year, opposition to war with Iraq culminated in hundreds of thousands of people joining the biggest left demonstration for decades.

The movement hasn't dissipated since then, rather it has continued to grow. All the indications show that the anti-war demonstration on February 15 will be even bigger, with the police saying that they expect around 400,000 people to attend. If these predictions are correct, this could well be the largest political protest in British history. On a world scale it is almost certain that the number of demonstrators will be in the millions.

The Stop the War Coalition (StWC) has established itself as the central co-ordinating body of the anti-war movement in Britain, bringing together the traditional left and increasing sections of the 'official' labour movement, the peace movement and religious organisations. Its alliance with Muslim organisations has had a crucial impact in ensuring a much more diverse make up of all demonstrations and mobilisations. Significantly, the tactical flexibility and relative openness of StWC have allowed it to grow way beyond previous anti war campaigns that were bureaucratically controlled and had rigidly imposed rightist politics that looked to the UN and legalism to oppose the world order. Whilst few on the leadership of StWC are involved within the Labour Party, the central officers have been undogmatic enough to recognise the strategic importance of a Labour Party opposition to the war, which again creates a space to allow the movement to develop as it needs to.

As well as encouraging the growing opposition amongst the Labour Party rank and file, within parliament MPs have been far more ready to stick their heads above the parapet, not just on the subject of the war, but also on a number of other issues. For the first time since coming to power, commentators are quite seriously speculating whether this could mean the demise of Tony Blair as prime minister.

The task of the anti-war movement must be to isolate Blair, who seems to get very little support from any quarter. Whilst none of his cabinet have done anything to stop the war, very few have done all they can to rally support for Blair. The one exception, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, had to hurriedly re-arrange the first of his meetings aimed at convincing party members of the need for war in the face of an embarrassing public protest.

In Britain around three-quarters of the population have consistently been saying they would oppose a war without UN backing, whereas a small majority have said they will support one if the Security Council endorses it. Ultimately, Blair may follow the US into war without reference to the UN, but he'd be a lot happier not feeling this might be the end of his political career. Even within New Labour it appears to be Blair personally who is pushing the drive to war. The more an anti-war movement can isolate Blair, the more even his closest allies are likely to ditch him. Whoever stood as leader in a post-Blair Labour Party would have to appeal to the broad spectrum of opinion in the party that is way to the left of Blair. They are unlikely to be revolutionaries, but it is inconceivable that any new leader could attempt to unite the party around a re-hash of Blairism; there would have to be very real and clear differences from the existing programme of New Labour most importantly, this would mean a far more critical approach to the US, but there would almost certainly have to be further concessions around domestic issues.

Those in the Labour Party and affiliated trade unions must launch very bold initiatives to demonstrate the extent of opposition to war. Party activists must work to build local regional and national networks to exert maximum pressure on all structures of the party: policy forums; the NEC; MEPs and MP's. Just as importantly, we must work hand in hand with the broader movement, giving a direction through which their political demands can be channelled. It may well mean demanding an emergency recall of Labour Party Conference to discuss the situation. Once we have clearly demonstrated that Blair has little support inside the party, Blair's position as leader would be very difficult, as would his position as prime minister. For this to happen would take an enormous effort, and would need the whole labour movement to ensure their delegates really represent the views of their members.

Despite the mass opposition that exists to war, an anti-war resolution at Labour's NEC at the end of January only received four votes, with all the trade union delegates voting for a resolution that allows Blair to unilaterally declare war. The respective trade unions clearly need to hold their delegates to account over this.

Given how much is at stake for both the Blair and Bush administrations, it is clear that it will take significant upheavals to avert a war. However difficult, the anti-war movement must set itself the task not just of protesting to soothe our own consciences, but of actually stopping the war.

WA

Firefighters' dispute

Step up the solidarity action

Charli Langford

With war against Iraq in the offing, it has become imperative for the government that the firefighters be forced back to work. Partly this is to release standby troops for service in the Gulf, but mainly it is because the government wants to avoid war on two fronts, especially since there is a high level of public support for the firefighters and a low level of support for the war.

Hence the recent move from John Prescott, threatening to impose a settlement and to outlaw fire service strikes if the dispute continues. In the event of a non-agreed pay rise being imposed, the government will hope that the FBU Executive will assess that enough firefighters would be bought off by the pay increase that the strikes will be sufficiently seriously compromised to become ineffective. If the imposed increase is high enough, there is also likely to be an argument within the FBU that a reasonable increase has been gained while no 'modernisation' strings have been agreed, and that the dispute should be called off. This view is likely to be promoted also by the TUC General Council, who were responsible for pushing the FBU into the Acas fiasco back in mid-December. This scenario must be fought against, because it would effectively be the defeat of the dispute the government will begin to impose the 'modernisation' agenda, first through non-replacement of retiring firefighters, later through redundancies and job changes that will at first involve carefully selected small groups of staff, probably near retiring age or in less militant brigades. The FBU, weakened by having failed to fight imposition, will then find it harder to instil sufficient confidence in members to fight creeping 'modernisation'.

The alternative and far more hopeful scenario is that the FBU fights against the imposition of a settlement. That makes the government's tactic far more high-risk. Taking away the right to strike is an infringement of human rights, and while there might normally be some sympathy for such a measure in the special conditions of a war, the high degree of opposition to the Iraq conflict will make this unlikely and the connections between the two issues will come far more to the fore.

A prime lesson from the dispute so far is the role of Acas. It is absolutely clear that this is a body that intervenes against workers in dispute – it is not neutral. It gives a weapon to the employers by generating a hoop that workers are required to jump through. If the workers refuse to take part in the discussions they can be portrayed as bloody minded and undemocratic. But one of the conditions of attending talks at Acas is that industrial action is suspended. In the case of the firefighters, this has meant the cancellation of planned strike days and the dragging out of the dispute over months. This is designed to cause frustration and drive a wedge between the leadership and the rank and file.

The government's handling of the dispute has so far been utterly contemptuous of the firefighters. They have overridden the employers' offer of 16 per cent with no strings and instead offered either 4 per cent with no strings, or 11.5 per cent over two years with job cuts disguised as 'modernisation'. But the 11.5 per cent offer would end up costing the employers and the government less money than the 4 per cent offer! The firefighters described the government's offer as 'total bollocks' and have refused to be intimidated. Support from other workers and the public has maintained its level or increased.

The Bain report details the cuts and changes that the government are trying to enforce. They are looking for compulsory overtime and job losses among firefighters, integration of fire control rooms with police and ambulance (i.e., loss of the specific special skills that fire and ambulance controllers have), reduction of the number of overall control rooms by giving each room a larger area to cover (i.e., losing local knowledge of road conditions, one way streets, etc), and cross training firefighters to do ambulance workers' jobs (i.e., cutting the number of personnel actually fighting the fire and rescuing people, while at the same time cutting the number of ambulance workers). The Pathfinder report, commissioned by the employers' side, received some publicity in mid-December but the government seem to have succeeded in burying it. This report, interestingly, makes a case for recruiting *more* firefighters as the present number is inadequate for the duties required. Pathfinder does this by recalculating the risk of various areas due to newbuild, change of use of buildings, etc. The last assessment was in 1985, and generally the calculation raises an area's risk assessment, which is unsurprising since population is rising and the number of old people in particular has grown. The government's response to this report was revealed on February 1 – the plan is to abandon the national basis of calculation that Pathfinder uses and to instruct Chief Fire Officers to assess risks on a local basis, a task which the FBU says they are not trained to do. CFOs would be under pressure to downgrade all risks to justify job cuts, and such downgrading would be certain to increase loss of life in fires.

Firefighter support groups are springing up, and currently they are doing a good job in taking the dispute into other workplaces in their areas and arguing the case with the general public. This work on the high streets will remain essential as much of the public are not unionised and are vulnerable to the lies of the media, and it also reveals the link between anti-war activism and firefighter support work. There has been sporadic solidarity action, normally disguised as concern over safety. London tube drivers in RMT have refused to drive trains, and some BT engineers in CWU have refused to work down manholes due to there being no safety backup from the firefighters in the event of them encountering explosive or suffocating gas. This needs to be encouraged as far as possible, but better still would be a concerted struggle by other public sector workers in pursuit of their own claims to step up the pressure on the government.

Anti-war contacts

Stop the War Coalition
PO Box 3739, London E5 8EJ
www.stopwar.org.uk
tel: 07951 235 915
email: *office@stopwar.org.uk*

Labour Against the War
PO Box 2378, London E5 9QU
tel: 020 8985 6597
fax: 020 895 6785
email: *latw@gn.apc.org*
Affiliation/sponsorship of LATW is £10 for organisations, £5 for individuals

We also have to learn not to get carried away by envisaging outcomes that are simply not possible. *Socialist Worker* has promoted the slogan of 'regime change' during the dispute. OK, it's a clever link to the war drive, but what can they really be asking for? No-one in their right mind would expect the elevation of the Socialist Alliance, or even the Greens, to government. And since *SW* has been calling on Labour Party members to jump ship and join the Socialist Alliance for several years now, they can't be proposing a government of the Labour left. In the highly unlikely event of the fall of New Labour, voters would in all probability re-elect them on the basis that any alternative with a hope of winning would be even worse. The best we could get would be the replacement of Blair by . . . well, whoever it was it would make little difference. Surely *SW* isn't calling for a Liberal – or a Tory – government? The slogan is crazy and pointless.

While a left Labour government is unlikely in the immediate future, what is a lot more practicable is a challenge to the Labour leadership regime from the left. With even those unions least associated with the left voicing support for the firefighters, with support coming from local and regional Labour Party bodies – who are widely hostile to the war as well – there is potential for extending the 'After New Labour' initiative to a call for a special or recalled Labour Party conference.

The steel wool has been working on teflon Tony and now things are beginning to stick. Blair is becoming personally identified with the worst excesses of New Labour. There is a possibility that he will have to be dumped by his own closest colleagues. Throwing him out through a firefighters' victory would be sweet. But far more importantly, this opens up an opportunity for the left. The right wing would obviously want a painless transfer of power; but putting up an anti-war, pro-firefighter left candidate would immediately shift the national political debate. With the likelihood of war, we are living in interesting times. A victory for the firefighters could herald far wider changes in the Labour movement. **WA**

Stumbling on

Neil Murray looks at developments on the far left and in particular at the Socialist Alliance

For several years now most of the far left in Britain has been convinced it is essential to provide an 'electoral challenge' to Labour. While in Scotland the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) has made some progress in this project, in England the Socialist Alliance (SA) has repeatedly fallen over its own feet in its attempt to create such an 'alternative'. In Wales, the Welsh Socialist Alliance has all but fallen apart (see the article by Daniel Morrissey in this issue of Workers Action).

Many on the far left in England will tell you the Socialist Alliance is the 'only game in town' for building an opposition to Blair. Ever since the intervention in the Greater London Assembly elections in 2000 we have been told that there is a 'vacuum to be filled' in British politics and that the Socialist Alliance is doing it.

The main component of the Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Workers Party, has even, at times such as the start of the firefighters' strikes in November, talked of 'regime change' happening in Britain. Quite what this meant, and how it was to come about (a general strike, the Socialist Alliance winning a majority in elections, Blair resigning in favour of Gordon Brown?) was never made clear, but it is one indicator of the overbloated optimism doing the rounds. While socialists would be delighted to see Blair go, we should not delude ourselves that we are currently in a position to pose an alternative.

The real world we live in

British politics is certainly in a state of flux. There is widespread disillusion with the government and cynicism about 'mainstream' politics, with record low turnouts in elections. The Tories seem to be in almost terminal decline (although we shouldn't discount the possibility of a revival), while the Liberal Democrats seem incapable of grasping the opportunity of stepping into the breach as the main opposition party – probably because the gulf between them and Blair is not as great as they would like people to believe. The opinion polls show that there is massive opposition to any war against Iraq, and the anti-war movement has been able to sustain unprecedented levels of mobilisation. Polls also show overwhelming support for left policies such as the renationalisation of the railways. The trade unions have become more outspoken in their criticism of the government (and not just on 'economic' issues) and left-wingers have been elected to the leadership of several unions.

And yet, at the same time, politicians and the mass media have managed to whip up hysteria about asylum seekers, and the British National Party has now won five council seats. While strike figures have shown a modest increase, this is based on the all-time lows of previous years. And, of course, none of this has so far stopped the government from pushing ahead with its programme of privatisation and modernisation at the expense of the working class, in tune with the rampant neo-liberalism of world capitalism, even if there is currently an economic downturn.

Many on the far left see this as a prime situation for growth, yet things stubbornly refuse to move their way.

Election results

The only way we can measure the success of the Socialist Alliance in England is through its election results, since this is its only regular activity. Supporters are very selective in which results they quote, preferring to ignore the more dreadful ones and hyping up the exceptionally good ones, rarely relating to the averages, which are the best indicators.

The SA's first major outing, the elections to the Greater London Assembly in May 2000, took place in the highly unusual situation of Ken Livingstone winning mass support (including from Labour Party members) as an independent candidate. This gave the SA (and others who stood in those elections) a very good opportunity to show they could fill that 'vacuum on the left'. In fact the SA got 3 per cent in the constituencies and 1.6 per cent for their central list, with the SLP getting 0.8 per cent and the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation 1.0 per cent, both with much smaller resources – hardly qualitatively worse results.

The SWP predicted that the Alliance would get 5 per cent of the vote in the General Election of 2001, while the CPGB talked of 250,000 votes. In fact, pooling everything on the left (SA, SSP and SLP), some 185,000 people voted for explicitly socialist candidates. Socialist Alliance can-

didates got an average of 1.76 per cent of the vote in each constituency in which they stood, the SLP an average score of 1.48 per cent, and the SSP an overall average across Scotland of 3.32 per cent. (The Scotland figure hides an interesting variation – the average percentage for the ten Glasgow candidates was 6.86 per cent, whilst for the out of Glasgow candidates it was only 2.71 per cent.)

It was only in a few – mostly predictable constituencies where the SA vote was more substantial: in Coventry, where SA candidate Dave Nellist had previously been the Labour MP, and St. Helens North, where the ex-Tory Shaun Woodward was shoehorned in by the Labour Party bureaucracy as its candidate.

In the council elections in May 2002, the SA stood in many places around the country – in some boroughs in nearly every ward, in others only in a selective few. But again with a few notable exceptions like parts of Hackney in north-east London (described by some as 'Britain's most corrupt borough'), where it got 12.7 per cent – its results were hardly outstanding. The national average was 6.3 per cent and in London 10.2 per cent. These results are where the SA had the advantage of being able to choose the most productive seats to contest.

Since then, there have been various by-elections for council seats, which might be seen as prime ground for protest votes (and for piling in supporters from a wider area), yet here the SA has achieved some of its most derisory results. In June 2002, it polled 18 votes, or 0.9 per cent of the vote, in a ward by-election in Luton, and in the same month nine votes (0.41 per cent) in a by-election for the Blackwall and Cubitt Town ward in Tower Hamlets. In Lewisham Downham ward it polled 41 votes (1.5 per cent) in November 2002, and in two by-elections in Hackney in January 2003 it got about 120 votes (around 8 per cent) – a considerable decline from May 2002. Then in Tottenham Hale in Haringey in January of this year it polled 68 votes, 4.5 per cent of the poll, but reinterpreted as 9.8 per cent of the Labour vote to look better. It might be thought that these were all contests with candidates 'parachuted in' at the last minute with no base and no work done, but this was not the case. In the worst case, in Tower Hamlets, the candidate was a longstanding and well known community activist. The local Socialist Alliance explained its appalling result by the fact that working class voters did not want to see the Tories beat Labour and Labour ran a left campaign. Oh, horrors! Perhaps this shows a problem at the heart of the SA 'project' – rather than be pleased that Labour took a left stance to defeat the Tories, they were disappointed that it did so, since this deprived them of a few more votes.

Other sections of the left presenting an electoral challenge have done better. The Socialist Party, both before and since its split from the SA, has obtained much better results, with a handful of councillors elected. A newcomer to the electoral scene, the Independent Working Class Association (the electoral front of Red Action, for a short time an inactive part of the Socialist Alliance), has made considerable progress from a standing start, getting three councillors elected and coming close in other wards.

Why the disparity between the results of the Socialist Alliance and the SP and IWCA? Both these claim, and it is undoubtedly true, that their results reflect their long-term work in the areas where they have stood. What is also true, however, is that both organisations downplay the 'more difficult' issues in their campaigns, such as asylum seekers. Indeed, the IWCA campaigns look like a slightly left version of the Liberal Democrats' 'focus' campaigns. Supporters argue that asylum, for instance, is not an issue that voters raise with them – a remarkable claim in the current situation and given other groups' experiences – and that 'the best antidote to racism is working class confidence', which is the old economistic argument that if we take up the 'bread and butter' issues, racism will somehow disappear. While the Socialist Alliance seems incapable of grasping that it is essential for socialists to build up a base by campaigning on housing, rubbish, pavements, etc, the SP and IWCA make the converse error of seeing see this as sufficient on its own, not linking them to the 'big' issues of politics such as war and socialism.

However, the sporadic and isolated gains by the far left (in so far as they can be described as such) do not amount to a breakthrough, let alone the posing of a serious alternative to the left of Labour. The Socialist Party lost two of their previous four councillors in the May 2002 elections. The best interpretation is that sections of the left have gained a tiny foothold on the electoral front.

One inconvenient fact which the SA, the SP and even the SSP refuse to face up to is that Labour lefts standing as independents have consistently outpolled their own meagre efforts. Ken Livingstone as mayor of London, Dennis Canavan as MSP, and various Euro-MPs have shown this. Indeed many of the SP's own results are built on their candidates (such as Dave Nellist) having previously gained a profile as Labour MPs or councillors. In very, very few cases has anyone built up a profile without such a background, which surely illustrates that the working class gravitates to what it has a link to – i.e., Labour, or candidates with a historical link to it.

How much of a vacuum?

The truth is that the Socialist Alliance has grossly overestimated the ease with which a 'left alternative' can be constructed – both in general, and in the current situation in particular. While there is a vacuum on the left of British politics (in the sense that the Labour Party has abandoned the field), much of the left assumes that all it has to do is to declare 'we are the left alternative' for its previous constituency to come flocking.

This massively misreads several factors. The current situation in British politics, particularly the massive move to the right of the Labour Party/government, is a product of defeats of the working class, both in Britain (since at least the miners' strike of 1984-85), and internationally (the demise of the Soviet Union and the deformed workers' states of Eastern Europe). Rebuilding class consciousness and militancy is a much more complex task than saying 'we exist'. Cynicism about politics does not automatically lead to a search for a left alternative or a willingness to take action; it can equally lead to despair and reactionary conclusions – hence some turn to the BNP. There is an underestimation of the allegiance of large sections of the working class to Labour – in terms of electoral support – even when they are disillusioned with the government. Opinion polls show that of those who abstain, the largest number still see themselves as Labour supporters. Of course, those sections of the far left - like the Socialist Party – which believe that the Labour Party has already crossed the Rubicon and become a straightforward bourgeois party cannot even start to get to grips with this issue.

This confusion is perhaps most obvious in trade union politics. While the election of left trade union leaders is obviously welcome, to assume this automatically heralds an immediate return to militancy is naïve in the extreme. Firstly, union members who vote for a particular candidate do not necessarily (indeed, rarely) share their wider politics. The print unions used to say that members voted for the CP as their stewards to fight for better wages and conditions, while voting for the Tories in elections to keep down their taxes. While this is an exaggeration, it contains a kernel of truth. Secondly, while candidates who are in varying degrees of the left have been elected to general secretary posts in several unions, this does not mean the left control decision-making in those unions. Both

Mark Serwotka in the Public and Commercial Services union and Derek Simpson in Amicus, for instance, are surrounded on their National Executives by supporters of their right-wing predecessors. With a few exceptions, the left has not had the same success in winning elections to union NECs. Thirdly, much of the left has neglected the task of building a serious base among union members in the workplace, relying instead on winning votes at branch meeting and conference level. While these votes are obviously important, the union bureaucrats know better than the left that this does not always represent the views of the bulk of union members, hence their resort in recent years to referenda of the membership to show that left resolutions do not have support.

The SWP, in particular, has been all at sea with the current situation in the unions. Forgetting the basic Marxist analysis of the trade union bureaucracy, they have been largely uncritical of the 'new generation' of union leaders, assuming they will lead militant struggles. Even Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison, who as the chosen son of the union machine defeated a left challenger, has been subject to the same treatment at times. Apart from the fact that these leaders represent quite a wide range of politics, from Simpson to Serwotka and all points in between, they are as subject to the inducements to an 'easy life' as other union leaders. To varying degrees, the extent to which they are really willing to lead struggles, rather than talk about it, will depend on the level of pressure they feel from their members.

Whatever the politics of the union leaders, it is necessary for the left to build a movement among the membership which puts forward the arguments for particular policies, attempts to mobilise the membership behind these policies, and can call the leaders to account. Of course, the degree of criticism and willingness to work with them will depend on the politics and policies of a particular union leadership, but the principle remains the same. Enthusiastic cheerleading for union leaders can only give way to disorientation and demoralisation when they fail to match up to expectations.

It is many years since the SWP abandoned serious, systematic work in the unions, attempting to build the sort of movement outlined above. Instead they have mainly concentrated on simply 'building the party' in the unions. Where they participate in wider bodies, such as Unison United Left, they simply try to impose their party agenda on the wider organisation, while broadly accepting their role as caucuses within union bodies and election machines.

In a few unions the SWP produce material for the wider membership, such as *Postworker* in the CWU and the newly-launched *Redwatch* in the FBU. While these pose as 'rank-and file' papers, they are clearly produced to an SWP agenda and distributed almost exclusively by the SWP. There is no attempt to build an organisation around them and little more than a pretence at allowing other union members to have a say in content. The first issue of *Redwatch*, produced before the first round of strikes, continued the confusion about the attitude to the bureaucracy. While trumpeting itself as the voice of rank-and-file firefighters, the main articles were interviews with Tony Benn and Andy Gilchrist. *Postworker* goes one further in refusing to take a position on union elections!

The Socialist Party prides itself on having a systematic approach to union work, unlike the SWP, and this is indeed reflected in the positions they hold, in terms of NEC posts etc. However, this 'success' has come at a political cost. While the SP builds ongoing organisation in the unions, these take the character of broad left election machines rather than bodies that attempt to mobilise the membership as well as contest elections. This leads to dubious political decisions, such as initially supporting a 'democratic' right-winger rather than Mark Serwotka against Barry Reamsbottom as general secretary of PCS. In the CWU, the Socialist Party supported trials of a productivity scheme in British Telecom (Self Motivated Teams), even to the extent of excluding the one left-winger prepared to oppose this from the left's NEC caucus – all this to keep faith with the right of the broad left. SMT has now been rejected by a 99 per cent vote at a special conference of the union's telecoms sector, but the fight against it (management intend to push it through) is weakened by the left's prevarication.

This confusion around trade union issues goes much further. Much of the far left's response to the modest increase in strikes has mirrored that of the bourgeois media. Last autumn, with one-day strikes by local government workers and impending strikes by the firefighters, much of the media went apeshit, with talk of a return to the militancy of the 1970s and anarchy on the streets, ignoring the inconvenient fact that levels of industrial action were miniscule compared to 25 years ago. Many on the left went beyond welcoming the change in mood to almost parroting (though of course from the opposite angle) the media's line. With the firefighters' strikes, the SWP seemed to confuse a membership tentatively taking their first national strike action for 25 years with workers sharing a revolutionary socialist consciousness. Rather than recognise that strike action can be the first step towards a wider understanding, the SWP turns things on its head and believes anyone taking strike action is already a committed socialist.

The unions and the Labour Party

Many firefighters are reported to have withdrawn from paying the political levy, and several regions are said to be submitting resolutions to FBU conference calling for the severing of the link with Labour. Given their treatment at the hands of the government, none of this should cause much surprise. It was FBU conference 2001 which first seriously raised the issue of unions supporting other election candidates than those of the Labour Party through moves for a rule change. This was headed off last year by the executive pointing out that, intended or not, this meant disaffiliation from the Labour Party, and by the unity created around the 40 per cent pay claim.

Those standing candidates against Labour disagree over what to do about the union link. The Socialist Party (consistent with its view that the Labour Party is now no different from the Tories) argues for outright disaffiliation (or, in the case of Unison, for a third political fund which could be used to support their candidates – a schema receiving no support from outside their own ranks), while the Socialist Alliance, having initially toyed with the idea of pressing for disaffiliation, argues for what it calls 'democratisation' of the link – the right of branches and regions to decide who to support in elections, hoping this will open the door to union support for their own candidates.

Neither of these proposals have made much headway (nor are likely to) in most unions, though the vote at last year's RMT AGM was close. Much more common have been moves to reduce donations and only to sponsor MPs (or their constituency parties) that broadly agree with the union's policies.

What both the Socialist Alliance and Socialist Party fail to recognise is that while the level of disillusionment with Labour is high among union members, there is no great rush by them to support left candidates either. Outside of the layer of committed activists, there is no great resonance for this. By encouraging moves to disaffiliate, they are encouraging an attitude which wants to keep the unions out of party politics altogether, and see the political funds used for 'lobbying alone', rather than the great move to the left they imagine.

One of the many pitfalls of this approach was shown in the recent council by-election in Haringey, north London, in January,

where the Socialist Alliance's candidate was a firefighter, gaining 68 votes. Beyond showing how little support the Socialist Alliance has, this also puts the FBU in a bad light, portraying it as part of a 'fringe group' with no support. Unchastened by this experience, the Socialist Alliance intends to repeat the same exercise in a by-election in Camden.

The desperation and opportunism of the Socialist Alliance around this issue has been shown by its response to the speech by FBU general secretary Andy Gilchrist to the 'After New Labour' conference in Manchester, in which he argued for the need to replace New Labour with 'Real Labour' values of social justice and public ownership. Speaking at a conference of Labour Party activists called by the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, Gilchrist was calling for a fight *within* the Labour Party. This was distorted in a Socialist Alliance leaflet distributed on the national demonstration in support of the firefighters on December 7, 2002, to appear as if Gilchrist was endorsing the Socialist Alliance as the alternative to New Labour!

The many contradictions in this attitude to the Labour Party continue when we realise that while not (currently) calling on unions to leave (i.e., to disaffiliate from) the Labour Party, individuals are encouraged to leave and join the Socialist Alliance. So the unions remain in the Labour Party, but with their delegations to conference etc weakened by the fact that left wingers are no longer there to stand for positions!

Missing from almost any mention of the union-Labour Party link from the Socialist Alliance or Socialist Party is any idea of the unions fighting for their policies in the Labour Party and how they might do this – accountability of representatives on the party NEC, policy forums, taking up delegacies to local CLPs, etc. In any other context, the left would rightly be shouting about how the bureaucrats weren't representing the members' interests, yet when it comes to the political party to which the unions are affiliated, this issue gets ignored – making propaganda for funding alternative candidates is more important.

This came to the fore at a meeting of the Socialist Alliance's national council in December 2002. The Alliance for Workers Liberty put forward a motion calling for a campaign in the unions to demand a special Labour Party conference 'to call Blair to account' around issues like PFI and the firefighters' dispute, a campaign for which they already have some support. While we might argue about the feasibility of this demand, the SA's reasons for rejecting support were rather different. The motion was heavily defeated by the 40 people present on the grounds that 'it would be counterproductive to campaign for an orientation towards Labour when the move was in the opposite direction' and the Socialist Alliance 'is being presented with opportunities to fracture the Labour Party base'. While recalling Labour Party conference might be seen as unfeasible, this reaction is a different, sectarian, one, based on a massive over-reading of the situation in the unions. So we're essentially back to a call to disaffiliate and a refusal to say anything about what the unions should do in the Labour Party while they remain there.

Fighting racism and fascism – further confusion

While the Socialist Alliance flounders in terms of making an electoral impact, the BNP has been busy 'filling the vacuum' from the other end of the spectrum. While the threat from the far right should not be overestimated – it is nothing like on the scale of several other European countries – socialists should certainly be concerned that they have managed to win five council seats and come close in several others. With the current furore over asylum seekers, this is likely to get much worse, with the BNP winning several more seats in the council elections in May.

There are several aspects to this issue: how to tackle the fears around asylum seekers which the BNP attempts to latch on to; taking up the question of the neglect of many areas by locals councils (more often than not Labour councils); and what sort of electoral challenge (if any) to present.

The SWP's usual response to a BNP presence is to wheel out the Anti-Nazi League to shout 'Nazi' at them. Many in the SWP and beyond on the far left seem to believe this to be the appropriate response to all those currently protesting against asylum seekers. If it were the case that all those people were fascists, we would have a much bigger problem than we do, considering the size of protests in small towns such as Sittingbourne in Kent. One of the most basic tasks in this situation is surely to isolate the fascists, not drive everyone else into their arms. Concerns about lack of facilities, and about being kept in the dark by the National Asylum Support Scheme and the government, have to be addressed while strongly opposing any racism.

Two years ago the SWP launched the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers in the wake of the initial press hysteria on the issue. Unfortunately, outside of a few areas, little was done to build this into an ongoing campaign, winning labour movement support and publicly tackling the myths about asylum seekers. Instead, like many such SWP 'initiatives', one or two public meetings were held and then the campaign was put on ice, at most to be wheeled out by the local SWP when it felt it useful. Yet where it has been tried, it has been shown that support can be won in the workers' movement and people can be won over. The need for such a campaign is now more urgent than ever. Obviously, if it had been systematically built from the start we might not be where we are now, but we have to make up for lost time.

At the same time, socialists have to take up issues of concern about local facilities, whether it be housing, health, crime, community facilities, etc. A recurring theme in many of the areas where the BNP has won support is that of neglect and of competition for resources. The left can cut across potential BNP support by arguing for more resources for all, rather than some preference for white areas, calling for class unity across ethnic divides. However, unlike the arguments of the IWCA and, sometimes, the SP, this cannot be achieved without tackling the issue of racism head on.

It is when these issues are expressed on the electoral front that confusion reigns. In the May 2002 council elections, a BNP candidate won a council seat in Burnley by four votes from Labour, with a Socialist Alliance candidate getting 151 votes. The SA has kept very quiet about this, possibly through division or embarrassment, but many supporters justify it by saying it is incumbent on the SA to stand wherever it can; others have said that those who voted SA would not necessarily have voted Labour anyway. If true, this might say strange things about those who vote SA, but many Asians will not thank the SA for 'letting in' the fascists. SA supporters point out, rightly, that primary responsibility for the growth of the BNP rests with Labour (neglect by councils, policies pursued by government, etc), but this does not excuse irresponsi-

ble tactics by the left.

Over the last year the Anti-Nazi League and the National Assembly Against Racism have been competing to set up 'broad' anti-fascist campaigns in the North West. Both have been on a broadly liberal 'hate racism' basis, with the NAAR usually out manoeuvring the ANL because of its closer links to trade union bureaucrats and council leaders. While the ANL has called on people to vote for 'anyone but the BNP', the NAAR has denounced those mainstream parties which did not stand candidates in some seats won by the BNP (presumably, we should campaign to force them to stand!).

Missing from both approaches is a class attitude to racism and fascism – that they threaten the unity and ultimately the survival of working class organisation. They can only effectively be fought by posing opposition to them as a class issue.

However, this does not mean that the left has to stand candidates. It seems beyond the powers of comprehension of those in the Socialist Alliance that it might be possible to campaign for a *critical* vote for Labour, taking up and mobilising around issues of local concern and racism. For much of the left the alternatives are either standing, and risking taking votes away from Labour and allowing the BNP to win, or absenting themselves from the election altogether.

Tensions within the Socialist Alliance

The lack of progress on both the electoral front and in terms of winning new supporters has exacerbated tensions within the Socialist Alliance.

Bringing together several far left groups and some non-affiliated individuals purely on the basis of the 'need' for an electoral challenge to Labour was always going to be a hard job, and indeed was proclaimed by some sections of the Alliance as its main achievement for a period. If progress and recruitment had been better, these might have been overcome, particularly as significant numbers of recruits would have diluted the overwhelming domination of the organised groups. In fact, lack of progress has brought differences to a head.

In November 2002 it was reported that 1,800 members are registered at the national office, and estimated that another 300 have paid up locally but not had their details relayed to the office. Given that the claimed membership of the SWP is about 5,000, this hardly represents anything to shout about.

The Socialist Party walked out of the Socialist Alliance in December 2001. There had been conflict with them ever since the SWP made its turn to electoral intervention and joined the Alliance. Having previously been the largest organisation in the Socialist Alliances, the SP were obviously miffed at no longer playing the dominant role. In the GLA elections they prevaricated between supporting the Socialist Alliance and the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation, with a finger in both pies. In the run-up to the 2001 general election, the SP announced where it would be standing candidates before the Alliance began its selection procedure for candidates, antagonising many local groups. They also announced they would be challenging some of the most left Labour MPs, like John McDonnell in Hayes and Harlington. The final straw for the SP was when the Alliance adopted a constitution which, they argued, gave complete control to the SWP.

The Socialist Party still argues that it is in favour of a 'new party of the working class', but seems in fact to concentrate simply on building itself.

When the Socialist Party walked out of the conference, the Socialist Alliance lost one of its best known members and national chair: the ex-Labour MP, now Coventry councillor, Dave Nellist. He was replaced by Liz Davies, an ex-member of the Labour Party's NEC.

Liz Davies herself resigned as Alliance chair, and from the executive, on October 21, 2002. She gave her reasons in a statement to a conference of independents in the Socialist Alliance held on November 30, 2002. We have reproduced an edited version of that statement.

The theme of lack of trust in the SWP which runs through Liz Davies's statement and also the walkout of the Socialist Party is echoed in criticism of the Alliance by many of the non-affiliated members (who have now formed themselves as an 'independents' group) as well as some of the affiliated organisations. Difficulty in working with the SWP is a constant theme (lack of democracy, launching campaigns without consultation, etc), but in its more overtly political expression it is a frustration with the unwillingness of the SWP and others to move to transform the Alliance into a party.

But placing all the problems of the SA at the door of the SWP is too easy an answer. On some issues the SWP is right against others in the Alliance – it has argued, for instance, that while the Alliance should continue to call on people to leave the Labour Party and join it (and here Liz Davies is factually wrong), it should also welcome any growth in opposition in the Labour Party. There is a tendency among the 'independents', like many who have left the Labour Party, to take the attitude that nothing useful can happen there (usually dated from when they left).

There are two main points here. Firstly, if the SWP sets its face against the Socialist Alliance becoming a party, it will not happen, and there certainly seems to be little movement there. Secondly, however, there is nothing to show that if the Alliance became a party, its progress would qualitatively improve. A label alone will not change things; it has not helped the SLP, nor did it particularly help those far left organisations which have termed themselves 'parties' in the past achieve the longed-for breakthrough. The problem lies not with the SWP, but with the nature of the 'project' the Alliance has set itself.

Many of the 'independents', and some of the affiliated groups, see the Scottish Socialist Party as the model they hanker after. Again, two points: firstly, the situation in Scotland is different – proportional representation for the Scottish parliamentary elections has given the SSP the opportunity to win representation and a profile at a level which the Socialist Alliance can only dream of; secondly, its starting point was also different because the class struggle in Scotland had not declined to the same extent as in England and Wales, and the Scottish Socialist Movement (which combined with other organisations including Scottish Militant Labour and the Communist Party

of Scotland to form the Scottish Socialist Alliance, which later became the SSP) had a significant base – not least because of the longer history of fighting the poll tax. More fundamentally, just to say 'we need an SSP in England' is wishful thinking unless its advocates argue how it is to be achieved. Here as so often, organisation is substituted for politics.

Limitations, and an alternative

In fact, the Socialist Alliance sets its sights incredibly low – 'filling the vacuum' vacated by Labour's move to the right, essentially hoping to mop up those who feel deserted by its adoption of a neo-liberal agenda (and by the effective disappearance of the Communist Party). Socialists have traditionally aimed much higher – the transformation of society, for which not only disillusioned sections of the reformist left must be won, but the support of the majority of the working class!

This might sound like nit-picking – surely the support of the existing left has to be won before going on to win over wider sections? Except that the two tasks are interconnected – to win over sections of the left you have to convince them that you have an approach which can win over bigger sections of the class, and not just fleetingly, but on a long-term basis.

Ultimately a party is necessary, but this party is defined by its politics and roots in the class, not by its label alone. It will not be built by declaration, but through systematic propaganda and intervention into the class, and by recognition of where the class is today. Many in the Alliance believe that if only it were more serious, it would mop up the thousands leaving the Labour Party in despair – although some are more wary because of what this might mean for the politics of the Alliance. Yet they cannot really explain why this has only happened to such a tiny extent so far.

The root of the Alliance's problems is not that it has not transformed itself into a party, but that it refuses to recognise the realities of politics. Fundamentally, this means that a battle to win over significant sections of the working class requires a systematic fight for socialist policies in the unions, encouraging and building struggles (but not on an exclusively 'party' basis), and a fight against the Blairites *within* the Labour Party. **WA**

The resignation of Liz Davies

This is an edited version of the statement sent by Liz Davies to the Socialist Alliance independents' conference on November 30, 2002, explaining why she had resigned as chair of the Alliance

I hope comrades will understand why I am not able to go into detail about the immediate events that precipitated my resignation. Suffice it to say that the financial malpractice to which I objected involved a sustained act of deception which posed a variety of potential dangers to the SA and individuals involved in it. . . . I would like to comment on the decisions of the Executive and the political context. . . . In my opinion, the report [commissioned by the SA Executive] is a whitewash and a cover-up. . . . The inadequacies of the report are hardly surprising given [the] openly dismissive attitude to fundamental breaches of accountability and of trust, between officers and to the members of the Socialist Alliance.

[Note – the 'financial malpractice' referred to does not involve any element of theft. This is agreed by Liz and the report to the SA executive – WA]

When I first discovered the 'practice' and raised it with other officers, I was pressed by leading members of the SWP and others to cover it up. When I refused, I was bullied and threatened. . . . As a result of the dismissive view of the Executive, and the attempts made to bully me and others into a cover-up, I felt that I had no alternative but to resign. I have been reinforced in that conclusion by the inadequacies of the report, which does indeed amount to the cover-up that some desired.

Unfortunately, this whole episode was symptomatic of a wider malaise, as I made clear to the Executive.

Since I was elected chair of the SA, I have spent a great deal of time trying to ensure that the priorities of the SA, as expressed at the Executive and national council, were implemented by the office. In general, attempts to place the SA on a sound footing as an autonomous and proactive body were met with obstruction by the office and in particular the national secretary. SA priorities which were not particularly priorities of the SWP were either not implemented or were implemented slowly and inefficiently. On the other hand, when the SWP decided to prioritise an event the office immediately swung into action and worked efficiently. . . . For the whole of 2002 there appears to have been little interest from the SWP in promoting the Socialist Alliance. There are reports from around the country of SWP members only bothering to attend SA meetings, or engage in SA activity, at election time, and barely even then. And other campaigning activities, such as support for industrial struggles, seem to be launched by the SWP with never a thought for a specific Socialist Alliance input or presence. Again, this problem was raised with the SWP leadership, but they refused to respond constructively.

. . . I have read a report of proceedings at the SWP Conference on 19-20 October. In this report, SWP leaders are quoted as arguing that 'reformists' should remain inside the Labour party – quite a different perspective from what was put to me by these same people when they asked me to join in 2000 and 2001.

Then it was clearly stated that the SA would be built as a broad socialist home for all those alienated by New Labour. I was told it would be built as a long-term, independent organisation specifically, not as an occasional front for occasional electoral activities.

It seems to me that the SWP have had a change of direction since their enthusiastic commitment to the Socialist Alliance in 2000. All the signs are that they will continue to downplay the Socialist Alliance, and to treat it as their own creature, rather than as a democratic and autonomous organisation.

I profoundly disagree with what appears to be the SWP's current analysis. The need to fill the political gap to the left of New Labour is just as pressing as it was two years ago (indeed, given the New Labour-Tory consensus over war, even more so). However, assuming that the SWP has now changed its attitude towards the Socialist Alliance, the question of how the Socialist Alliance can be built is a very difficult one. The Socialist Alliance is not, of course, solely a creature of the SWP, but it is certainly a difficult task to try to build an electoral alternative to New Labour without the active participation – in good faith – of the largest organised group on the British left.

Finally and most importantly a viable left alternative to New Labour can only be built on the basis of accountability and probity in the conduct of our affairs. The casual disregard for these requirements by the SWP leadership and others on the left remains a huge problem for all of us.

Breathing life into the Labour left

Bob Wood

It is a commonplace today that the left is almost non-existent in the Labour Party, having either been completely marginalised and demoralised in the constituencies, or having left for the greener pastures of the Socialist Alliance or sunk into apathetic inaction. Yet this view takes a one-sided and undialectical approach to the Labour Party. Political development is a decidedly non-linear process.

Labour cannot be reduced to New Labour. Whilst the channels of control from below have been choked off, leaving the government on the whole free from rank-and-file constraint, this does not mean that dissent does not still arise at the base of the party or, even more importantly, in the trade unions, which remain a critical component of the disparate forces which comprise the party.

The ascendancy of New Labour, aided and abetted in the first instance by the main trade union leaderships, has brought a decidedly subjective and impatient response from many socialist activists. This is hardly surprising, mistaken though it may be. The Harold Wilson government in the mid sixties was greeted by much the same sense of dismay and feelings of betrayal, and many left the party or engaged in political activity in organisations like the Socialist Labour League or the International Socialists, or even the Communist Party. Eventually though, the tide of history carried this cohort into the labour movement to form the basis of the Labour left resurgence in the seventies.

Many of those who have abandoned the Labour Party as a terrain of struggle seem to have a rather limited political ambition: to occupy the political space once filled by the Communist Party before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Stalinism. The attempt to build a bridge between those workers who support revolutionary organisations and those who support social democratic parties, via the united front, is relegated to some future date when a revolutionary party has been built. The united front tactic can only be used, the argument runs, once this party exists, using a narrow historical analogy with the thirties of the last century. Given the widespread misuse of the term 'united front', even applied by SWP guru John Rees to the Socialist Alliance – 'a united front of a special type' – it is worth emphasising that the united front is not just a tactical weapon with a limited use, but a method designed to bring about the maximum possible working class unity. In that sense it is applicable in all places at all times.

The immediate task of the left today is to build maximum working class unity in opposition to New Labour. Or, to put it another way, to organise and give political expression to the often inchoate but heartfelt disappointment and disgust felt for the Blair government by most thinking working class people, and probably by the majority of Labour Party members.

The current divide between those who support and work in the Socialist Alliance (or the Scottish Socialist Party) and the bulk of the labour movement organised in the Labour Party has deep historical roots, stemming from the First World War and the Russian Revolution. It is unlikely to be overcome in the short term. But it is essential to try and overcome the deep chasm of mistrust that exists between Labour Party activists and those on the left outside the party in order to build the greatest possible opposition to New Labour. This can be done in campaigns around education, health, war and asylum and over many other issues.

But this can be only one of the many tasks which those on the Labour left must set themselves, although it is an important one. There are additional tasks more narrowly focussed on developments within the Labour Party itself. After six years of the Blair government, the old demarcation lines between left and right no longer mean as much as they used to – the crucial divide is between those who feel betrayed by the government and those few at the base who support it, usually placeholders, careerists or sycophants. The ongoing series of 'After New Labour' conferences organised by the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs promises to play a central part in organising the opposition to Blair, particularly because of the emphasis on the role of the trade unions in the party. However, if these conferences are to be more than just a series of regional rallies, some ongoing organisation is needed, and this is where the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups can play a connecting role.

The Network recently held its AGM in Leeds. Gone are the days when the Network could organise meetings involving many hundreds in Manchester Town Hall. Nevertheless, as the only remotely democratic organising centre for left-wing activists in the party, and the only part of the Labour left committed to public campaigning rather than mere 'resolution mongering', it deserves continuing support. The numbers attending the AGM were diminished by the unfortunate coincidence that it was on the same day as the national demonstration in London in support of the firefighters. Nevertheless, in spite of the small attendance, it was a positive meeting. In addition to adopting uncontentious resolutions on opposition to asylum policy and war and other issues, the AGM welcomed the 'After New Labour' initiative and pledged the Network to working closely with the MPs in future. Let us hope this is reciprocated. Working together, the Network and the Campaign Group have the potential to unify the opposition at all levels of the party.

Over the last few years, although the trade unions have made their presence felt at Annual Conference, delegations to local Constituency General Management Committees have tended to become fewer. If the link with the unions is to be strengthened, then a serious campaign must be waged to increase these numbers, a process which could help to arrest the drift to the right in many CLPs. Support may come from some unlikely directions

the Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation has just produced a handy directory which lists contact details for all the affiliated unions, which has been distributed to all CLPs. The constituency post of Trade Union Liaison Officer is likely to assume greater importance in the immediate future.

If the Labour left can engage in genuine united front activity, support the initiatives of the Campaign Group and the Network, and build the connections between the party and the unions at local level, then the prospects may be a little brighter than they have seemed for some time. **WA**

Welsh politics after four years of the Assembly

Daniel Morrissey

It hardly needs repeating that the five and a half years of the Blair government has been a time of profound political upheaval, which has thrown up a number of new challenges for socialists. One of the developments which is likely to prove of greatest long term significance, however, is also one that has been consistently neglected by the Anglo-centric 'British' left: namely, Scottish and Welsh devolution. It is typical of New Labour that even this – one of its most progressive initiatives – was diminished by the detail of its implementation, at least in Wales. The strength of popular support for self-government in Scotland was such that New Labour could not credibly have offered anything less than a full parliament with primary legislative powers, and Scottish politics has indeed begun to develop a dynamic of its own. In Wales, however, the introduction of a weak and limited body, with a far from overwhelming plebiscitary mandate, has left its mark on Welsh politics.

The passage of the Government of Wales Act in 1998 gave Wales governmental institutions of its own for the first time since its incorporation into the realm of England under the Act of Annexation in 1536, which also forbade the use of the Welsh language in government. Wales retained the character of a border country until the development of the iron industry from the late eighteenth century and the creation of a militant working class, which directly challenged the state at Merthyr in 1831 and in the Chartist march on Newport in 1839. But, as the Welsh Marxist Ceri Evans argued, the subsequent emergence of the coal industry 'placed Wales at the centre of the imperial expansion of the British empire. . . . In the process sections of the Welsh working class became corrupted by the profits of empire'. For the next hundred years, the people of Wales accepted their incorporation into the English-dominated British state, and the Welsh working class put its faith in the Labour Party to ensure that it received a fair share of the benefits of national prosperity.[1] The collapse of coal markets and the downturn in the world economy after 1974 hit Wales particularly hard, however, and this led to a loss of confidence that policies drawn up in London could deliver prosperity and social justice for the people of Wales. There was a rebirth of national sentiment, marked by the rise of Plaid Cymru and the Welsh language movement. The move towards greater national autonomy suffered a false start in the 1979 referendum, which was lost by a margin of four-to-one. Subsequently, however, the experience of Thatcherism finally convinced many of the need for Wales to control its own affairs.[2]

The campaign for an Assembly

Labour's proposals for the Scottish Parliament were developed jointly with the Liberal Democrats, trade unions, churches and community organisations, in the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The process was the culmination of a national debate, involving every level of Scottish society. In Wales, notwithstanding the work of the Parliament for Wales Campaign, there had barely been a debate on devolution even within the Labour Party, and the bureaucracy felt able to announce its legislative intentions by dictat. Accordingly, Scotland was promised a Parliament with primary legislative and tax-raising powers, which was elected by proportional representation and provided for gender balance, but none of these features was on offer for Wales when Labour published its definitive policy on the Assembly, *Shaping the Vision*, in 1995. In response, Welsh Labour Action (WLA), a broad centre-left coalition of party activists, was established in order to campaign for parity with Scotland. Over the next two years it had some success in making the case for a stronger and more democratic Assembly, strengthening the hand of those within the bureaucracy with a genuine commitment to devolution, led by Ron Davies, who became Welsh Secretary in 1997. Concessions were made: first, 'an element of proportionality', in the form of the additional member system (AMS), and then the 'twinning' of constituencies to ensure a female candidate in 50 per cent of the seats.

Labour's decision to hold referenda for Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, rather than simply go ahead and legislate on winning office, was a major climbdown, reflecting the superficiality of Blair's commitment to a 'radical constitutional agenda'. In the event, however, the conduct of the campaign for a 'yes' vote augured well for the future of a devolved Welsh politics, with a progressive alliance led by Labour, Plaid, the Lib Dems and the unions, making common cause to convince the Welsh people of the benefits of self-government, however limited. Within this, a 'Socialists Say YES' campaign was set up, led by activists from the left of Labour and Plaid, Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (Welsh Language Society), the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and even the SWP, which had recently renounced its longstanding hostility to devolution. A conference organised by the campaign attracted over 100 people, including several future Assembly Members, and agreed a socialist manifesto for the Assembly, with commitments to push immediately for greater powers and to take the utilities in Wales into public ownership.[3]

The outcome of the referendum on September 18, 1997, was nail-bitingly close: the margin in favour was only 6,721 votes (0.6 per cent of the total), on a 50 per cent turnout. Nevertheless, the pro-Assembly forces remained optimistic: with an administration in Cardiff determined to make the best of this opportunity to deliver material gains for the people of Wales, the doubters could be won over, and the body acquire real popular legitimacy. This schema suffered its first major setback, however, when the resignation of Ron Davies over the 'Clapham Common' incident led to his replacement by Alun Michael. Michael was effectively imposed by Tony Blair in a fixed election where two-thirds of CLP members, and all unions who balloted their members, voted for his opponent, Rhodri Morgan, but the combined obedience of the TGWU, AEEU and GMB ensured that Blair got his man. Whereas Morgan, like Ron Davies, had been a consistent supporter of the Assembly, Michael had shown no interest in devolution since 1979, and had not even sought selection as a candidate (the selection process was conveniently 'reopened' in time for him to be parachuted in). In addition, the selection of Labour candidates was subject to an unprecedented degree of central control, to ensure that the politically unreliable (like Tower Colliery miners' leader Tyrone O'Sullivan, and WLA Chair Gareth Hughes) were filtered out, on some spurious pretext. Unsurprisingly, the manifesto on which Labour fought the election in May 1999 was distinguished only by its vacuity. Plaid Cymru, on the other hand, fought on an essentially 'Old Labour' platform, promising to restore the link between

pensions and earnings, and to reinstate the student grant. Labour's response was to publish a particularly wretched document entitled *The A-Z of Nationalist Madness*.

But, as the leftwing Labour MP Paul Flynn commented in *Tribune*, 'the people of Wales found this insanity irresistible'. Plaid saw an 80 per cent increase in its 1997 vote, winning the support of tens of thousands of Labour voters and capturing supposedly safe Labour seats like Rhondda and Islwyn. Labour spin-doctors tried to explain away their party's worst result in Wales since the 1930s, but the most credible explanation was that, in the absence of a serious Tory threat, many working class voters felt that they had nothing to lose in opting for a Plaid programme that seemed more authentically 'Labour' than the official version.[4]

Welsh Labour in office

Labour was left three seats short of an overall majority and chose to form a minority administration with Alun Michael as 'First Secretary'[5]. The obstructiveness of the three opposition parties exacerbated the lack of a clear Labour programme, the uncertainty about what the Assembly's powers might allow it to do, and the hostility towards Michael within his own group, and little was achieved by the Assembly in its first nine months. In February 2000, Michael, already damaged by the resignation of his Agriculture Secretary following a no-confidence vote, suffered the same fate himself. The Labour Group, many of whose members had been actively plotting his downfall, declined to re-nominate him and Rhodri Morgan took his place. This was a massive defeat for Blair's attempts to run Wales by remote control, and rekindled hopes that a distinct Welsh political agenda might yet be followed in Cardiff.

The reality, as ever, was disappointing. After six months in the job, Rhodri signed a Partnership Agreement with the Liberal Democrats and brought two of their six AMs into his cabinet. This went down very badly with large sections of the party, not just for the principle, but the manner of its execution. The coalition had been stitched-up between the Labour and Lib Dem leaderships behind the scenes and was presented to the Assembly Labour Group as a virtual *fait accompli*, only hours after some of them had first heard of the proposal. Four voted against. The coalition was then announced to the media, several hours before the Welsh Labour Executive Committee – supposedly the party's governing body in Wales – had a chance to discuss it. Rhodri was severely reprimanded by activists at 'consultation meetings' belatedly held across Wales, and acknowledged concerns about the indecent haste with which the exercise had been carried out. There was a more fundamental political problem, however. In being newly 'inclusive' to its right, Welsh Labour froze out its left: Plaid Cymru. In place of the 'coalition of ideas' advocated by Ron Davies, whereby all parties genuinely committed to making devolution work (i.e., everyone but the Tories) would work together, putting the interests of Wales above party advantage, the boundaries of acceptable policy formation were now set by the combined partisan interests of the two new 'partners'. While the Partnership Agreement contained very little that had not appeared in the original Labour manifesto, the inevitable result of the coalition would be to pull Labour to the right. By throwing in its lot with a party interested only in unambitious tinkering in the search for easy electoral rewards, Labour ministers were diverted from any idea they may have had of developing an agenda of radical reform to address the problems of Wales.

This is not to say that the Assembly government has achieved nothing worthwhile. In particular, Education Minister Jane Davidson has pursued a coherent and progressive agenda. She has pointedly taken a different path from her colleagues in Westminster, eschewing selection and any private involvement in the running of schools. She has scrapped secondary school league tables and standard assessment tests for seven-year-olds, and has reintroduced state support for less affluent FE and HE students, in the shape of the new Assembly Learning Grant. The administration has also made a number of services free at the point of delivery: school milk for children under seven; nursery places for three-year-olds; prescriptions and dental checks for the under-25s; bus travel for pensioners and the disabled; entry to all museums and art galleries. Potentially, such measures could help to rehabilitate the idea of a public service, freed from the intervention of the market, but there has been little attempt to present these developments as part of an overall strategy of decommodification; instead, they have been offered as 'one off' giveaways. Only in a speech to Swansea University on December 10, 2002, did Rhodri finally join up the dots, claiming that these policies represented 'the creation of a new set of citizenship rights . . . which are as far as possible, free at the point of use, universal and unconditional'. Of course, Rhodri's belated attention to this is transparently driven by the need to beef up his government's record before the election, and not by any sudden urge to 'set the record straight' and point out that he has been following a premeditated (but previously unacknowledged) strategy.[6]

The Assembly's ineffectuality has been illustrated most clearly by its failure to meet the big challenges that have arisen since 1999 – in particular, the crisis in the steel industry. From the earliest suggestions that the days of steel-production in Wales might be numbered, Welsh politicians were reduced to pleading with Corus to put the interests of its employees and their communities before those of its shareholders. There followed a desperate scramble to secure whatever financial inducements might be permissible within the tight constraints of European competition legislation, and which could therefore be offered to the Anglo-Dutch multinational. As it became increasingly clear that nothing available was sufficiently attractive to dissuade the company from 'downsizing', AMs lined up to condemn Corus boss Brian Moffat for his lack of social conscience – demonstrating an almost childlike naivety about the *raison d'être* of capitalist enterprises. Radical solutions to prevent the destruction of the Welsh steel industry were conspicuous by their absence. To some extent this is due to the Assembly's limited powers: there is genuinely very little that it could legally have done. But it is worrying that hardly anyone in the Assembly even *suggested* any radical action, by any layer of government. Only the former Plaid leader, Dafydd Wigley, called in the chamber for nationalisation (although this call was taken up by Ron Davies in a TV interview shortly afterwards, as well as by one or two other Plaid Cymru AMs, and seemed to become Plaid's policy by default). In their timidity, AMs were, of course, no more remiss than the Westminster government, whose powers are far greater. Politicians in London and Cardiff alike adhere to the neo-liberal consensus that national governments are powerless in the face of globalisation. But in Wales, this timidity also reflects an unwillingness to push at the boundaries of the devolution settlement – a lack of any determination to do a more serious job, requiring greater powers, and thereby demonstrating the need for those powers.

As with steel, so with the Foot and Mouth crisis and a series of other damaging developments in the economy: Wales's political 'leaders' present themselves almost as passive observers. Responding, in February 2001, to the loss of more than 5,000 jobs in two months, Rhodri suggested that he was powerless to protect employment in Wales: 'We do not control macro-economic policy. That is left to the Treasury.' When asked how Labour plans to regenerate the Welsh economy, he and his ministers typically offer little more than vague generalities: '. . . developing the export potential of Welsh companies . . . establish-

ing an innovation and entrepreneurship culture . . . promoting our natural strengths', etc, etc. With such a lack of vision, it is unsurprising that most people in Wales are hard pressed to name a single achievement for which the Assembly can claim credit.

The Labour Left

The apparent inability of the Welsh Labour leadership to get to grips with Wales's problems has been exacerbated by the absence of any real challenge, or even any sustained critique, from within its own ranks. Unlike its Westminster and Holyrood counterparts, the Assembly Labour Group has no organised left caucus and there is therefore no internal pressure for a more radical agenda. The most left-wing AM, Richard Edwards – the only Labour member to have publicly opposed the 'War Against Terrorism' from the outset – is stepping down due to ill-health, and is set to be replaced by a right-wing careerist. Ron Davies remains a potential alternative to Rhodri, and he has publicly set out some distinctive ideas on economic policy (notably on the inadequacy of the Barnett formula, which determines the level of the Assembly's funding) and on constitutional matters. He has made no attempt to build a 'left', however, preferring instead the role of the leader-in-(internal)-exile. Otherwise, the Labour Group is conspicuous for the absence of any political thought worthy of the name. As a consequence, such divisions as do exist tend to be determined as much by personal as by political factors. A case in point is Blaenau Gwent AM Peter Law, who has publicly criticised Rhodri and even launched an abortive leadership bid, but is essentially a populist rather than a socialist, and is nursing a grievance after losing his cabinet seat to the Lib Dems.

Outside the Assembly, the party's condition is little better. There is a handful of maverick MPs, the most energetic of whom are Paul Flynn and Martin Caton. Llew Smith, the only Campaign Group MP in Wales, is stepping down at the next election. He has been a strong supporter of public services, workers in struggle and the peace movement, but also a virulent opponent of the Assembly, with an almost pathological hatred of nationalism (although not British nationalism, of course). The left still has a presence on some GMCs (notably in Cardiff and Swansea), but many CLPs have been reduced to empty husks. Certainly, the Welsh party is by no means 'converted' to Blairism, but for many activists, accommodation to their right has become a way of life, and even those with more courage in their convictions have lacked organisation. The shattered remnants of the Bennite left have not been fully reunited since the pit closure campaign in 1992-93. Even the most promising subsequent initiative – Welsh Labour Action (WLA) relied disproportionately on the social-democratic urban intelligentsia, strongly connected to academia and the media. It never fully connected with the industrial working class left in the valleys, whose politics were more economistic, sometimes even to the extent of sharing Llew's hostility to devolution. In addition, many of WLA's leading figures were absorbed into the political establishment after 1999 – such as Sue Essex, who is now Assembly Minister for Environment – leaving the group to disintegrate as an independent force.

The current resurgence of the Labour Left across the British state in response to the war, privatisation and the government's handling of the firefighters' dispute may yet find an echo in Wales. An initial meeting in Cardiff called by Labour Against the War attracted almost 40 activists from eleven CLPs and led to the circulation of an anti-war resolution that has been submitted by at least three GMCs to the Welsh Party Conference on February 27-28. An 'After New Labour' fringe meeting is also planned for the conference, linking in with the successful series of events organised by the Campaign Group of MPs over the last nine months. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the Welsh Labour Left is in a healthy state, it can certainly not be written off just yet.

The far left

Meanwhile, the self-appointed guardians of the socialist faith, who seek to replace Labour as the voice of the working class, present a somewhat ragged spectacle. The Welsh Socialist Alliance (WSA) had high hopes of replicating the success of the Scottish Socialist Alliance/Party, but has never had anything like the same implantation in workplaces or working-class communities, nor the same political breadth. It was initially composed principally of the Socialist Party (SP) and Cymru Goch – the latter being a somewhat eccentric group that arose out of the Welsh Socialist Republican Movement (WSRM) and expounds its own brand of revolutionary socialist nationalism. An electoral pact with the SWP, under the name 'United Socialists', failed to make the heralded breakthrough in the 1999 Assembly election, scoring an average of 1.6 per cent in the nine constituencies they contested and 0.5 per cent in the regional lists.

The SWP finally joined the WSA the following year, and ploughed resources into the Alliance in the run-up to the 2001 general election. A similarly uninspiring performance at the ballot-box led, however, to its partial disengagement in favour of a return to more familiar activities under its own colours – for example, it has been the leading force in the anti-war movement in Wales. But the SWP has apparently maintained enough of a presence in the WSA to drive out both the SP *and* Cymru Goch in the course of 2002. According to a report in the CPGB's *Weekly Worker*, 'a high proportion' of WSA branches 'are inactive and rarely meet', new members 'are few and far between', its journal is defunct and its election preparations 'lethargic'.[7] The project of a united socialist alternative to New Labour is not in good shape, it would appear.

Interestingly, Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP) has consistently polled more impressively than the WSA and its predecessors, despite having substantially fewer members and no visible presence to speak of. Most spectacularly, in the Ogmore parliamentary by-election on February 14, 2002, it saved its deposit, winning 1,152 votes (6 per cent), while the WSA managed only 205 votes (1.1 per cent), despite a far more energetic campaign and a vastly greater membership in the constituency. Significantly, the SLP's candidate was an ex-miner, reinforcing the conclusion that it is seen by some sections of the working class as the authentic left wing of the mainstream labour movement, whereas the WSA is dismissed as merely a marginal far left organisation. Nevertheless, the SLP in Wales is in no position to build on its limited electoral success. In many ways, the most significant Marxist organisation in Wales is the Communist Party of Britain, which at least has some implantation in the trade unions, as well as some understanding of the Welsh national question and of the need to take a united front approach to Labour.

Plaid Cymru

This leaves Plaid Cymru as the only credible left alternative to Labour. The party has existed since 1925 and in its early period espoused a romantic bourgeois nationalism, looking back to a mythologised feudal past. It took off electorally in 1966, when it won its first parliamentary seat, and was subsequently able to capitalise on the failure of British labourism to deliver the goods for the people of Wales. It consistently won around 10 per cent of the vote in general elections, drawing support mainly from the rural north and west of Wales. By the early 1980s, however, it also had a strong socialist wing, which to some extent mirrored the Bennite Labour left, led by Dafydd Elis Thomas, MP for Merionydd Nant Conwy. The crisis of socialism from the late 1980s saw the Plaid 'National Left' break up, and most of its leading members embrace

'modernisation' (Elis Thomas, once a self-styled 'revolutionary Marxist', ended up in the House of Lords[8]) or else drift out of politics altogether.

As Ed George has succinctly summarised, 'Plaid has since the 1980s maintained itself on a programme of "independence in Europe" (a plain contradiction in terms) coupled with a mild and largely inoffensive social democracy. Yet even this gentle appeal to "social justice" begins to look radical against the new model Blairite Labour Party, especially when measured against the degree of social and economic crisis that Wales has suffered since the 1974 recession burst the post-WW2 Keynesian restructuring bubble, and especially following the appalling consequences of the Thatcher government's crash-and-burn restructuring of the British economy.'[9] This is the background to Plaid's electoral breakthrough in the 1999 Assembly election, when it won the biggest swings from Labour in the coalfield and semi-coalfield constituencies – those hardest-hit by Thatcherism and with most cause to be disappointed by New Labour.[10] While the Plaid Cymru Group in the Assembly has failed to develop a convincing alternative agenda to that of Labour, it has at least said the things that Labour should have said in relation to the steel crisis, PFI, the rail industry and the war.

Welsh Labour is all too uncomfortably aware that many of Plaid's policies are far more in tune with the views of most Labour supporters than are its own. Consequently, it gleefully seizes on any Plaid pronouncements on the national question, as the only stick with which it feels it can beat the official opposition. For example, Labour was quick to pounce when Seimon Glyn, a Gwynedd Plaid councillor, called for the 'monitoring' of immigration by affluent, and arrogantly anti-Welsh, English settlers into economically depressed Welsh-speaking communities. While denouncing such views as 'racist' or as 'divisive nationalism', Welsh Labour reaffirms its own obeisance to the imperial British crown, and dismisses legitimate concerns about the social disintegration of many parts of Wales. For some Labour politicians, the spiteful 'Nat-bashing' in which they regularly engage is no more than cynical opportunism. For others, however, it reflects a visceral Welsh anti-Welshness, which has nothing to do with the 'socialist internationalism' that they loftily proclaim.

The late 1990s saw the emergence of a new Plaid left, whose leading figures were all in their twenties and thirties, predominantly working class and from the industrialised south. They include Jill Evans, an MEP since 1999; Adam Price, MP for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr since 2001; and Leanne Wood, who is expected to become an Assembly Member in May[11]. They have won a series of battles over policy at Plaid conferences and have begun expounding their views – very cogently – in the journal, *Tribun Coch*[12]. While more conservative forces, around the present (largely ineffectual) party leader, Ieuan Wyn Jones, retain overall control, the left is growing steadily in strength and influence. Price, in particular, won acclaim for his exposure of the Lakshi Mittal affair, and is already being talked about as a future party leader.

Rebuilding the left

It is too early to tell whether Plaid's electoral breakthrough in 1999 was a flash-in-the-pan, or whether it represents a longer-term pattern. Certainly, it was not repeated in 2001, but then Welsh working class voters may be differentiating between Assembly and Westminster elections – still predominantly voting Labour in the latter, if only to keep out the Tories. In any case, Plaid is unlikely to replace the Labour Party in the foreseeable future. The labour movement retains decisive social weight, and while Plaid has been assiduously courting the unions, the latter's link with the Labour Party remains intact. The labour movement as a whole (party and unions) remains the most important terrain on which socialists will have to fight for political leadership of the working class. Nevertheless, the failure of the Welsh Labour leadership to break decisively with Blairism, or to acknowledge the need for a distinct Welsh agenda, will continue to assist Plaid in winning support in the very communities that have historically been the bedrock of labourism. Any viable socialist project in Wales needs both to be grounded in the mass organisations of the working class *and* to have an understanding of the importance of the national question. Consequently, there has to be a non-sectarian engagement between the left in Labour and Plaid – and indeed, with socialists in other organisations. This has happened in the past, during the 'Socialists Say YES' campaign in 1997 and around the Cardiff Euro Demo the following year. Subsequently, the tendency to retreat behind party lines has been exacerbated by developments within the Assembly, but this must be overcome if the left in Wales is to be revived.

The range of current issues facing the left in Wales, and elsewhere – most immediately, the war, but also privatisation and the whole neo-liberal agenda – cannot be addressed successfully by socialists in any one organisation, but only by a united front embracing the whole organised working class and its allies. In Wales, the establishment of the Assembly presents a major opportunity for the left: a potential focus for a challenge to the policies being pursued at the level of the British state. The strategy for building such a challenge, and for developing a positive programme of the left in Wales, can only come about through the joint work of activists from the labour and nationalist movements. The sooner such work re-starts, the better.

Meanwhile, campaigning is already well under way for the second Welsh general election, which will be held on Thursday May 1, 2003. In the next issue of *Workers Action*, I will examine the ways in which the election is highlighting or obscuring the broader political issues that I have discussed above, and will discuss more concretely the position that socialists should take in the election and in the Assembly's second term.

[1] My analysis here draws heavily on Ceri Evans, 'For Welsh Self-Government', a document presented to a South Wales Socialist Outlook Summer School in June 1996.

[2] It is not possible to do justice to the bigger issue of the Welsh national question, and the Marxist position on the self-determination of nations, in an article such as this. I intend to return to these matters in a future issue of *Workers Action*.

[3] Only Workers Power opposed the statement, arguing that the Assembly was not a class issue.

[4] The best analysis of the election results is C. Evans and E. George, *Swings and Roundabouts. What Really Happened on May 6th?* (Welsh Labour Action, 1999). Copies are available from me, c/o Workers Action.

[5] The head of the Scottish Executive is called the First Minister, but Blair apparently vetoed the use of this title in Wales when he discovered that the closest Welsh translation, 'Prif Weinidog', means 'Prime Minister' – a title no-one but he could enjoy. Nevertheless, Rhodri Morgan adopted the style 'First Minister' after a few months in office.

[6] I will examine this speech in greater detail in the next issue of *Workers Action*

[7] *Weekly Worker* 464, January 23, 2003. Of course, it would be unfair to take the CPGB's word for it that the SWP is to blame for these problems. But, as one of the few remaining organisations within the WSA (although it apparently has only one member in Wales!) the CPGB would at least have no cause to exaggerate publicly the scale of the problems.

[8] He is now Presiding Officer of the Assembly.

[9] Ed George, 'A Note on Welsh History and Politics', available on his website, www.geocities.com/edgeorge2001es.

[10] See Evans and George, op. cit., for a detailed analysis.

[11] She is no.1 on the Plaid 'top-up' list for the South Wales Central region, and is therefore certain to win a seat under the Additional Member System.

[12] Available on the web at www.tribuncoch.com. A print version is planned for the future. **WA**

Venezuela

Chávez wins another round

Nick Davies

What did Venezuela's self-styled lovers of freedom and democracy do when they didn't like the elected government? The answer, of course, is that they tried to overthrow it, and if at first they didn't succeed, they tried, tried and tried again.

The 60-day 'general strike' which began at the beginning of December and all but collapsed by the start of February was the fourth such action to hit Venezuela since December 2001. Its aim was to overthrow the democratically elected President Hugo Chávez. We say 'strike' because it was not really a strike at all, but an attempt at economic sabotage by a coalition of Venezuela's pampered elite, the insecure middle class and the entrenched vested interests, all enraged by the Chávez government's attempts at redistributing Venezuela's wealth in favour of the poor. 'This is a strike of the rich' was the succinct comment of the Caracas graffiti artists. The supporters of the 'strike' included the country's five privately owned TV stations and eight privately owned newspapers, as well as many large businesses.

At first, the 'strike' was merely limping along, with only private schools, shopping malls, and fast food outlets closing down. However, on the fourth day the sabotage campaign received a boost when managers and administrative workers at the Venezuelan state oil company, the PDVSA, walked out. Venezuela is the fifth largest oil exporter in the world. Oil makes up 80 per cent of all exports and half of all government revenue. The Venezuelan economy began to lose an estimated $50 million per day from the shutdown: nearly all Venezuela's economic activity depends on the steady supply of oil from its refineries. But while the shutdown was supported by the oil refinery managers and the oil tanker captains, the crew of one of the largest tankers, the *Pilin Leon* were expressing their support for the government, and for the Venezuelan military who boarded the ship and replaced the captain.

It is important to remember that the PDVSA is not a nationalised enterprise as such. Its function is to enrich the corrupt clique that runs it. The last 25 years have seen a process of creeping 'piratisation' of this supposed state asset. In 1974 the company rendered 80 per cent of its income to the state and kept 20 per cent as 'operating costs'. Having reached 50-50 by 1990, the ratio reversed to 80-20 in favour of the company by 1998.

The present Venezuelan constitution, adopted in 1999 and approved by referendum, is possibly the most democratic in Latin America. It provides for the recall, halfway through their term of office, of all elected officials. This applies to President Chávez himself, who could be removed by referendum in August of this year. This begs the question, if Chávez is so unpopular, and he can be kicked out this coming August anyway, why the hurry? Why did the right wing try to shut the country down now?

The answer, of course, is that Chávez is not as unpopular as his opponents say he is. Despite the daily hardship caused by the shutdown, most notably the petrol shortages in a country where fuel is cheaper than bottled water, Chávez's supporters, mainly among the poor, not only stuck with him, but also mobilised in support of the government. These mobilisations were scandalously underreported not only in the anti-government Venezuelan media but also in Britain, where the view that Chávez is a 'Castro-communist' demagogue at the head of a tottering, unpopular regime is allowed to go unchallenged for most of the time. The constitution states that any referendum can only be called if no less than 20 per cent of voters sign petitions in favour of it, and the voter turnout must be 25 per cent or more. The number of voters voting for the recall of the president must be equal to, or more than, the number of voters who voted for him or her, and Chávez was elected with almost 60 per cent of the vote. Finally, there can only be one referendum during the term for which Chávez is elected. All this meant that the right wing was seriously worried that Chávez would actually win a referendum.

Since the last attempt to unseat Chávez, the farcical 48-hour coup in April 2002, his opponents' position had worsened. Many of the middle classes who supported the April coup attempt realised that they were being used as cannon fodder in an attempt to impose a dictatorship supported by the USA. A number of opponents of Chávez in the military had been retired since April. As a whole, the military was more pro-Chávez that it had been previously. Therefore, many of the right wing saw this shutdown as their last chance for some time.

As in April 2002, the right wing was the most uncritical believer in its own propaganda. According to the newspapers and TV stations, the Chávez regime needed just one last push. But it was the opposition, not Chávez, who blinked first. By February 3, the banks were opening for business, under pressure from their customers. Many businesses were forced to reopen, to stave off bankruptcy. The oil workers remained on strike, demanding that Chávez call elections, but clearly, for now, the opposition's moment has passed. A glance at the anti-government media gives an idea of the pessimism and low morale of the opposition movement. The right-wing *El Universal* feared that the strike would 'cause the country irreparable damage', and that the strike was 'undermining the electoral solution'. Elsewhere, the same newspaper urged the opposition to 'stop, think, get a new strategy, and above all, not give Chávez the pleasure of watching us destroy the country'. The less right-wing *El Nacional* was honest enough to admit that instead of weakening the government, the strike had 'strengthened the Chavistas' convictions'. The opposition is attempting to cover with bluster and lies its abject failure to unseat the government. Jesus Torrealba, executive secretary of the opposition co-ordinating committee, stated that 'the national strike has reached its objectives

and the protest is entering a new phase'. This 'new phase' consists of gathering signatures for a petition, asking for, among other things, a shortening of the president's term of office from six to four years. Considering that the opposition was, in December, too impatient to wait eight months for a referendum before kicking Chávez out, this 'new phase' represents a pretty pathetic climb-down.

Chávez remains in power for now, but will he and his 'Bolivarian' movement survive in the long term? To stand any chance at all, Chávez must mobilise his base, the 80 per cent of the country who live in poverty. If they are disappointed or become marginalised, they are less likely to defend the regime. As well as introducing real, material improvements in housing and education since 1998, the government claims to be devolving power downwards to 'Bolivarian circles' and to neighbourhood co-operatives. These must be no mere ornament, but must have real power. Certainly, the more real power people have the more likely they are to be patient if all of their basic needs cannot be met overnight. Clearly, any government in Venezuela, even if not faced by regular attempts to unseat it, would face an enormous task in confronting the grotesque inequalities which exist in terms of access to health, housing, education and secure employment. Nevertheless, if Chávez does not continue mobilising his supporters, his enemies will continue mobilising against him. Chávez's remarks about the need for 'understanding' and 'dialogue' after the failed April coup would have encouraged his opponents to believe that here was another Allende, who would go so far, but when it came to the crunch, would vacillate. The recent announcement by Chávez that he would use troops to keep schools and banks open and to prevent the hoarding of food, and the sacking of over 1,000 oil industry managers, suggests that he may have learned lessons from the events of recent months.

In the propaganda of the Bolivarian movement there is little reference to the organised working class and the trade union movement. In some ways, this is understandable if the trade union in the country's biggest industry, or at least its leadership, is opposed to Chávez. However, the need for Chávez to base his government on the organised working class is not determined by how left wing the workers are (clearly, the relatively well-paid oil workers are more conservative than Chávez's supporters in the shantytowns) but by their relationship to the production process. If Chávez and his supporters are to face down the attacks by the right wing they will have to have the support of the rank-and-file workers in the oil industry and in the factories. Their support will be essential if the Venezuelan masses are not only to defend the gains they have made, but go on to make new ones. In fact, Chávez obviously enjoys widespread support among workers. An indication of what is required was when a supposed indefinite lockout, starting on October 21, collapsed after two hours when in some cities, workers forced employers to open the factories, under the threat of occupation. This scared the wits out of the ruling class. A key question is the need for the government to bring the PDVSA under direct government control, and to kick out the corrupt management, in order that a new PDVSA, under the control of the rank and-file workers, can use the country's oil wealth to help the poor.

Most importantly, the future of the Venezuelan masses cannot be dependent on the personal qualities of Chávez. There is no doubt that Chávez genuinely wishes to redistribute wealth, but there is every doubt that he understands how this task can be accomplished. Latin American political elites and their supporters in the USA have in the past paid little attention to election results and constitutions. Whether he has wanted to or not, Chávez has had to mobilise the masses against the right wing. However, the Venezuelan masses cannot be used as a stage army by Chávez when it suits him. If the modest but worthy achievements since 1998 are to be defended and extended, these mobilisations need to develop a life of their own, supporting Chávez but not depending on him. The Venezuelan masses should not wait for Chávez to be voted out of office, assassinated, or for him to capitulate, before building their own independent, democratic organisations.

Of course, the biggest danger facing the Bolivarian movement is that which faced Allende in Chile in 1973, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in the 1980s: the USA. If anything, that danger is greater now than it was then. The Bush regime, at the head of the only hyperpower, is clearly intent on destroying any democratic government which it sees as a threat to its interests or those of US corporations (you can't actually see the join anyway) in the name of the 'war against terrorism' or the 'war against drugs'. In Latin America, and in most other parts of the world, whether the US government decides you are a threat to it determines whether you live or die. As we showed in Workers Action No.16 ('Masses repel coup-plotters . . . for now!'), the USA was behind the coup attempt in April, and it is certain that it was bankrolling Chávez's opponents this time round. One ray of hope is that Otto 'Third' Reich, whose grubby finger marks were all over the April coup attempt, did not get Congressional approval for the government job that Bush had found for him. However, what we also argued in that article was that a government in Latin America need not be particularly left wing to be perceived as a threat to the USA, it needs merely to attempt to run any given country in a way which is not entirely for the convenience of US corporations or for the strategic interests of the US government, so that while most Latin American states are now formal democracies instead of military dictatorships, the elected civilian governments have only nominal power. A case in point is Venezuela's oil wealth. Venezuelan oil accounts for 13 per cent of US oil imports, and imports account for about half US oil needs. Regardless of what it needs itself, the USA, for its own strategic purposes, wants to control world oil supplies. Therefore, the call by Chávez at the beginning of January for a 'Latin OPEC', a regional cartel of oil exporters pooling the state oil companies from Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Trinidad, will not have gone unnoticed in the boardrooms of American big oil.

If Otto Reich was the USA's 'hard cop', its 'soft cop' is the six-nation group 'Friends of Venezuela'. Consisting of Spain, Portugal, Chile, Brazil and Mexico, but dominated by the USA, this group is attempting to 'resolve' Venezuela's crisis. (Imagine for a moment a six-nation 'Friends of Britain' intervening during the miners' strike of 1984-85! This indicates what a neo-colonialist operation the 'Friends of Venezuela' is.) It was in fact ex-US president Jimmy Carter who came up with the idea of gathering signatures, to enable the opposition to save face. But with 'friends' like these who needs enemies? Socialists in the rest of Latin America, as well as in North America and Europe, must organise in solidarity with the Chávez government and, more importantly, its supporters in Venezuela, in the same way that socialists supported Cuba, Chile and Nicaragua in the past, not necessarily because we agree politically with Chávez and his brand of populism and nationalism, but because of what his government represents: an attack on the privileges of the Latin American elite, a genuine attempt to redistribute wealth, and an attempt to break free from the dead hand of the free-market world order. **WA**

Wang Fanxi 1907-2002

Wang Fanxi, who died in Leeds aged 95 on December 30 last year, was the last surviving link with the heroic generation of Chinese revolutionaries who took part in the defeated 1925-27 revolution, and drew the lessons from the debacle by rallying to the positions of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

Wang joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1925 during the period of its disastrous embrace of the nationalist Guomindang. After a period spent at Wuhan – the headquarters of 'Left Guomindang' leader Wang Chin-wei – he was sent to the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow. While in Moscow he was won to Trotsky's trenchant critique of the Stalinist betrayal of the revolution. In spite of the fierce repression of the Russian Left Opposition, a majority of Chinese students in Moscow supported Trotsky. When he returned to China in 1929 he maintained clandestine links with those returning students who had been expelled for Trotskyism. Later that year, when the underground organisation of Chinese Left Oppositionists in Moscow was broken up, Wang was himself expelled from the CCP, and he formed the *Our Voice* group.

Wang's group was one of four groups sympathetic to the Left Opposition in China. After considerable urging from Trotsky, they merged on May 1, 1931, but in less than a month its entire leadership apart from Chen Duxiu was arrested and imprisoned by the Guomindang.

Wang was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, and was not released until late 1934. He then went to Shanghai and resumed publication of two monthly journals, *Struggle* and *Spark*, which appeared until 1942. He was rearrested by the Guomindang in 1937, and was tortured and kept in solitary confinement. He was released in November that year as invading Japanese forces approached.

Together with Chen Duxiu – successively the father of Chinese nationalism, communism and Trotskyism – Wang attempted to enlist in the army to stimulate resistance through armed struggle, but this plan was foiled by the dismissal of a sympathetic general. Wang then resumed working on the journal *Struggle*.

Chinese Trotskyism split over its attitude to the war between China and Japan, and the significance of American involvement in it. A majority led by Peng Shuzhi argued that China's war against Japan remained progressive even if the US entered on the same side. The minority led by Wang considered that the US entry into the war fundamentally changed its character, and that China's national struggle had become an adjunct of the imperialist war. Chen Duxiu had meanwhile adopted a form of popular frontism, and had broken with Trotskyism, although Wang refused to condemn him in the same terms as Peng's group.

Since the late 1920s, when the CCP had withdrawn to the vast peasant interior of the country, the Trotskyists had been the only socialists to address and fight alongside the workers of the main industrial centres of the south of China. This work continued to a limited extent even under the brutal Japanese occupation. Between the Japanese surrender in 1945 and the victory of the CCP in 1949, the two Trotskyist groups were able to win a following among sections of workers. Peng's group, the Revolutionary Communist Party, had about 300 members, and Wang's Internationalist Communist Party had about 200.

When the Red Army reached Shanghai, Wang was sent to Hong Kong to establish a party centre. However, he was deported by the British authorities to the Portuguese colony of Macau. The Chinese Trotskyists continued to function until a series of police raids in December 1952 and January 1953 led to the arrest of some 200 comrades and members of their families.[1] Many of these comrades died in jail, and 12 of them were not released until 1979.

In Macau, despite living isolated and in poverty, he retained his beliefs, and wrote his memoirs entitled *Chinese Revolutionary* – an invaluable record of his life and struggle which has been published in a number of languages.[2] Wang's memoirs can now be supplemented by more recent research on Chinese Trotskyism.[3] He also continued to analyse the ongoing changes in China under Mao. His analysis of the Cultural Revolution as an intra bureaucratic struggle in which no wing of the CCP leadership was supportable has stood the test of time better than most other attempts by Trotskyists to analyse the period's tumultuous confusion.

In 1975, he was able to move to Britain, living in Leeds for many years. Although the conditions of his residence precluded him from taking and active part in political activity, he continued to write and follow political developments internationally.

Apart from his memoirs, only a small part of his writings are in English. They include his reply to Peng on the split in the Chinese Trotskyist movement;[4] his analysis of the Cultural Revolution;[5] a tribute to his old teacher, Chen Duxiu;[6] and an obituary of his old comrade Zheng Chaolin, who survived 34 years' imprisonment by the Guomindang and the Chinese 'communists', and died aged 97 in 1998.[7]

Among the tributes paid to Wang, many stressed his strength of principle, his non-sectarian spirit, his interest in political ideas and theory, and his kindness.

Richard Price

[1] See Li Fu-jen and Peng Shu-tse, *Revolutionaries in Mao's Prisons*, Pathfinder, 1974.

[2] Wang Fan-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary, Memoirs 1919-1949*, Oxford, 1980. An enlarged version was published by Columbia University Press in 1991.

[3] See especially G. Benton, *China's Urban Revolutionaries. Explorations in the History of Chinese Trotskyism 1921-1952*, Humanities Press, 1996, and *Revolutionary History*, Vol.2, No.4, Spring 1990, 'The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution'.

[4] Wang Fanxi, 'Problems of Chinese Trotskyism', *Revolutionary History*, Vol.2, No.4, Spring 1990, 'The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution'.

[5] 'F.H. Wang', 'On "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" ', in *China: The Revolution is Dead – Long Live the Revolution*, Black Rose, 1977.

[6] Wang Fanxi, 'Chen Duxiu, Father of Chinese Communism', in G. Benton, *Wild Lilies, Poisonous Weeds*, Pluto, 1982.

[7] Wang Fanxi, 'Obituary of Zheng Chaolin (1901-1998)', http://members.tripod.com/~cpri/or-2.html

WA

Joe Strummer 1952-2002

Back in 1977 there were thousands and thousands of young people who were pretty naïve about politics, and had no idea where the Westway was, but of two things they were certain: they hated the National Front, and the first Clash album was a 40 minute musical adrenaline rush the like of which they'd never heard. The following spring, tens of thousands of them went to the huge Rock Against Racism concert in Victoria Park, London. Twenty-five years later, the death of Joe Strummer has caused a palpable sense of loss among those people politicised by the Clash who have clung on to their beliefs through the hard times of the 1980s and 90s. The Clash's two- or three-minute bursts of anger against racism, imperialism and alienation are some of the best, possibly *the* best, political rock and roll music ever produced. While other bands from the punk era might have gone in for a bit of radical posturing, if only for the shock value, the Clash meant every word of it.

Although all the members of the Clash, in its best known line-up at least, were happy to identify with the band's revolutionary rhetoric and its support for anti-racism, Strummer was clearly the political driving force of the band, and the one who ultimately made the Clash what it was. When Strummer was inspired by the battle between the police and the black community at the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival to write *White Riot*, Terry Chimes, the original drummer, could not understand the fuss about 'just a bit of aggro'. It was this difference of perspective that caused Chimes to leave after the band recorded the first album, with the result that he is credited as 'Tory Crimes'. Likewise, Keith Levene, a guitarist in the early line-up, left as much for political reasons as musical ones. Evidently, the song *I'm So Bored With the USA* started life as a Mick Jones tune called 'I'm So Bored With You', about an ex-girlfriend, until Strummer changed the words. This story, incidentally, illustrates the extent to which the Clash were dependent on the marriage between Strummer's lyrics and Jones's ability to crank out a melody. This should have occurred to Strummer when he sacked Jones seven years later, a decision he bitterly regretted for the rest of his life, but which was prompted, it is said, by Jones having 'strayed from the original idea of the Clash'.

Although he may not have been the most technically gifted musician, Strummer made up for it with the breadth of his musical interests and influences. While the first album sounded like a combination of MC5 and Junior Murvin, 1979's *London Calling* put ska, folk, r&b, and rockabilly into the mix, as well as, of course, reggae. Not all these attempts to transcend the musical limitations of the band's punk roots were successful. The band overreached itself with the too-long, patchy *Sandinista!* , and *Combat Rock* was, in the view of some fans, pitched a little too much at the stadium rock loving, shopping mall punters of the USA. Despite these lapses, the band was nearly always forgiven by the fans. The Clash were 'on our side', they were 'one of us'. They sacrificed royalties in order to keep the prices of *London Calling* and *Sandinista!* low, they were always touring, playing for often two hours or more with a passion and energy which had to be experienced to be believed. They played benefits for Rock Against Racism and in support of the striking miners, they supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and they refused to appear of Top of the Pops.

The bourgeois press was kinder to Strummer in death than it had ever been in life, grudgingly acknowledging his influence, but casting him in the role of lovably eccentric throwback from the hectic days before New Labour. But can anyone seriously deny, in the present climate, that songs like *I'm So Bored With the USA* and *Clampdown* remain relevant? How many millions of people live for the weekend, and in the words of *Janie Jones* (one of the best songs ever about someone with a boring job), are in love with rock and roll, with getting stoned, but would love to really tell the boss exactly how they feel? In his most recent recording, with his band the Mescaleros, *Shaktar Donetsk*, about a refugee, is evidence that Strummer had lost neither his edge nor his commitment, as was one of his last ever performances, a benefit concert for the striking firefighters.

Strummer was astute enough to know the limitations of music itself as a vehicle for change. 'Huh, they think its funny, turning rebellion into money' was his verdict in the brilliant *White Man in Hammersmith Palais* on the post-punk music scene of 1978. Although his songs dealt with war and injustice, and he identified with the oppressed and the downtrodden, Strummer never attempted to give any political lead himself, and it is difficult even to think of a reference to socialism in any of his songs. In fact, in *London Calling* he sang '. . . don't look to us. Phoney Beatlemania has bitten the dust'. In other words, although Strummer's music could inspire us, if we really wanted to bring about change, it would be up to us, but he would be on our side.

Nick Davies

Cinéma vérité?

Dirty Pretty Things (Stephen Frears, 2002, GB, 107 mins)
City of God (Katia Lund and Fernando Meirelles, 2002, Brazil, 129 mins)

Once an industrial city and a major port, London has been radically recast in the past decade and a half as a financial centre and the hub of an ever-growing service-based economy. To the outsider, London appears to be a city obsessed with shopping, entertainment and consumption. Constant building and renovation have transformed formerly grimy and run-down districts. New shops, bars, restaurants, clubs and hotels have opened in profusion, and property values have spiralled.

This process is not, of course, unique to London. Something similar can be seen in many of the older industrial cities of the north, Scotland and Wales. But in London, the scale is bigger and the momentum of change seems correspondingly faster. The extremes of wealth and poverty are not only greater; they often lie only a street or two apart, since, unlike many European capitals, London for the most part doesn't have one-class suburbs.

But beneath the traditional class divide lies the subterranean London of economic migrants, asylum seekers and illegal employment below the minimum wage, which increasingly sustains the whole glittering edifice.

If London over the past decade has been like a vast party, with the rich at the top table grabbing huge portions, the middle class taking more modest slices, and the working class picking up the crumbs, then *Dirty Pretty Things* takes us into the world of the people who clear up the mess afterwards.

It's hard to think of many films over the past two decades that have even attempted to mine the rich potential of contemporary London, let alone portray the seamy underside of the world's most ethnically diverse city. A few films in the 1980s captured the beginnings of this change. *The Long Good Friday* could be read as a metaphor for the massive changes that were beginning to uproot the East End crime bosses' manor. *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (both directed, like *Dirty Pretty Things*, by Stephen Frears) gave quirky takes on race relations under Thatcher, while *Mona Lisa* hinted at the era's sleaziness. But by the 90s, London had mainly become a backdrop for gangster movies. Following on from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, the genre has degenerated into little more than geezers 'n' guns. Post-*Trainspotting*, there has been a similarly undistinguished set of clubs 'n' drugs films. Apart from some of Mike Leigh's films, you struggle to think of many other memorable films with a London setting – or at least one that is much more than a backdrop.

The two central characters of *Dirty Pretty Things* are caught in a twilight world of exploitation. Nigerian exile Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor) works nights as a hotel desk clerk and tries to stay awake during the day as a cab driver. He is a qualified doctor who, it emerges in the course of the story, has suffered personal tragedy as a result of political opposition in Nigeria. Turkish migrant Senay (Audrey Tautou) works as a maid at the same hotel, and dreams of saving enough money to leave for New York. They share a tiny flat, but because of their shifts, their lives rarely cross.

Their precarious foothold in London is disturbed when Okwe discovers a human heart blocking a toilet in the hotel. This discovery leads to his uncovering a trade in human organs which involves the sinister Spanish hotel manager, Sneaky (Sergi Lopez). Meanwhile, immigration officers are on the trail of Senay, causing her to leave her job and find work in a sleazy sweatshop. Through Okwe's friend Guo Yi (Benedict Wong), a Chinese mortuary attendant, Senay finds a temporary bolt hole, sleeping in a hospital. And while all this is going on, a slow burning romance between Okwe and Senay is beginning to develop.

Torn between his conscience as a doctor to expose the trade and his inability to expose it because of his illegal status, Okwe's world is further undermined by his discovery that Senay is planning to trade one of her kidneys for a passport and ticket to America.

This is a film with some strong sides: its obvious humanity towards its subjects and their problems, and its claustrophobic depiction of London as a twilight world of grimy cab offices, cramped living spaces, menial labour and ruthless employers. That being said, there are weaknesses too. The romance doesn't seem very believable, nor does the inexperienced Senay's readiness to accede to the sexual demands of the sweatshop boss in return for a job. And while Frears doesn't resort to stereotypes, there is a tendency to use national 'types' as vehicles for the plot, including minor characters such as Sophie Okenedo's tart-with-a-heart, Juliette.

The acting of the main characters is good, and Ejiofor is potentially a significant talent. But the quiet, brooding compassion he displays for most of the film is undercut towards the end by the bumpy transition from character driven romance to dark thriller, and requires him to resolve the moral dilemma in a way that seems at odds with his character. All in all, a film that doesn't quite deliver what it promises, but a worthy effort nonetheless.

Brazilian film *City of God* also arrives with a big reputation. Don't be fooled by the poster of a young couple on a beach. This isn't the Rio you see in holiday programmes – stunningly beautiful city, host to the greatest carnival in the world, backed

by mountains, fringed by beautiful beaches and soundtracked by a gentle bossa nova. *City of God* uses a cast of non-actors, most of them very young, to tell the story of a group of boys growing up in a Rio de Janeiro *favela* – one of the shanty towns in which a third of the population live – from the late 60s to the early 80s. Where the strongest suit of *Dirty Pretty Things* is its understated *menace*, *City of God* is as visceral as it gets.

It depicts the life of grinding poverty of a population dumped on the outskirts of the city, without regular work or even the most basic facilities. Crime is not so much endemic as necessary for survival. The arrival of cocaine in the 70s provides the means for teenagers to become local crime lords and inevitably sets in motion ever more violent turf wars. The police – insofar as they bother to visit the neighbourhood – are alternately corrupt and violent.

This is apparently based on a true story, and the main protagonist is almost the only character not to become destroyed by the spiralling cycle of violence. Against all odds, he succeeds in realising his dream of finding work as a photographer when one of his pictures winds up by luck being used by a downtown newspaper. But this isn't an uplifting Brazilian version of the American Dream. Only by getting out is there any hope.

The cast are natural, vibrant and totally believable as out of control young gangsters, old before their time. As if to emphasise the enclosed adolescent male world they live in, with its wild oscillations between gang friendships and macho posturing, there are hardly any female characters of any significance.

City of God has been compared with the uncompromising violence of Sam Peckinpah's films. But where Peckinpah would typically precede a violent denouement with a long, reflective build up, the action in *City of God* is relentless. There's plenty of tricksy editing as the narrative spins first backwards, and then, in a series of jerky movements, forwards. Plenty, too, of swirling, hand-held crowd scenes that suggest the directors did *Battle of Algiers* at film school.

The problem is that this leaves little room for character development. While the film wouldn't be improved at all by some heavy handed moral woven into the plot, the direction elevates action above content. You come away impressed with the incontrovertible fact that gangs of pistol packing kids fighting endless wars to control a shanty town is tragic and futile. But then you knew that to begin with.

Richard Price

Movements against globalisation

Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization
By Amory Starr
Zed/Pluto, 2000, 268pp

Jonathan Joseph

Naming the Enemy is an interesting and useful book in which Amory Starr sets out the various forms of political resistance to corporations and globalisation. It looks at the emergence of a range of social movements, of which three basic types are identified:

1- contestation and reform, anti-corporatism, peace and human rights;

2- globalisation from below, development of people's internationalist populism;

3 delinking, restructuring of globalised political economy as localities.

The problem, as the author herself admits, is that the book does not really evaluate the size, scope, practices and chances of success of such movements. This is a problem since the process of description, if it is to be accurate, necessarily entails some degree of evaluation. This becomes a real problem when it comes to evaluating which are the most important movements against globalisation and what kinds of power they have. There is also perhaps an overstating of the discursive aspect of this struggle at the expense of material and economic structures and struggle – a theoretical point that later reflects in her understanding of agents and social change. Debating the ideas associated with globalisation may be important, but the struggle of ideas is itself no good unless those with ideas can back them up with meaningful (and not just symbolic) actions.

The book starts by noting how neoliberalism involves deregulation, privatisation and the dismantling of social contracts. It talks of how the right to free trade has taken precedence over human, civil, environmental, workers' and governmental rights. Yet these main bodies are unelected and meet in secret. Multinational corporations have taken over the economy while being protected by the law. It is a process described as corporate colonisation. The book then divides into sections looking at different opposition movements.

Contestation and reform

The first group of oppositionists are those who challenge the neoliberal reformulation of political and economic issues and, in particular, social priorities and the role and responsibilities of the state. At a national level this might involve protests against cuts in welfare programmes, whilst at an international level this may involve campaigns against structural-adjustment programmes, or international issues such as peace and human rights. Such campaigns find expression at events

like the G8 summits. The protestors mobilise against corporate power and the neoliberal agenda using a combination of institutional democratic processes and direct action. Such movements would include Reclaim the Streets and the Critical Mass bicycle group. Starr also discusses Cyberpunk, which encourages philosophical and literary debate through the internet. In her discussion of these movements Starr notes how they often struggle to articulate an alternative vision (p.80).

Globalisation from below

The second group of protestors that Starr classifies are globalisers from below. Consistent with Marxist and humanitarian aspirations, such a group may not display outright opposition to globalisation, but will attempt to re-build the world based on people's movements uniting in a widening framework based on multiple sites of oppression. This process would involve rational planning, the reorientation of trade to support social justice and environmentalism in the form of conservation. Thus groups like Greenpeace would be included in this category.

In this section are a few pages on labour and socialist organisations. The union section recognises the hostile union climate. There is mention of anti-sweatshop campaigns, the importance of new union struggles such as in Korea and also the need for union activities to become transnational. The socialism section is very disappointing and says virtually nothing about socialist parties or about what is happening to social democracy. Instead, what discussion there is of parties is confined to new movements like the Zapatistas, who are frequently held up as the new type of movement from below.

The annoyance one may feel at such a cursory treatment of socialism and the labour movement is partially offset by Starr's conclusion to this section where she asks: '. . . might socialists be right that the other movements have an inadequate analysis of the system?' (p.108). Yes! I think we might say, as well as agreeing with her on the point that for all the talk of new forms of international solidarity, there are many unanswered questions about how globalisation from below will be organised.

Delinking, relocalisation and sovereignty

The final category of anti-corporate protestor is concerned with the productivities and rights of localities. This concerns the need for economies to be in dialogue with ecological bases and limits, stresses the importance of community economic health, political autonomy and the right to self-government. The issue of sovereignty, in this context, concerns the struggle for land, culture and autonomy.

As well as sovereignty movements, this category includes anarchists, advocates of sustainable development, small business movements and even forms of religious nationalism. What brings these diverse movements together is that they name large corporations as the enemy. But the conceptualisation of the enemy is difficult and few of these movements criticise capitalism as such (p.151).

Problems

It should have become apparent that the anti-corporate movement is large and diverse and that Starr's research on this movement can be a valuable resource. But given the diversity of such a movement, some evaluation is all the more necessary.

Among these diverse movements we have to assess which are the more significant and which can have most impact. The disproportionate attention paid to such things as Cyberpunk indicates the book's weakness – that despite the aim not to evaluate, there is a tendency to focus on Western or North American groups which are themselves cultural products of the globalisation process. Like the globalisation process, the development of opposition groups is highly uneven. Thus groups like Cyberpunk, or even Reclaim the Streets, have an influence among certain radical sections in the well-off countries, but not among the poor in the rest of world.

This is not to say such movements are unimportant in radicalising the consciousness of sections of the population. But it is necessary to assess which groups are best placed to make a difference through their actions. The disappointment of this book is that 'old-style politics' – socialism and the labour movement – get underestimated among all the new forms of struggle that are emerging. That there is very little on the labour movement does reflect a North American perspective where these sorts of organisations are weak and where, consequently, opposition takes the form of the types of protest movements discussed throughout the book. Starr writes that the real test of PopCulture as a social movement medium is what content it carries (p.170). But a more pertinent question would be, what leverage does it have?

To take this criticism a little further, many of the alternative approaches discussed here have come to the fore because the labour movement is weak and because of the crisis of social democracy. But whatever the current weakness of the labour movement, alternative protest movements do not have the same transformative potential as organised labour activity. It is true that some of the protests against the G8, the WTO and multinationals have started to make headway and some alternative strategies have been creative and innovative. But they should complement labour movement activity rather than being seen as an alternative strategy. How we understand globalisation and what we do about it can not be separated from class struggle, the actions of states and the ruling class, and consequently the neoliberal agenda. The opposition to globalisation must come from those at the point of production who wield the greatest influence. In a sense the rise of alternative movements is a response to the current weakness of the working class. But they cannot, on their own, provide the solution, however creative their activities. **WA**

The national question in Palestine

In the first of a series of discussion articles on the subject of Palestine, **Yossi Schwartz** of the Socialist Workers League of Palestine argues that the Israeli Jews do not constitute a nation

Even today, after the second anniversary of the heroic Intifada (the third Palestinian national uprising since the 1930s) and the more than 2,000 dead and tens of thousands of wounded resulting from the partition plan sponsored by imperialism and Zionism known as the 'Oslo Agreements', the local Stalinists and their fellow travellers continue to advocate the division of Palestine under the slogan 'two states for two peoples'.

The 1913 Bolshevik tract on the national question signed by Stalin contains the following definition: 'A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.' Using this formula it looks as if the Jews in Palestine (Israel) are a nation. The Jews are more or less a stable community living on a territory that is expanding, share a common economy and have a similar psychological make-up as oppressors. However, those who accept the argument that the Israeli Jews constitute a new nation have to tell us when the Israeli Jews became a nation. For the Israeli Communist Party and others who supported the creation of Israel the answer is simple: in 1948, when the Zionists 'cleansed' most of their Holy Land of its Arab inhabitants. According to them it was a war of independence against the British imperialists. However, for people who claim to support the oppressed Palestinians this is not an answer, as they know that this was not a war against Britain but against the Palestinians.

In fact there is no such a thing as an Israeli nationality. In Israel there is an endless debate over who is a Jew, not who is an Israeli. The reason for this is that full rights for a person in this country are determined by the question of whether she/he is a Jew - not an Israeli, not a Hebrew speaker, but a Jew as defined according to the medieval rabbinic religious law (*Halacha*). Jews in Israel are entitled to remove their Jewish nationality from their ID, but they are not entitled to write that their nationality is Israeli. Among the list of the nations of the world that one can find in the office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs you cannot find the Israeli nation. Thus the Israeli state is officially not the state of the Israeli Jews but the state of the world Jewish 'nation', as defined by the Zionists and their friends among the rabbis.

Even the physical land does not belong to the Israeli Jews but to the Zionist movement. The Constitution of the Jewish Agency stipulates: 'Land is to be acquired as Jewish property and . . . the title of the lands acquired is to be taken in the name of the JNF [Jewish National Fund] to the end that the same shall be held the inalienable property of the Jewish people. The Agency shall promote agricultural colonisation based on Jewish labour, and in all works or undertakings carried out or furthered by the Agency, it shall be deemed to be a matter of principle that Jewish labour shall be employed (Article 3).'

Had the Zionist movement sent settlers to Palestine in the 18th or early 19th century the story might have been different, i.e., they could perhaps have constituted a nation through the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the native population, as European settlers did in the USA, Australia, Canada, Argentina, etc. However, due to their late appearance in history, in the epoch of the decline of capitalism, the Jewish colonists in Palestine have not been able to separate themselves from Zionism and imperialism and this has prevented them from becoming a nation. Thus, for instance, whereas the formation of the United States, for all its brutality towards the Native Americans, represented a historically progressive event which enormously increased the productive forces of humanity, Zionist colonisation in Palestine is a purely anachronistic phenomenon. The Israeli state can only survive by selling the Palestinian Jews as cannon fodder to the imperialist oil corporations, and plays a purely reactionary role as the main obstacle to the completion of the democratic revolution in the Middle East. Those who cannot understand the process by which colonialism lost any progressive content and turned into its contrary during the imperialist era are unable to understand one of the basic laws of dialectics.

The Palestinian people, on the other hand, constitute a people in the modern sense of the term because they have been formed in the struggle against Zionism and imperialism. Those who argue that the Palestinians want a mini-state do not hear the chants of the Palestinians in the demonstrations. They chant: 'We are the same people from Haifa and to Jenin.' The imperialists, the Zionists and the local bourgeoisie including the Palestinian Authority want to convince the Palestinian masses to give up their right to their homeland. While those who support two states as a solution declare themselves to be the real friends of the Palestinian people, in reality those who argue for a Palestinian mini-state argue for the Zionist project. Their position simply reflects mistrust towards the power of the working class to make a revolution.

The right of the Palestinians to their homeland, as has been proven since the signing of the Oslo Accords, cannot be achieved through support for Bantustans in the West Bank and Gaza in the framework of the imperialist order. Any illusion in the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the Zionists and the Palestinian people is a deadly pie in the sky as history has proven since the beginning of the Zionist colonisation. Today, even such a mini-state is impossible as it requires the removal of the settlers and this cannot be done short of a revolution.

The solution can come only through a socialist revolution of the working class with the support of the poor peasants and the refugees, as part of the mass struggles in the entire region. In Palestine the more advanced layers of this struggle are the Palestinians. Sections of the Jewish workers will join this revolutionary movement to escape the death trap of Zionism. In the struggle to solve the national question the workers will take power and continue on the road to socialism. Once the working class takes power they will never agree to a new partition. The Jews will have a place in the outcome of the revolutionary struggle, not as colonialists but as equals and partners in the building of the new Socialist Federation of the Middle East that will include a Secular, Democratic and Socialist Republic over the entire historical land of Palestine.

http://www.swlp.org/ **WA**

Israel in the Lebanon 1982

Richard Price explains the background to the massacre of Palestinian civilians that took place in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in September 1982

Israel's invasion of the Lebanon in 1982 and the siege of Beirut that followed marked a turning point – politically, militarily and psychologically. Until then, the image of a small and embattled democratic and 'socialist' Israel under constant threat from its aggressive neighbours had held sway in Western public opinion for more than a generation, in spite of the evidence of the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973.

The invasion was the resumption of unfinished business left over from Israel's previous invasion in March 1978. On that occasion, its forces had invaded up to the Litani River, killing some 2,000 civilians. When they withdrew in June, they installed Major Saad Haddad's 3,000-strong Maronite militia as a puppet border guard, paid and armed by Israel, in charge of a strip of border territory.

The transformation of Lebanon into a client state was a long-held ambition of Zionism, stretching back to the 1940s. When the Lebanon descended into civil war during the mid 1970s, Israel armed and funded the right wing Phalangist and other Maronite militias to counter the PLO and its Lebanese allies. In the short term the tactic also served to encourage the various Lebanese factions to continue slaughtering each other. The larger aim was to destroy the Palestinian military presence in the country, along with the state-within-a-state infrastructure the PLO had built there since its expulsion from Jordan in 1970. The new Likud government headed by Menachem Begin hoped, in turn, that this would facilitate the crushing of Palestinian resistance in the Occupied Territories and their eventual annexation.

The 1982 invasion was carried out under the code name 'Operation Peace for Galilee'. The immediate pretext was the attempted assassination in London of Shlomo Argov, Israel's ambassador to Britain, on June 3. Yet even Margaret Thatcher announced that the PLO's sworn enemy, the Baghdad-based Abu Nidal, was responsible for the attempt. In a further twist, PLO sources claimed that Mossad penetration of Abu Nidal's organisation had been responsible for the order to kill Argov.[1] On June 6, on the day of the invasion, the Israeli Chief of Staff informed the commander of UN forces in the Lebanon that the purpose of the action was to clear PLO forces from the immediate border area so that 'Israel would no longer be within PLO artillery range'.[2] In fact, there was no viable threat to Israel's northern border, a cease-fire having continued almost unbroken between July 1981 and May 1982. The invasion, therefore, had nothing to do with Israeli 'security' in Galilee or anywhere else, but was a preconceived plan to smash the PLO and further Balkanise the Lebanon.

Israeli units moving north brushed past UN forces, and laid waste to the south of Lebanon, looting and destroying villages as they went. Syria, which had intervened in the Lebanese civil war against the Lebanese National Movement and the PLO in 1976, sending in 30,000 troops with the backing of the Arab League, was quickly taken out of the equation. Its entire air defence system in the Lebanon and 92 of its aircraft were quickly destroyed. After a few skirmishes in the southern Bekaa valley, the Syrian army agreed to a truce on June 13. Only Palestinian forces, supported to a lesser degree by the Lebanese National Movement, resisted the Israeli advance, although they were heavily outgunned. The PLO's forces numbered 9,000, while Israel deployed ten times that number. Having devastated Sidon and Tyre, Israeli forces had reached the outskirts of Beirut by June 10, and for the next 67 days West Beirut lay under siege.

The other Arab states didn't lift a finger to defend the Palestinians. Neither did the Soviet Union. Its leaders 'watched two of its Arab allies, the PLO and Syria, suffer humiliating defeat in Lebanon at the hands of the Israelis. The Israeli siege of Beirut and the subsequent expulsion of the Palestinians were a blow to Soviet prestige. But the Russians were prepared to pay this price because they did not wish to risk confrontation with the USA'.[3]

Of the 500,000 people trapped in West Beirut, only three per cent were PLO fighters. While the Israeli army shelled West Beirut from the south, the navy bombarded and blockaded the north and west, and the line between East and West Beirut was sealed off by Phalangist militias. Meanwhile, Israeli F 16 jets pounded the city from the air. On July 3, the Israelis cut off water, electricity, fuel, food and medical supplies from the west of the city. By mid-August, the Israeli's heavy artillery, rockets, phosphorus shells and cluster bombs had killed an estimated 18,000 Lebanese and Palestinians and wounded 30,000 more, nearly 90 per cent of whom were civilians. Blocks of flats, hospitals, schools and even large numbers of diplomatic buildings were destroyed indiscriminately. Yasser Arafat subsequently claimed that on one occasion, Ariel Sharon sent a message to the Palestinian leadership threatening to use nuclear weapons.[4]

At the end of August, PLO forces agreed to withdraw from the rubble of West Beirut under the terms of the Habib plan. A 'peacekeeping' force consisting of 2,400 US, French and Italian troops landed on

August 25 to oversee the PLO withdrawal. Once it was complete, the 'peacekeepers' themselves withdrew on September 10, even though under the terms of the agreement they were supposed to remain a further two weeks and protect West Beirut civilians.

Shortly after the PLO withdrawal, Bachir Gemayel, the nominee of the Phalangists, who had collaborated for years with Israel, became president-elect of Lebanon. However, in the first two weeks of September he began to show signs of independence, refusing to sign a peace treaty Begin and Defence Minster Ariel Sharon tried to force on him. On September 14, Gemayel was assassinated by a huge – and for Israel, conveniently timed – car bomb.

The following day the Israeli army moved into West Beirut, claiming to be pursuing 2,000 phantom PLO 'terrorists' it claimed were still in the city. On the same day the Israeli Chief of Staff and another leading general met with Phalangist officers and agreed that the Phalangist militias should move into the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in south-west Beirut. Israeli paratroops accompanied the militias to the camps, and then surrounded them while the Phalangists carried out two days of savage butchery. Throughout the massacre, Israeli troops 'were never more than 300 yards away from the camps and sometimes as close as 50 yards. Moreover, Israeli soldiers were on the roof of the Kuwaiti embassy nearby and could see what was happening in both camps'.[3] Even a US envoy was moved to send a message to Sharon on the morning of September 18: 'You must stop the massacres. They are obscene. I have an officer in the camp counting the bodies. You ought to be ashamed. The situation is rotten and terrible. They are killing children. You are in absolute control of the area, and therefore responsible for that area.'[4]

The Israeli cabinet – in spite of a mass of damning evidence that it knew within hours that the massacre was taking place – brazenly denied any responsibility. Sharon subsequently claimed that 'no one foresaw – nor could they have foreseen – the atrocities committed in the neighbourhood of Sabra and Shatila'.[5] On September 22 - the same day as a Palestinian general strike throughout Israel and the Occupied Territories – the Knesset voted against an enquiry. Three days later, a demonstration in Tel Aviv called by the Alignment and Peace Now drew 400,000 people, three quarters of them Israeli Jews. Although it didn't call for withdrawal from the Lebanon, it called for the resignation of Begin and Sharon.

This forced the government's hand and a Commission of Enquiry headed by the Chief Justice, another judge and a general was convened. Its judgement largely whitewashed Begin's role in the massacre and rejected any idea of pre-planning by the Israeli government or military. However, in relation to Sharon it had the following to say:

'In his testimony . . . the Minister of Defence also adopted the position that no one had imagined the Phalangists would carry out a massacre . . . But . . . it is impossible to justify the Minister of Defence's disregard of the danger. We will not repeat here what we . . . said above about the widespread knowledge regarding the Phalangists' combat ethics, their feelings of hatred towards the Palestinians and their leaders' plans for the future of the Palestinians when said leaders would assume power . . . no prophetic powers were required to know that concrete danger of acts of slaughter existed . . . From the Defence Minister himself we know that this consideration did not concern him in the least . . . the Minister of Defence bears personal responsibility . . . it is fitting that the Minister . . . draw the appropriate conclusions . . . and if necessary . . . the Prime Minister should consider whether he should exercise his authority . . . according to which "the Prime Minister may . . . remove a minister from office".'[8]

In spite of its mealy mouthed formulations, the judgement was a damning indictment of Sharon, the Butcher of Beirut. His punishment for his role in the massacre of perhaps 2,000 civilians was more like a pat on the back – he was moved sideways to Minister Without Portfolio. Such is the record of the man recently re-elected prime minister of Israel.

The chilling account of the Sabra and Shatila massacre which follows is the testimony of Ralph Schoenman and Mya Shone, two American civil rights activists who were in Lebanon for six weeks from August 9 to September 23, 1982, and were among the first foreign journalists to reach the camps.

In the 1960s Ralph Schoenman was director of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, and a founder member of both the Committee of 100 and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. He is the author of a number of books and pamphlets, including *Prisoners of Israel* (co-written with Mya Shone), *The Hidden History of Zionism* and *Iraq and Kuwait: A History Suppressed*. He is a former supporter of Socialist Organizer in the United States, and is currently working on a book concerning the United States and September 11

[1] A. Hart, *Arafat: Terrorist or Peacemaker?*, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984, p.450. Rumours that Nidal, who died in 2002, was in the pay of Israel resurfaced in the 1990s.
[2] S. Maebride, *Israel in Lebanon: The report of the International Commission to enquire into reported violations of International Law by Israel during its invasion of the Lebanon*, Ithaca, 1983, p.2.
[3] F. Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, Verso, 1983, p.249.
[4] Hart, op. cit., pp.456-7.
[5] D. Gilmour, *Lebanon: The Fractured Country*, Sphere, 1983, p.175.
[6] Ibid., p.175.
[7] Ibid., p.176.
[8] I., Brenner, *The Iron Wall*, Zed, 1984, p.183.

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The massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila

The following interview with **Ralph Schoenman** and **Mya Shone** was submitted to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on December 7, 1982, by the Jordanian Permanent Representative to the UN with the request that it be circulated as an official document

Q. Much of the debate and discussion surrounding the massacres which took place in Sabra and Shatila camps centres on the question of Israeli responsibility for the killings. What evidence do you have pertaining to this?

A. We have evidence that the murder of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in Sabra and Shatila was part of the co-ordinated military operation under full command of Israeli armed forces.

Q. Could you elaborate?

A. First, it should be made clear that what took place in Sabra and Shatila had already been prepared for by the destruction of the camps in the south of Lebanon and the nature of the occupation there. Bear in mind that aerial bombardment had reduced these camps to rubble and caused terrible destruction resulting in tens of thousands of casualties. Then after the Israeli invasion of West Beirut, the intense shelling of the camps caused further devastation. This shelling continued from Wednesday, September 15. It was an important factor in preventing people in West Beirut from knowing about the massacre immediately, because people couldn't reach the camps.

Q. When did the killing inside the camps begin?

A. It began on Wednesday night. It began, moreover, after Israeli armed forces had sealed off the camps, preventing the civilian population from escaping. It is crucial to realise that the Israeli army had total military control of the area. The killer units which carried out the slaughter did so in full co-ordination with Israeli armed forces. They could not enter the camp or carry out a military operation without full cognisance of Israeli command officers.

Q. But why assume that Israeli officers and soldiers knew that the militia were slaughtering civilians inside the camps?

A. It is no assumption. By Thursday, despite the Israeli fire directed against escaping civilians, some 1,500 refugees managed to reach Gaza hospital in the north of Sabra camp. They were in panic and hysteria and filled the basement and corridors of the hospital. They told the Norwegian, Finnish and German doctors and nurses about the killing in the camps and that Israeli forces were firing on the camp, having sealed it off.

Q. What did the hospital personnel do?

A. They asked the International Committee of the Red Cross to enter the camps and to ask the Israelis to halt the slaughter.

Q. Did they do so?

A. The International Committee of the Red Cross stated that the shelling was too intense and that they could not reach the camps. Nor, it should be pointed out, would Israeli forces permit them to do so.

Q. What happened on Thursday?

A. People in Sabra met in houses and shelters during the shelling and took a community decision to appeal to the Israeli Command Post at the Kuwaiti embassy for an end to the killing in the camps. Four men were sent as a delegation to the Israeli Command Post under white flag to inform Israeli commanders that: a) The camps were offering no resistance and were in a state of surrender; b) There were *no* arms in Sabra or Shatila – arms having been turned over to the multi-national force before its departure. This four-man delegation did not survive its mission. All four were shot dead around 5pm Thursday afternoon. Their bodies were found at the Israeli army checkpoint near the Kuwaiti embassy. The names of the four men were: Abu Suaid, aged 62; Abu Hamad Ismail, aged 55; Tewfik Abu Hashmah, aged 64; Abu Ahmad Said, aged 65.

Q. How do you know this?

A. We interviewed with tape recorders survivors of the massacre in Sabra. They described to us the decision to send the delegation, its mission and its fate. Throughout this period of Thursday and throughout Friday and Saturday morning Israeli forces continued to ring the camps and to direct fire at people.

Q. What was the relationship between the killer militia and Israeli forces?

A. The Israeli army supplies the militia with uniforms, arms, rations – even shoelaces. Moreover, at the checkpoints of the Kataeb and Haddadi militia, there is always an Israeli in charge. Indeed, the uniforms are the same except that Haddadi forces often have 'Free Lebanon' stitched on their uniforms and Kataeb have a Phalange insignia.

Q. Were there witnesses that you interviewed who survived the massacre?

A. We interviewed in Shatila and Sabra over 70 people who survived the massacre. Their accounts are consistent. People from different parts of the camps who did not know each other gave very similar accounts of what took place. Person after person described to us the integral nature of the military operation between Israeli forces and the militia.

Q. Be specific.

A. Hussain O. was arrested by Israeli forces on Thursday night as he tried to distribute bread during the shelling. He was taken through checkpoints manned jointly by Israeli forces and Haddadi militia. He saw people marched to these checkpoints, separated out and shot by the militia in the immediate presence of Is-

raeli soldiers who were in command.

On Friday morning, several witnesses described how Israeli armed forces entered Shatila and the southern part of Sabra. They entered from the road which connects the Kuwaiti embassy to Akka hospital. One of the survivors saw the killing of Safih Khalid Hamoud, aged 38, and her two children, Hassan, aged 2, and Mohammad, aged 8.

Q. What did the Israeli forces do?

A. They entered the main road of Shatila and south Sabra. They fanned out into the small streets. They met no resistance. They then formed a phalanx inside the camp, 100 yards from the house of Safih Khalid Hamoud. The militia units then came through the Israeli lines which reformed behind them, protecting their rear flank. The militia began to slaughter people systematically with Israeli forces present. They had uniforms identical to those of the Israeli troops except that 'Free Lebanon' was stitched on them. They painted the Kataeb insignia on houses. They killed with axes and knives.

Q. What took place on Saturday?

A. In the early morning, about 5am, the slaughter began again as Israeli troops ringed the camps. The killing took place until 10.30am. Bulldozers were brought into the camps to pile up bodies and pour rubble over them. One Lebanese man was saved by the screaming child he was holding. For some reason he was left unscratched while all around him soldiers cleaved people with axes and knives. Another witness, Sadih K., aged 60, hid while militia hacked people with axes. One boy hid in his mother's blood and was left for dead but had his finger chopped off while lying there.

Q. How did you enter the camps?

A. We tried on Saturday morning to gain entry but were turned back at Israeli checkpoints. We then walked through Fakhani and behind buildings until we gained entry into Shatila and Sabra. It was a charnel house. We photographed piles of bodies, pieces of people. In the small streets and in the houses and shelters we saw hundreds of people in one small area. With the exception of one family, all the rest were mutilated. Heads were smashed with axes. Eyes were cut out. Brains lay next to heads. Skin was stripped from neck and face. Limbs were severed. Abdomens were laid open. It was butchery on a sustained scale. The worst of this was that the free-flowing blood and pools of blood showed that the torture and mutilation had preceded death.

Q. Did you see any Israeli soldiers while you were there?

A. At approximately 1pm Saturday, we had gone to the Akka hospital facing the camp. Israeli tanks, half-tracks and combat units in black jackets descended on the camps, enveloping us. They were using loudspeakers as well, broadcasting into the camp that any who did not surrender would be killed. There was no call to any killer units to desist as claimed falsely by the Israeli government.

Q. What did you do?

A. We photographed the tanks and the combat units. We entered Shatila and continued to take pictures of the butchered bodies. There was machine gun fire from the Israeli troops which went unanswered.

Q. What do you conclude from this?

A. Israeli forces were engaged in the military operations of which the massacre was a component from Wednesday September 15 through Saturday September 18. Israeli forces fully control the area. The militia are under their command. If, for example, the troops of an occupying army use special forces trained and recruited by them and under their direction to carry out a slaughter in their presence, how can one speak of this as the action of the individual soldiers who wielded the axes and knives? It is an insult to our intelligence to say such things. Israeli forces ringed the camps. Israeli command posts have a complete view of the camps. Israeli soldiers were inside the camps during the butchery. Four delegates from Sabra were shot dead when they appealed for an end to the slaughter. This was a co-ordinated military operation from beginning to end.

Q. How many were killed?

A. The Lebanese Red Cross personnel counted over 3,000 bodies not including those buried under rubble placed over them by the bulldozers on Saturday morning. The mass grave is 150 feet by 150 feet by 25 feet deep, which was prepared by the Lebanese army and Red Cross to receive the bodies, and it is full.

Q. Are there other witnesses besides the survivors in the camps?

A. The Norwegian, Finnish and other foreign doctors and nurses at Akka and Gaza hospitals saw patients shot dead in their beds. When the doctors and nurses were marched out of Gaza hospital on Saturday morning, they saw bodies everywhere. About 1,000 people were lined up on the street. As the doctors and nurses marched, people were being taken in groups to the side streets and machine gun fire was then heard. The Egyptian hospital accountant was shot dead. In Akka hospital Dr Ali Osman, a Palestinian, was taken and shot dead.

Moreover, an Israeli military unit entered Akka hospital and lined up the medical personnel. One Israeli officer gave a piece of paper with his name on it to the Palestinian nurse, Antisar Ismail, and told her to show this paper to the soldiers who were due to come shortly. When the Israeli soldiers left, the militia unit followed them into Akka hospital. They were shown the piece of paper by Antisar Ismail. They laughed and took her into the basement of the building behind the hospital. She was raped and mutilated. The disfiguring was so terrible that her aunt could only identify the body from the rings on her finger. Here is an Israeli unit entering a hospital and then sending in a militia unit which butchers people. This is the pattern. Where else in the world, in what occupied country, would you exonerate the occupying army when indigenous militia under its control are used to carry out murderous operations? People, everywhere we have gone, in and out of Lebanon, understand this.

Q. Was this massacre the major atrocity of the war?

A. It is perhaps the emblem of the occupation but it is in its essence little different from what has taken place throughout the South.

Q. Have there been massacres in the South?

A. There are mass graves throughout the South. Some are the result of the saturation bombing. Some are the result of the fire power on the ground directed at shelters, schools and the small houses found throughout the camps.

Q. Where were you in the South?

A. We spent three weeks in the South and travelled extensively throughout the villages and the refugee camps as well as the cities of Nabatiya, Tyre (Sur) and Sidon (Saida). In Ain el Helweh, a refugee camp which once held 80,000 people, the Israeli airforce bombed this camp in a period of ten days with unrelenting intensity. The camp was taken as a grid and each quadrant was subjected to carpet bombing in sequence. When each part of the camp, which is about one mile by one and a half miles in size, was levelled, the bombing began again with the first segment. This carpet bombing continued day and night. After ten days, shelling began of similar intensity. This camp was reduced to rubble. Shelters collapsed. In one shelter 500 people died; in another 250 died. Incendiary weapons were used. Phosphorous shells were fired into the shelters, broiling people alive. The UNRWA clinic is located opposite the government hospital of Sidon. This hospital has been gutted and its roof converted into an observation post overlooking the camp. The UNRWA clinic person-

nel complain that fluid from the mass grave keeps flowing into their clinic.

Q. What caused these mass graves?

A. The Israeli army buried nearly 1,000 people in a mass grave next to the hospital. It is a shallow grave. There is a similar mass grave opposite the St Joseph Convent School where the road to Tyre begins.

Q. What has happened to the surviving population?

A. The Palestinians have been scattered. They live in store fronts and garages. They live out in the streets. They have tried to return to the rubble of Ain el Helweh but they are prevented by the Israeli army from performing any repairs which would rebuild houses. Wherever this destruction occurs, Israeli bulldozers follow and make huge piles of rubble. We have witnessed this.

Q. What of the wounded?

A. Hospitals have been shut down. The Red Crescent, which was the medical service organisation of the PLO, has been destroyed. Virtually all its medical personnel have been imprisoned. Private hospitals do not want to admit Palestinians because of the constant arrests which occur in hospitals where Palestinians are treated. Because Palestinians in the camps are poor and because medical treatment in the private hospitals is very costly, most Palestinians are refused admission because they lack funds. Almost all cases of infection, major wounds, burns or even amputations result in infection and subsequent death because there is no medical care.

We have spoken to many people who described how family members still alive in the rubble were buried alive by bulldozers which piled rubble further on top of them, ignoring their cries and the pleas of relatives. This was told by many people in Sidon and Ain el Helweh, describing to us the fate of their families.

Q. Where else do these conditions apply?

A. In all the camps in greater or lesser degree. Rashidtya has been virtually destroyed, with the exception of some buildings. But there are constant arrests which continue to this day. The Kataeb come into the camps and shoot them up. Women are raped. People are robbed and Israeli units are always near by.

Q What is the relationship between the militia and the Israeli army in the South?

A. At every checkpoint of the Haddadi militia an Israeli soldier or officer is present. The Haddadi are supplied by the Israeli army with weapons, uniforms and shoelaces. They share barracks with the Israeli army. This is also true of the Kataeb. We saw many barracks where Phalange and Israeli were together. And checkpoints of the Kataeb are invariably monitored by Israeli soldiers who are clearly in charge. None of the killing by the militia occurs without Israeli knowledge. It is safe to conclude this after seeing the total military control exercised by the Israeli armed forces.

Q. Is this situation uniform in the South?

A. The pattern is clear. In the villages, Israeli armed forces enter and go house to house. Most of these are Lebanese villages. But if they are Muslim or if the National Movement has a following or if Palestinians live in the villages, the Israeli army destroys the contents of every house in the small villages. Many houses are bulldozed or blown up at random. The male population is rounded up in the centre of the village or town. Masked informers then point out people. They are taken away. Sometimes their bodies are found. Usually they are never heard from again.

Q. Is this continuing?

A. It is an ongoing process. While we were in one part of Rashada at night, Israeli soldiers would be beating people and arresting them in another part. Constant sweeps continue in the villages and the hospitals or clinics which still function.

Q. What about prisoners and those taken away?

A. We have taken over 6,000 affidavits which have been signed by family members authorising lawyers such as Lee Tzemel in Israel to act as the lawyers for these prisoners.

Q. How many prisoners are there?

A. The International Committee for the Red Cross has spoken of approximately 9,000 prisoners in Ansar, which is between Tyre and Nabatiya. But we have spoken to numbers of prisoners who were released. We have learned of between eight to ten detention centres in the north of Israel. Megiddo has held as many as 8,000. We have sought to estimate the total number of people taken prisoner but it is very difficult. For example, the women of Tyre spent two weeks, day and night, calculating the number of prisoners by having women from the surrounding villages and from Tyre visit the residence and office of Bishop George Haddad. They painstakingly wrote down the name of the prisoner, the date he was taken, his father and grandfather, his age, etc. They compiled a list of nearly 16,000 names just from the area surrounding Tyre. In Sidon some women compiled a list from a small area. There are 2,500 names on this list. We believe that between 20,000 and 30,000 men have been arrested and held at some time or another. Their fate is not known. A few hundred have been released and they tell a horror story.

Q. What do they describe as the conditions in the camps?

A. Throughout the villages and the camps we hear the same account. The prisoners are subjected to sustained and savage beatings with heavy sticks, pipes and electric wire. We have many accounts of deaths. People are deprived of water for extended periods of time. They have been left in the broiling sun. One young boy was hanged from his wrists with wire for 36 hours. The wire cut to the bone. He was beaten around the head so severely that he became amnesiac. All his teeth were smashed. Electric torture is widely reported. One man, an engineer, described how nine prisoners were subjected to torture with electricity in front of him. Electrodes were attached to the feet, the genitals, the fingers, the abdomen and the face. One victim's body jumped nearly two feet. He died instantly. Another died in a seizure. One young boy in one of the camps described how boiling water was poured over one man. The boy had been beaten systematically himself. Two youngsters had fractured skulls when we saw them. Wherever we went – in every village, refugee camp and town that we visited – we have come across this. The stories are consistent. We have precise detail, day by day accounts on tape. In some instances we have photographed the scars. There are many accounts of sustained cigarette burns on the hands and faces of prisoners. One woman who was so burned has lost the use of her hands. In the case of electric torture, we have the names of the Israeli guards and officers who participated in the electric torture. This pattern of abuse in the camps has been so widespread and reported to us by so many people that we are certain that it was a policy. The uncontrolled behaviour was that of the random Israeli guards who tried to stop the torture. The sustained and controlled behaviour was that of systematic beating, deprivation and torture. In Ansar, for example, prisoners are appointed who must beat the other prisoners if there is any infraction. They get favours if they do this and are punished if they refuse.

Q. How are prisoners arranged, identified and selected?

A. Prisoners are stamped – some on the backs, some on the arms. The distinction between Palestinians and Lebanese is made in this way. The overwhelming majority of these prisoners are civilians including large numbers of professional people – lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers and administrators. Mohammed Maki, to take one example, was the finan-

cial director of the Secours Populaire, a medical relief agency which had on its board 400 prominent Lebanese including the Minister of Home Affairs, Labban.

When he was arrested, no one know where he was taken. We only learned of his imprisonment in Ansar when we spoke to two youths, of 16 and 17 respectively, who had been released from Ansar and who had seen Mohammed Maki there. It should be mentioned that these two youths were themselves savagely beaten and told that if they described what had happened to them or described prison conditions the Israeli army would know and they would be killed. The house of Mohammed Maki was dismantled stone by stone by Israeli soldiers. His wife and children were harassed and continually visited by soldiers.

Q. What about the International Red Cross?

A. They do not perform well. They refuse to make any public statement about conditions in the camps although individual International Red Cross personnel have seen such conditions in Ansar and said so to us. All of them have heard accounts from ex-prisoners. Yet all the identification cards provided to family members by the International Red Cross for prisoners held in Ansar are marked 'En Bonne Santé'. It is pathetic.

Q. But what of family members or former prisoners who take complaints to the International Red Cross?

A. We have many examples of this. First, it must be remembered that it is very dangerous for former prisoners and family members to complain. There are constant spies. The people are subject to re-arrest and to savage reprisals by Haddadi and Kataeb militia followed by destruction of homes by the Israeli army and even the arrest of the entire family. Despite all these hazards, some released prisoners have gone to the International Red Cross and related their experience. They have done this out of a sense of urgency and concern for the fate of those still in prison.

Q. What has been done?

A. In every case, the International Red Cross has passed on the complaint, with the name of the complainant, to the Israeli armed forces. The International Red Cross will make no public statement. Their rationale is that they put the Israeli armed forces on notice of the complaint. But the net effect is to collaborate with the Israeli army and to expose the complainant and his family to severe jeopardy.

Q. Why did people speak to you?

A. Because we are known for work on behalf of political prisoners in other countries and we came with recommendation or with local trusted people.

Q. How does the population manage?

A. The situation of the Palestinian population and that of the poor Lebanese is dreadful. There is no means of income. All the men are in prison, in hiding or dead. Only a few men, most of them sick or injured, remain. People are faced with constant harassment and without the means of sustenance. Medical care is virtually non-existent. The destruction of the camps results in an absence of hygienic facilities. There are cases of typhoid and much skin disease. The people try in all ways to keep areas clean but it is very difficult.

Q. What of the Lebanese authorities?

A. In the South, they are reduced to Vichy puppets. You find all the road signs in Hebrew. Israeli officers are signing two-year contracts for apartments in Tyre and Sidon. It is an occupied country and the Lebanese authorities do nothing. There are spies everywhere and the Kataeb and Haddadi militia intimidate, loot and kill.

Q. Is there much looting?

A. The worst looting has been performed by the Israeli armed forces themselves. The steelworks in Sidon was stripped of $30,000,000 of iron and rolling stock, which was loaded onto trucks and shipped to Israel. The technical equipment of the UNRWA trade school was looted of its lathes, machine tools and typewriters. The offices of Middle East Airlines were stripped of their computers and electronic guidance systems – all these were shipped to Israel. But perhaps the most shameful examples of this vandalising of the country have been documented in Beirut.

Q. What are you referring to?

A. Israeli officers have occupied the apartments and homes of some of the most distinguished scholars and intellectuals of Beirut. They also entered and occupied cultural institutions such as the French cultural centre, Cermoc. They entered the National Library. Wherever these occupations have occurred, books, carpets, paintings and bibles have been gathered in piles. Soldiers have shit and pissed on them. In the home of Ambers Salem, the sister of Saleb Salem, soldiers shit on the Turkish carpets and valuable paintings. They gathered small objects, antiques and statuettes and shit on them. Shit was left in every room, on the walls. At the French cultural research centre which belongs to the French government, the Israeli officers and soldiers threw shit everywhere. There is shit all over the ceilings. They took showers and baths on the large carpets. They took all the books. There is shit in the drawers of desks and cabinets.

In the home of one woman known for her library, the Israeli army occupied it and left shit on every floor and in every room. They gathered her towels, draperies and clothes and pissed and shit on them. The stench of shit is throughout the house. An Israeli officer had told her the house would be given back to her in the 'condition it deserved'.

In the laboratory near Barbir hospital, which is a blood research centre, Israeli soldiers occupied the entire building. There is shit everywhere, including all the receptacles and blood samples.

The feeling that this has engendered amongst everybody – Lebanese, Palestinians, foreigners, journalists – is palpable. Perhaps even more than the massacre, this desecration has made people feel the horror of this occupation. The fouling of the libraries, cultural centres and homes of Lebanese contrasts with the language constantly used by the Israeli army with regard to the Palestinian population: they are being 'cleaned out', areas are being 'sanitised' – euphemisms which refer to bombing without mercy, mass arrests with torture and now massacre.

Q. But the Lebanese army itself is now making arrests.

A. Yes in the thousands. But what is this army? It is under the control of the Phalange, to all intents and purposes. Kataeb speaks of 'reducing' the Palestinian population from 500,000 to 50,000. This begins to make clear what has been the real purpose of the destruction of the refugee camps by such unimaginable fire power, the sustained targeting of the hospitals and now the massacres, punctuated by mass arrests and torture. This is an attempt to destroy the Palestinian community as an integral society. It is the destruction of the social fabric of the Palestinian people. They are being forced to disperse or die – or to disperse *and* die.

Q. But will the situation not change when foreign troops withdraw.

A. We see what has happened to the population when their own fighters have withdrawn. We think the demand of the moment is for the immediate withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces. We think that what we have seen in Lebanon is a rehearsal for the West Bank. We think that the occupation of Lebanon is the work of Judeo-Nazis and that the people of Israel must awaken, must recognise the Palestinian people as their victims and must cease to give licence to governments which use words like 'security' and 'settlement' as a euphemism for the destruction of a people. **WA**

Introduction

Christopher Ford[1]

Seventy years ago, in 1933, the largest man-made famine in the history of humanity was reaching its deadly heights, as millions of people perished in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. To the reader the word famine implies a natural disaster, but neither drought nor crop failure caused the Great Hunger, it was entirely artificial and man-made. During the less extensive famine of 1921/22 the Bolshevik government had allowed western food agencies to provide aid; a decade later in worse conditions Moscow denied the existence of a famine.

This denial by the regime was strengthened by the parrot fashion apologies of western Communist Parties and Stalin's sympathisers in the wider labour movement. When the *Manchester Guardian* reported the horrors witnessed by their journalist Gareth Jones, the Kremlin banned journalists from travelling there.[2] This was countered by a string of journalists who actively denied in public what they often confirmed in private. Walter Duranty, Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*, and Louis Fischer of the *Nation* were at the forefront, attacking 'exaggerated' émigré claims of famine. The press cover ups were complemented by the antics of the tourist agency Voks, who constructed Potemkin villages, which gave fuel to the fables of willing and gullible 'tourists' such as George Bernard Shaw.

Whilst Stalin's heir Khrushchev recorded in his memoirs that 'Perhaps we'll never know how many people perished', neither during his 'de-Stalinisation', nor under his successors did the perpetrators of this crime ever face justice. Indeed, for decades the regime suppressed this event from 'official' history. Those who sought to commemorate, analyse or protest this tragedy risked imprisonment or worse. These falsifications of history mirror in scale that of the holocaust revisionists, yet its advocates, who often reside in the labour movement, escape any similar vilification.

The famine revisionism moved from outright denial, to questioning the scale of the catastrophe and the artificial cause of the famine. This style was expressed as early as March 1933 when Duranty cynically reported: 'There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation, but there is widespread mortality from disease due no malnutrition.'[3] This set the pattern for such historians as the Canadian Douglas Tottle's *Fraud, Famine and Fascism*[4]: 'Drought (a complicating factor), widespread sabotage, amateurish Soviet planning. Stalinist excesses and mistakes caused the famine of 1932-33.' This work of distortion *par excellence* has been the principle source for famine revisionism to this day.

That there has been a lack of serious analysis of the Ukrainian famine on the left is an understatement. This is a problem exacerbated by the legacy of Stalinism, whose blanket denunciations of 'Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism' permeates even the thinking of the anti-Stalinist left to the point at which holding a reasoned discussion on Ukraine is at times almost impossible.[5] As a consequence it is a sad fact that non-socialist historians have predominantly conducted the most honest historical accounting of this tragedy. Whilst rightly expressing the seething hatred of Moscow felt by the victims, many accounts have tended to be marred by the anti-communist bias of such 'sovietologists' as Robert Conquest or the impressionistic right-wing Ukrainian authors.[6]

The following article by the leading Ukrainian Marxist Vsevelod Holubnychy[7] is recognised even by its critics as 'an outstanding attempt to come to grips with basic issues necessary for an understanding of the Famine'.[8] Published in 1958, *The Causes of the Famine of 1932-33* did not appear in the lofty journals of Sovietologists, who at the time published next to nothing on the issue for nearly a decade. This essay appeared in *Vpered* [Forward], a review for workers published by the Ukrainian Revolutionary Democratic Party. Under Holubnychy's editorship from the early 1950s, *Vpered* represented the revolutionary socialist current in the post-war Ukrainian emigration.

Unlike other authors, Holubnychy cannot be simply dismissed pejoratively as 'bourgeois nationalism'. His critical grasp of original sources was unrivalled, and his work a major influence on subsequent thought on the subject. Holubnychy stands apart from other historians of the famine in his attempt to outline its political and economic context.

Holubnychy differs from the analysis of the famine being a genocide rooted in the 'anti-peasant bias of Marxism', as opposed to the famine being a weapon to drive people into collective farms. He points out that 75 per cent were already in collective farms before the famine. Famine, he argues, is more the result, not the cause of collectivisation. His analysis was later criticised for pointing to the fact that 'there is no evidence to show that Stalin specially planned the famine'. Holubnychy is clear that 'the famine was quite obviously an artificially created one', which 'could have been avoided'. The blame for the famine is placed squarely at the door of Stalin who decided to requisition Ukrainians to their deaths. In response to the revisionists who claim drought as the cause, as Holubnychy points out, the drought occurred in 1934, 'But there was no famine'!

The consequences of the famine were far reaching, for it is the case that this tragedy was a core component of the final triumph of the Stalinist regime. In the 1920s the Communist Party of Ukraine had sought to reverse the legacy of Tsarism and energetically led a policy of *Ukrainisation*. This cultural renaissance under the slogan 'away from Moscow' became the engine of efforts to assert Ukrainian autonomy. In the face of the famine the Ukrainian CPU leaders, party rank and file, and the intelligentsia attempted to resist the starvation. The CP of West Ukraine backed the CPU against Stalin and in turn was closed down. In reality *Ukrainisation* did not rest on a self-governing Ukraine; if it had the tragedy of 1933 would not have occurred.

No longer willing to stomach the refusal of the CPU leadership to exterminate their own people in January 1933, Stalin announced the abolition of the policy of *Ukrainisation* and Tsarist Russification was resurrected. This was accompanied by a purge that decimated the CPU, and exterminated the intelligentsia – a reign of terror that lasted for nearly a decade. In a last-ditch effort the old Bolsheviks and CPU leader Mykola Skrypnyk proposed that the clause in the Ukrainian constitution which granted the right to leave the Soviet Union should be exercised.[9] It was however too late, and in July he committed suicide in protest at the famine.

According Khrushchev, the only reason the Ukrainians did not suffer the fate of smaller nationalities deported *en masse* was that 'there were too many of them and there was no place to deport them'. The aftermath of the famine, created in the name of 'socialism', saw a generation turn to revolutionary nationalism. The body blow suffered by the socialist idea has not recovered in Ukraine to this day.

[1] An activist in the PCS, and an editor of the Marxist-Humanist journal *The Hobgoblin*, Christopher Ford is the author of a forthcoming study of the Ukrainian Revolution and selected writings of Ukrainian Marxism.

[2] The report was insensitively titled Famine in Russia, Englishman's Story: What He Saw on a Walking Tour, *Manchester Guardian*, March 30, 1933.

[3] Walter Duranty, 'Russians Hungry but not Starving' *New York Times*, March 31, 1933.

[4] Douglas Tottle, *Fraud, Famine and Fascism*, The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard, Progress Books Toronto.

[5] The editorial board of *Revolutionary History* found itself in such a controversy when this article by Holubnychy amongst others by the URDP members was proposed. The board sadly voted not to print them.

[6] Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York, 1986) is considered the definitive account of the famine. A more impressionistic right wing account is Wasyl Hryshko, *The Ukrainian Holocaust of 1933*, Bahriany Foundation, Toronto, 1983.

[7] Holubnychy 1928-1977. Born near Kharkiv. As a refugee in Western Europe after the war he edited the URDP youth paper *Yunatska borotba* [Youth struggle] and later *Vpered* [Forward]. The right wing of the Ukrainian diaspora backed by the CIA harassed the URDP. It did, however, survive until 1960. Available in English is the *Selected Works of Vsevelod Holubnychy. Soviet Regional Economics*, Edmonton, 1982. He also wrote for *Fourth International*, *New International* and *Labour Action*.

[8] *Commission on the Ukrainian Famine*, Unites States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1988, p.21. Commission directed by James Mace.

[9] Cited in *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine*, Macmillan Press, 1987, p.145. **WA**

The Causes of the Famine of 1932-33[1]

Vsevelod Holubnychy

A study of available official primary sources, such as government resolutions, economic statistics, and Moscow and Kiev periodicals of the time, allows us to reconstruct the following picture of the causes of and the circumstances surrounding the famine in the Ukrainian SSR of 25 years ago.

The first Five Year Plan for industrialising the USSR was, in every respect, an improvisation. The planners were still inexperienced and the Stalinist majority in the VKP(b)[2] obstinate and over-enthusiastic. The economy of the USSR was not guided by rational planning, but moved in fits and starts, goaded along by 'storming campaigns', and 'shock brigades'. As a result, the goals for 1930-32 set by the Five Year Plan were considerably over fulfilled, while the yearly plans drawn up by the Stalinists independently of the Five Year Plan were all underfulfilled both in Ukraine and in the Soviet Union as a whole.

In 1930 an acute shortage of capital suddenly made itself felt because too large a number of industrial projects had been embarked upon simultaneously, and there was nothing to finish the building with. At the same time the capitalist crisis of unprecedented proportions which was unforeseen by the Bolsheviks had a significant effect on the tempo of Soviet industrialisation. As a result of the crisis the prices and demand for agricultural materials, the main Soviet export, fell to much less than the price of machinery being imported by the USSR. For example, a hundredweight of Soviet grain sold on the world market in 1929 for 8.63 roubles; in 1933 it sold for only 2.57 roubles. This was not a case of dumping by the Soviet Union, as some voices in the Western press, for their own competitive reasons, maintained. For, after all, American and Canadian prices for grain were even lower than the Soviet.

On the other hand, the prices of tractors, for example, which the USSR imported, were by 1934 55 per cent higher than they had been in 1929. Furthermore, the USSR was also bound by long-term contracts such as the three-year deal with H. Ford (1929-32) for the purchase of tractors. The prices, according to this agreement, remained at the 1929 level regardless of what transpired on the world market in the meantime. In order to fulfil its obligations to Western businessmen, whose confidence it valued, and in order not to slow its industrialisation plan, the fulfilment of which was very much dependent on the importation of machinery, the USSR had to export more and more agricultural products at falling prices in order to find the currency with which to pay for imports. The export of grain from the USSR in these years reads as follows (in millions of hundredweight): 1929 – 2.6m, 1930 – 48.4m, 1931 – 51.8m, 1932 – 18.1m, 1933 – 17.6m, 1934 – 8.4m. The USSR was never again able to achieve as high an export figure as in 1930 and 1931 although, naturally it would have liked to. Owing to a lack of exportable products, the importation of machinery to the USSR fell significantly from 1932, and the USSR's foreign trade was brought to a minimum.

Following instructions from Moscow, the XI Congress of the CP(b)U[3] of June 5-15, 1930, passed a resolution about the immediate need to raise the quantity of agricultural products assigned for export from Ukraine. The plan for the consignment of grain for export from Ukraine from the harvest of 1930 was raised by Moscow to 2.3 times what it had been in 1926, for example. In 1926 the Ukrainian SSR gave 3.3m tons of grain to the state, which at the time was 21 per cent of the harvest. In 1930 7.7m tons were taken from Ukraine: 33 per cent of the harvest. That Ukraine was being exploited directly at this time can be seen from the fact that, while the total grain harvest in Ukraine amounted to only 27 per cent of the all-Union harvest in 1930, the consignment of grain in Ukraine accounted for 38 per cent of the consignment in the entire Soviet Union in 1930.

Never again in its history, neither before, nor after was Ukraine to achieve such a high figure for grain consignment as in 1930. Having trundled 7.7m tons of grain out of Ukraine the Bolsheviks lost their heads from success. Stalin hurried to announce that the grain problem had been solved. A statistical survey of collective farms and Machine-Tractor Stations showed that the harvest in the collective farms had been considerably better than in individual homesteads. As a result, the Bolsheviks' optimistic hopes in the collective farms were inflated to utopian proportions. *Bilshovyk Ukrayiny* (No.2, 1931), for instance, wrote that a collectivised Ukraine would overtake Europe and America in agricultural productivity within ten years! Some growth in productivity in the collective farms was in reality probably due to the fact that in 1930 it was largely the voluntary collective farms that continued to exist: compulsory collectivisation had been halted in March 1930 when 71.5 per cent of the land in Ukraine had been collectivised all at once; after this Stalin allowed the peasants to leave the collective farms, and at the beginning of July, 1930, the level of collectivisation in the Ukrainian SSR fell to 36.4 per cent. This is the percentage at which it remained without change until December 1930, when forced collectivisation was begun once again. But the forced collectivisation, as will be seen, did not lead to the expected

productivity.

The success of grain requisitioning in 1930 can be explained firstly by the fact that the harvest of that year was considerably above average, it netted 23.1m tons of harvested grain. On top of this the requisitioners in 1930 sometimes took the seed and all of the stored grain from previous years. The sowing campaign of 1931 could only find 95 per cent of the required seed.

Giddy from the success of 1930 and from exaggerated hopes in the growth of productivity that would be registered by the collective farms which were again being forcibly introduced from December 1930, the Bolsheviks planned for a harvest in 1931 of 23.0m tons and placed the same levy of grain for consignment as had been extracted in the previous year 7.7m tons. All of this, however, turned out to be a mistake. By harvest time in 1931, collectivisation in Ukraine had indeed reached 71 per cent as had been foreseen, but the abused peasantry neither wanted to nor yet knew how to work collectively. The harvest of 1931 was only 18.3m and of this (according to official figures) almost 30 per cent was lost during grain collection.

It became imperative that the level of grain requisitioning in Ukraine be lowered. This however meant that Stalin's industrialisation would slow down, that the plan for exporting grain and for importing machinery would be underfulfilled. This is why the order came from Moscow that the planned amount of grain to be requisitioned had to be fulfilled at any cost.

The campaign of grain collection of 1931-32 took place in Ukraine under enormous, unprecedented pressure. Even so, by the spring of 1932 only 7.0m tons of grain had been collected, about 91 per cent of the plan. There was simply nothing left to take. As Mykola Skrypnyk said at the time, echoing the words of peasants, 'the broom swept away everything'. Statistics revealed that a peasant in Ukraine was left for consumption an average of only 112 kilograms of grain. For the peasants, whose main staple had for centuries been bread, this was a catastrophe.

In the spring of 1932 the famine began in Ukraine. The local press of 1932 bears witness to this fact quite graphically. Take, for example, the report of Y. Zaslavsky in the Kharkiv journal *Kolhospnytsya Ukrayiny* (No.16, 1932). The author writes that the women in the collective farms demanded of the head of the collective farm: 'Give us something to eat! Give us bread! I am hungry and my children have already begun to swell with hunger. We cannot bear it anymore, the devil take you!' The head of the collective farm found an anonymous note on his desk in the office: 'We'll finish you off you son of a bitch if you don't find us some bread'. The head replied: 'It is true that we are having problems with provisions; this fact is undeniable. But for those that work, there is bread.' Then the collective farmers 'went in a group to the store shed and broke in. They tried to take out the grain by force'. All this took place in the village of Novo-Oleksiyivtsi in Kherson province.

The first results of the famine were serious. In the autumn of 1931, instead of the planned 14m hectares only 6.5m were ploughed for spring sowing. In the spring of 1932 only 55 per cent of the necessary amount of grain was available for sowing and Moscow had to loan Ukraine 135 thousand tons. According to the plan, 19.1m hectares should have been sown in the spring of 1932. This plan, however, was underfulfilled by 2m hectares: there was a shortage of animals to draw the plough and of people to do the work.

The Ukrainian Bolsheviks, Skrypnyk, Chubar, Petrovsky, Kosior, Strohanov, Terekhov, Mayorov, and others more than once addressed themselves to the Central Committee of the VKP(b) and to Stalin personally with demands to ease the pressure on Ukraine. They pointed to what was clearly a critical situation in the agricultural economy of Ukraine. Under this pressure, Stalin issued a resolution in Kharkiv on May 6, 1932, lowering the quantity of grain to be requisitioned from the harvest of 1932 in Ukraine to 6.6m tons. Nevertheless, this concession was much too small and the Ukrainian Bolsheviks continued to protest. In order to demonstrate the solidarity of the entire CP(b)U in the face of this pressure from Moscow and to show that opposition to the high levels of grain requisitioning was not the work merely of the leadership of the CP(b)U, the Third All-Ukrainian Conference of the CP(b)U took place in Kharkiv from July 6-9, 1931, with only one item on the agenda: the situation in the countryside.

Before this conference, the leaders of the CP(b)U had toured the starving villages and collected a huge amount of factual information with which to back up its opposition. Stalin, in turn, sent Molotov, who was then the head of the government of the USSR, and Kaganovich, then the Second Secretary and head of the Agricultural Department of the VKP(b), to the conference as his personal representatives. A tremendous fight took place at the conference. The Ukrainian Bolsheviks argued that the targets set for grain collection were too high, that the Ukrainian peasants were starving, that the agricultural crisis was 'objective'. Molotov and Kaganovich, however, declared that it was the leadership of the CP(b)U which was responsible for the crisis, that Moscow would not make any more concessions, and that the figure of 6.6m tons of grain had to be fulfilled by January 1, 1933, unconditionally.

The struggle between the Party and the Ukrainian peasantry for possession of the grain harvest of 1932 was a matter of life and death. As part of the struggle 112,000 members were sent into the villages, compared to 44,000 in 1931. Statistics below show that far from every Party member went against his own people. The total membership of the CP(b)U fell from 520,000 on June 1, 1932, to 470,000 on October 1, 1933. Membership in the Communist Youth League of Ukraine (LKSMU) fell from 1.3m in 1932 to 0.45m in 1934. During the month of February 1933 alone, 23 per cent of the membership of the CP(b)U and 27 per cent of the Communist Youth League of Ukraine was thrown out for opposing Party discipline. Those ejected were, of course, immediately arrested.

The harvest of 1932, according to official estimates, amounted to somewhere between 13.4 and 14.6m tons. Losses during harvesting accounted once more for up to 40 per cent of the crop. In order to extract the required 6.6m tons from what remained, every method was used to terrorise the population. The notorious law of August 7, 1932, established the death penalty for the 'theft of socialist property', which included even the gathering of ears of grain in the field by hungry children after the harvest. At the beginning of August a resolution was sent down from the CC of the VKP(b) which abolished various norms for grain requisitioning in the collective farms. Instead, it demanded that the requisitioners themselves define differentiated norms at each collective farm, which in effect meant 'take as much as you can'. The government of the Ukrainian SSR had resolved on September 1, 1932, to give collective farmers advances on days worked in order to encourage them to work and prevent them from starving, but by November 20, 1932, in accordance with Moscow's demands, a new resolution ended the distribution of grain for workdays, demanded the return of grain already handed out wherever possible, and ordered that all other collective stores of grain be counted in with the amount of requisitioned grain. This included seed grain. On December 17, 1932, the government of the Ukrainian SSR ordered that villages which do not fulfil the planned grain consignment would have consumer goods cut off and no trading would be allowed with them. Almost all the villages failed to fulfil the plan, in actual fact.

The last available count, made on December 26, 1932, showed that 71.8 per cent of

the planned volume of grain had been collected from Ukraine, i.e., 4.7m tons. The plan had failed. Because of a lack of draft animals and working hands, the sugar beet harvest of 1932 also failed. Instead of the foreseen 16.8m tons, only 4.3m tons were collected, and the rest rotted in the fields.

The hunger began to take on new, massive proportions. According to official statistics, the distribution of grain for workdays in 1932 took place in only 12 per cent of the collective farms in the Odessa oblast, in 5 per cent of the farms in the Dnipropetrovsk oblast, 18 per cent of the farms in the Kharkiv oblast, and so on. In an absolute majority of collective farms, there was no payment for work done at all, simply because there was nothing to pay with. A calculation will establish that on the average in 1933 there remained for consumption only 83 kilograms of grain per person of the village population throughout Ukraine.

However in contrast to 1932, in 1933 the press was forbidden to speak openly of hunger. This is why in the periodicals one can find almost nothing referring to the existence of a famine. There were only indirect comments, as in *Bilshovyk Ukraviny*[4] (No.9-10, 1933), which mentioned that people were complaining that the 'food was bad', and so on. At the XIII Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern on December 5, 1933, M.M. Popov said that in Ukraine there existed 'production problems'. A. Slipansky, a former Borotbist[5] was denounced for 'sabotaging the grain economy' and for trying to drive Ukraine 'to famine'. Slipansky was shot, although the accusations brought against him were clearly fabricated.

The consequences of the famine are clearly evident, nevertheless, from various other indicators. The First Five Year Plan of the Ukrainian SSR, for example, anticipated a growth in the population of Ukraine under normal conditions from 30.2m people on January 1, 1929, to 33m on January 1, 1933. In actual fact, the official population statistics of Ukraine turned out to be the following: January 1, 1931 – 31.4m; January 1, 1932 – 31.8m; November 1, 1932 – 32.1m; January 1, 1933 – only 31.9m; and November 1933 – 31.6m. At the VII Congress of Soviets in Moscow, P.P. Lyubchenko referred to the population of Ukraine in 1934 as being only 30.0m people. According to official Soviet government statistics, then, over 3 million people were missing in 1933 from the population figures! Unofficial estimates, based on the extrapolation of data between the two censuses of 1926 and 1939 show the loss to be somewhere between 5 and 7 million people. This figure, however, includes not only those who died in the famine but also the unborn, those deported during the dekulakisation, etc.

The devastation of the Ukrainian countryside is evident also from these figures giving the number of peasant households in Ukraine:

Date	All peasant households	Of that number in the collective farms
1.7.1929	5,214,600	292,000
1.7.1931	4,990,000	3,510,000
1.1.1932	4,748,000	3,314,000
1.7.1932	4,656,000	3,212,500
1.1.1934	4,043,700	3,238,800

Of course, the reduction of households in this table reflects not only the famine, but also the dekulakisation going on at that time. The following official data on the number of cattle in Ukraine illustrates the catastrophe very clearly:

	Cows	**Horses**
	(in millions of head)	
1929	3.9	5.6
1930	3.5	5.3
1931	3.4	4.8
1932	2.7	3.6
1933	2.4	2.6
1934	2.5	2.5
1935	2.6	2.5

It might be said in conclusion that the famine of 1932-33 was not organised in order to drive the peasants into the collective farms, as some people mistakenly imagine. At the time when the famine broke out, 75 per cent of the Ukrainian peasants were already collective farmers, and the private sector accounted for only 18 per cent of the entire sowing area in 1932. The famine was more likely a result rather than the cause of collectivisation, if the enormous harvest losses can be attributed to the peasants' unwillingness and inability to work collectively. Furthermore, there is no evidence to show that Stalin specially planned the famine. It was rather a consequence of external and internal economic factors and the situation in which the USSR found itself. Nevertheless, insofar as Stalin could have but refused to diminish its consequences by lowering the amount of grain requisitioned and by sacrificing the tempo of industrialisation, the famine was quite obviously an artificially created one.

This statement – that the famine was artificial, i.e., that it could have been avoided – is supported by a whole series of facts which came to light only later. Already in the spring of 1933 a significant number of tractors were dispatched to Ukraine. 2.1m hectares more than in spring of 1932 were sown. In the spring of 1933 Moscow extended a new loan to Ukraine – 340,000 tons of seed. The harvest of 1933 came to an above average 22.3m tons, and the losses during harvesting due to mechanisation were reduced to 3.3m tons. But the most important factor was that this time Moscow reduced the quantity of grain to be collected to 5.0m tons! In this way the plan was fulfilled and the famine ended. Even more important changes came about in 1934. In this year, because of the drought, the harvest in Ukraine was only 12.3m tons, i.e., even lower than that of 1932. But there was no famine! Moscow had drastically reduced the quantity of grain to be requisitioned and even released 770 thousand tons of grain for consumption by the population and for seeding. Obviously, something similar could have been done in 1932, but at that time Stalin was against this. Insofar as this was in his power, he is to blame for the famine.

One sometimes hears the statement that Postyshev was the organiser of the famine in Ukraine. A study of source materials does not support such a simplified assertion. P.P Postyshev arrived in Ukraine on January 24, 1933, after 72 per cent of the grain called for by the plan had been collected from the harvest of 1932 and the famine already existed. It is well known that Postyshev tried to collect grain in 1933 but there are no facts to show that he continued to requisition grain. This might have been the case if there had been anything left to take. But it seems likely, however, that there was nothing left to take, and so Postyshev was irrelevant. Postyshev, to be sure, created the impression that he was responsible for the famine by publicly defending the terror being used against the starving peasants, by stating that the planned grain-requisitioning could have been fulfilled and that the 'kulaks' had sabotaged it, and also by the fact that at the height of the famine, which coincided with the beginning of his rule, he did nothing to help the peasantry. In this he was deeply to blame, but this fact does not make him the organiser of the famine.

[1] First published in *Vpered*, Ukrainian Review for Workers, October 1958, No.10 (Munich) by 'Vsevelod Holub'. A subsequent English version was published in *Meta*, Vol.2-1, 1978.

[2] VKP(b) – All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks).

[3] CP(b)U – the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, a constituent section of the VKP(b).

[4] Official organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine.

[5] Borot'bisty – Ukrainian Communist Party of former left SR's which fused with the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine in 1920. Leaders of the opposition to the Stalin-Kaganovich-Skrypnyk faction of the Ukrainisation programme in the twenties. **WA**

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