Workers ACTION

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The long road from 1984

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Cover: Durham Miners' Gala, July 14, 1984: NUM president Arthur Scargill, Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock and NUM general secretary Peter Heathfield

About Workers Action

Workers Action is a Marxist current in the labour movement.

Workers suffered a series of heavy defeats under the Tories from 1979 onwards. The Labour movement is only now beginning to show signs of recovery both in terms of the level of strike action and the election of left-wingers to leading trade union positions. But the Labour Party leadership is resolutely pro-free market and pro-business, and has yet to see a real challenge to its authority inside the party.

Workers Action believes that the most important task at the moment is a struggle to renovate the existing labour movement, politically and in the workplace, so that it can fight effectively in its own interests.

This requires a struggle in the Labour movement as it is, with all its problems and weaknesses. Workers continue to support the Labour Party far more than any other party in elections and 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 a positive development in that they show that there is opposition, 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 at the moment there is a realistic possibility of a serious electoral challenge to Labour. 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

Pressure mounts on Blair

The more Tony Blair tries to 'move on', the more his past keeps catching up with him. He assumed that Hutton was going to get him off the hook, but the report proved to be such an outrageous white wash that it lacked any credibility. The extent of Hutton's whitewash surprised Blair's friends and foes alike. Many assumed that Geoff Hoon had only kept his job after the body armour scandal in order to be offered as a human sacrifice to Hutton, but he's got off scot-free, for now. The Butler inquiry looks like another stitch up. Blair was effectively bounced into holding this inquiry by the revelation by the US-appointed weapons inspector David Kay that there may never have been WMDs in Iraq. By asking this farcical enterprise to consider only 'intelligence failures', and not how he and the rest of the New Labour clique interpreted and acted on that intelligence, and ignored intelligence that showed that Iraq had no WMDs, Blair insults the intelligence of all of us.

Blair was then forced to admit that he was not aware that the famous '45 minutes' reference referred only to battlefield weapons, not missiles, which suggests that he had not bothered to read his briefing papers properly. Then, in the space of one week came the collapse of the trial of GCHQ whistleblower Katharine Gun, the revelation by Clare Short that the British government, on US instructions, had bugged the UN (was this what Blair meant by his being a 'listening government'?), and the news that the Attorney-General, under pressure from politicians, had changed his still secret legal advice on the legality of the war.

In this issue of Workers Action, we look at how the project to 'liberate' Iraq has unravelled, both in Iraq and in Britain. The effect of the constant drip-drip of information about the run-up to the invasion of Iraq is proving more corrosive by the day on Blair's credibility and the loyalty of his allies. It is emboldening Blair's growing number of enemies in parliament, the Labour Party and the country, who have come to realise that the Labour Party is saddled with a leader who, far from being a 'pretty straight kind of guy', is a narcissist with a Churchill complex, a compulsive liar and a war criminal.

Blair's domestic agenda, on which he would like us to concentrate, is hardly likely to win friends and influence people, other than the *Daily Mail* and the BNP. Strengthening the suspicion that Home Office policy is written at dictation speed in the editorial offices of the *Express* and the *Mail* was the announcement limiting the rights to benefit for citizens of the new EU countries, a shameful and appalling capitulation to the racist hysteria whipped up about 'east European gypsies' (sic). A Labour government is now being attacked, from the left, by the Lord Chief Justice, who has criticised the proposals to limit 'failed' asylum seekers' right to appeal against tribunal decisions as 'fundamentally in conflict with the rule of law'.

The scale of British connivance at the legal black hole that is Camp Delta shows how authoritarian this government is. Britain still has its own mini-Guantánamo Bay in Belmarsh Prison. Blunkett's recent 'anti-terrorist' proposals appear to be directly influenced by the US Patriot Act. And then there is to be drugs testing in schools. In this atmosphere, there is almost a 'revolt at will' mentality among some Labour MPs. Given the size of his majority, the 'victories' Blair won on foundation hospitals and variable top up fees represent a huge political failure for him. There are now rumours of serial rebels facing deselection by the NEC, or of them having to swear loyalty oaths to keep their seats.

According to an opinion poll in the *Guardian* (February 24, 2004), 39 per cent of Labour Party members say Blair should stand down before the next election; 33 per cent say that the party has gone too far to the right; 31 per cent say the Hutton report was a whitewash; 38 per cent say that the party has failed to deliver its promise to be a party 'for the many and not for the few' (whatever that means); 66 per cent favour an increase in the top rate of tax to pay for public services; and 41 per cent say that Blair's continued support for the Iraq war is the greatest threat to a Labour victory at the next election.

What do these figures tell us? It depends on which end of the telescope we look through. The Blairites could argue that a majority, albeit not a huge one, is broadly in support of the government – 47 per cent of members say that Blair has not taken the party too far to the right but has got it 'about right'. They could also point to the 55 per cent support for the leader. But it is a hollow triumph, in the middle of a second term with a huge majority, to claim that a bare majority of your own members would support you in a leadership vote, or that a mere 56 per cent say you should not

stand down before the next election.

On the other hand, solid opposition to the Blairite leadership appears to be coalescing at only 30-40 per cent of the membership, which tells us that the struggle against the leadership still has a long way to go. Some of those who would vote for Blair in a leadership contest are saying one thing to the pollsters, and something else in party meetings or in private. Four successive election defeats have imbued some members with a 'party patriotism' which prevents public criticism of Blair, for the time being. A continuing, and bloody, occupation of Iraq, further kow towing to the Bush regime, and more 'victories' such as those on tuition fees may change more minds.

So although the battle against Blair is well and truly on, it has not yet been won. It would be irresponsible to pretend that it has been. But that is the message from the founders of the Respect Coalition: that a serious electoral challenge to Labour is possible at the moment. This issue of Workers Action contains two articles which cast a critical eye over Respect and the political method behind it. It is possible to sense the frustration in the minds of Respect activists: this government is so right-wing, so dishonest and so incompetent, surely all it needs is just one more push for it to be replaced by Respect (or the Socialist Alliance, or whatever) as the party attracting the most votes from working class people and trade unionists.

One reason why politics in Britain is more complicated than that is the events of 20 years ago. We look at the miners' strike of 1984-85 and why it was defeated. We argue that that defeat has had an effect on the political landscape of Britain which it is difficult to overestimate. The present situation is a consequence of that defeat, and a reflection of that changed landscape. One finding of the *Guardian* poll is that those who joined the Labour Party at the time of the 1997 landslide were the first to leave, and that most existing members joined before Blair became leader. In other words, those still prepared to give Blair the benefit of the doubt are more likely to be Old Labour than New – not obnoxious Blairite careerists but people who regard themselves as socialist, and are just grateful for a Labour government, of any kind.

In our analysis of the recent conference of the trade union left, we argue that however understandable the anger felt by its members towards the government, the expulsion of the RMT from the Labour Party because some of its branches affiliated to the Scottish Socialist Party is not the liberation that some on the left think it is. For a start, the Labour leadership has arguably acted against its own rules. There is no rule against affiliated organisations (as opposed to individuals) supporting candidates against the Labour Party. Socialists should be demanding that the RMT be readmitted. Unless you are an RMT member in one of the six branches affiliated to the SSP, this development is a step towards disengagement by unions from politics, leaving RMT members in England and Wales without any leverage against the government. The fact that all the trade union delegates present at the NEC meeting except the RMT's voted for the expulsion tells us how much more work needs to be done.

Rather than launching yet another doomed, sectarian electoral challenge to Labour, one way effectively to challenge Blair and Blairism is to build up the morale and organisation of the trade unions by developing action against low pay, cuts and privatisation. In this issue, Workers Action supporters in two unions, PCS and the AUT, look at how those unions' disputes with the government can be developed and won.

As we go to press, at least 200 people have lost their lives and some 1,500 have been injured in the explosions in Madrid. It scarcely need saying that all socialists should regard indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians as acts of barbarism, without any justification whatsoever. But as the dust settles, some conclusions can be drawn. Bush and Blair will use the Madrid outrage as an excuse the jack up the 'war on terror' to a new level, involving further attacks on civil liberties and, possibly, further pre-emptive strikes on the Middle East. The Spanish government was a supporter of the Bush-Blair invasion of Iraq, but nowhere in Europe was the war more unpopular than in Spain, where around 90 per cent of people were opposed to what the government was doing. The 11 million who demonstrated all over Spain against terrorism must have included millions who also opposed the war. Many of those demonstrators showed their anger at the government, which, for its own reasons, quickly blamed ETA for the bombings, when most available evidence indicated otherwise. Other demonstrators said that the outgoing Spanish prime minister, José María Aznar, is reaping what he has sown in supporting the war. Placards held up by demonstrators in some cities said 'peace'. They did not say 'bomb Iran'.

Three days after the bombings, voters, in a higher than usual turnout, punished Aznar by putting the anti war PSOE into office, thus weakening the Bush Blair coalition. All this serves as a rebuttal of the Bush Blair line that anyone opposed to them must be 'soft' on al Qaida. People in Spain, and all over the world, are easily able to separate the issues of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and the activities of al Qaida. They know that terrorism is real enough, but that the 'war against terrorism' is a fraud. **WA**

War on Iraq, one year on

Simon Deville looks at some of the reasons why Tony Blair hasn't had a good war

Just over a year ago, between one and a half and two million people marched through central London in the largest political demonstration in British history, forming just one section of the largest simultaneous demonstration in the history of humanity. By then even Tony Blair must have had an inkling that he was in trouble. His political instincts have locked him into an alliance with George Bush that has led him from one disaster to another. Having burned his bridges he cannot build alliances elsewhere, but hanging on to Bush's coat tails has proved absolutely catastrophic. New Labour dogma could not have conceived the way the last year has panned out for the project. Deep down, Blair must surely wish for us not to 'move on', but to turn back the clock two years.

Prior to the war on Iraq, Blair had made a virtue of going out of his way to face down any opposition to his left. His strategy has always been to appease the right by forcefully promoting Thatcherite policies and weakening any democratic control over his government, all in the name of 'modernisation'. If this meant taking on a section of the left of the Labour Party or the trade union movement, so much the better – the left has nowhere else to go in electoral terms and the more Blair could show that he has tamed the workers' movement, the more he could convince big business that Labour is a safe pair of hands for British capitalism. This strategy had paid off – half way through Labour's second term Blair's opinion poll ratings were still very high, and there were little signs of a resurgence of struggles. Those sections of workers that were involved in disputes were a very small minority and could still be portrayed as dinosaurs clinging on to a bygone age of industrial militancy. There might have been some warning signs as one Blairite trade union leader after another was toppled whenever they had to face election, but by and large Blair was still seen as 'teflon Tony'.

Sea change

The war and the anti-war movement have created an absolute sea change in British politics, however. That one year on from the start of the war Blair is still unable to shift the focus to the domestic agenda is something that neither Blair nor any of his advisers could have anticipated. According to their view of politics, most of the population should have suddenly collapsed into jingoism as soon as the war started, or else opposed the war and then quickly forgotten about it. Indeed, by any standards it is unusual for international policy to take centre stage so consistently and over such a long period of time. The reasons for this need some analysis.

New Labour's arguments throughout the lead-up to war, during the war, and in its aftermath have only served to underline precisely how shifty Blair really is. Blair's appeals to 'trust me' were already wearing thin before the start of the war, but almost every single one of Blair's appeals in relation to Iraq have rung hollow. Firstly, we have had his dodgy dossiers, one failing to convince and the other exposed almost immediately as being over a decade out of date, and stolen from the internet rather than being based on genuine intelligence material. Blair's next fraudulent claim was in relation to the UN. Blair and numerous senior front bench MPs had said time and again that the government would not go to war without a second UN resolution explicitly authorising it to do so, and supported Labour Party policy explicitly saying so. This always looked rather shabby as the US made it clear it was going to war regardless, and that its war aims were little to do with weapons of mass destruction or the UN. As soon as it became clear they wouldn't get their second resolution, Tony Blair 'drew a line' under this commitment and moved on.

The claims that the Iraqi people would welcome the invaders with open arms could be forgiven as being wishful thinking rather than outright deception. Certainly, few Iraqis would have shed many tears for the end of the Ba'athist regime, but no sooner had the regime been toppled than many Iraqis were also making it clear that they didn't want Britain or the US to outstay their welcome.

While the US claims that Iraqi oil will be for the Iraqi people, it will be necessary to

use oil revenues to pay for the rebuilding of the country's infrastructure by companies directly linked to the Bush administration – a debt which the occupying forces will have imposed on Iraq contrary to international law.

Probably the most significant and persistent lies about Iraq are in relation to weapons of mass destruction. Firstly, there was plenty of evidence that Saddam Hussein had destroyed most of Iraq's biological and chemical weapon capability shortly after the first Gulf War. Most of the stocks unaccounted for would have degraded quickly and would certainly not have posed a threat a decade later. Sections of the US intelligence services are putting forward the line that 'we all got it wrong'; that is, that they all genuinely believed that Iraq still had WMD. This line is rather implausible since numerous sources had put forward substantial evidence refuting WMD claims, not least John Pilger and the Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq (CASI). Even before the start of the war, Britain and the US were responsible for the unnecessary deaths of around half a million Iraqis because of the non-existent WMDs. Alongside this, Britain and the US were blocking goods agreed under the UN food for oil programme, arguing that everything from Paracetamol to wheelbarrows could have a dual use and secretly be made into WMDs.

With a definition of WMDs this broad, it isn't surprising that Blair believed Iraq posed a threat to the rest of the world. In contrast to the US line that 'we all got it wrong', Blair persists in arguing that Iraq posed a threat, though he has become more vague about what the threat was, shifting from WMDs to WMD programmes, to WMD programme capabilities. While neither the US nor Britain was prepared to give the UN weapons inspectors more time, Blair insisted that the CIA-appointed Iraq Survey Group be given more time to find evidence of WMD programmes in post-war Iraq. When the ISG found nothing, it was of course time to draw a line under this episode and move on again.

The revelations of Katharine Gun, backed up by Clare Short, that the US was bugging the UN offices as it tried to bribe and blackmail its way to a second resolution make Jack Straw and Blair's latest claim that the war was to defend the authority of the UN beyond parody.

The government seem to be doing all they can to avoid publishing the legal advice of the Attorney-General precisely because they know that any legal advice they had for authorising war is decidedly shaky and wouldn't stand up to much public scrutiny.

The last year and a half of government claims over Iraq should have taught them what most small children know – that if you start telling lies you need to tell ever bigger ones to try and cover your tracks. Far from moving the debate on, the government have dug themselves into a deeper and deeper hole, serving to reinforce exactly how untrustworthy they are.

Shoulder to shoulder

When the most right-wing Republican administration in living memory took over at the White House, it was only natural for Blair to seek to ally himself to it. Blair's political agenda is clearly one of neo-liberal imperialism that sees mainstream European politics as harking back to a post-war consensus of large public sectors and welfare systems, and an international framework of laws hammered out through the UN. It is not just in relation to European social democracy that Blair is right wing; even conservatives such as Jacques Chirac can appear to be to the left of Blair.

From early on in the Bush administration, it was clear that the neo cons had little regard for international agreements, with Bush abandoning the Kyoto agreement soon after taking office. At the time, however, few paid much attention to the policies of key individuals around Bush the objectives of think-tanks such as the Project for a New American Century would have seemed just plain loopy. But post September 11, it became clear that the Bush administration intended to use the opportunity to put its plans for world domination into effect. It isn't clear whether New Labour knew what it was letting itself in for when it aligned itself with the Bush administration, but while this alliance has gone a long way towards giving credibility to Bush's claim to have international support for his policies, it has done nothing but damage Blair.

International outlaws

Whilst it would be foolish to place too much hope in any kind of international legal framework – and it is important to recognise that the previous framework was established by the victors of the Second World War in their own interests – it is clear that the war in Iraq has gone way beyond the established consensus. It is clearly in the interests of the anti war movement to oppose the 'right' of countries to wage war as a 'pre-emptive strike', and to maintain that any country going to war should be held to account for its actions. It is extremely unlikely that Bush or any of his allies will see the inside of a courtroom for their actions in Iraq, but this is the crux of why we cannot and will not draw a line under the war and move on.

Firstly, there needs to be some accounting as to why the government led Britain to war alongside Bush. Already the anti-war movement has scored some successes in this respect. Any future government contemplating going to war will look at the example of Blair and have to decide whether it is worth it in terms of the opposition it might generate. The common-sense notion that going to war will automatically win support for a prime minister has been well and truly disproved. The greater the political price that Blair pays, the more reluctant a future government will be to engage in a similar imperialist adventure.

End the occupation of Iraq!

The second reason we will not move on is that Britain and the US are still occupying Iraq. They are administering a military regime in which Iraqis are beaten, tortured and killed with impunity. The US clearly hopes that it can maintain its occupation long enough to leave Iraq so deeply in debt to US companies that the puppet regime they install will not contemplate anything that might threaten US interests. The best way we can discourage this kind of thinking is to do all we can to ensure that the occupying powers are withdrawn from Iraq, and that Iraqis are genuinely able to determine their own future. The Betchels and Halliburtons must also be withdrawn and made to pay for their profiteering. In addition to holding Blair to account in Britain, the anti-war movement must also be building direct links with Iraqi movements and organisations not aligned to the occupying powers.

First and foremost, the labour movement here should be helping to rebuild a truly independent labour movement in Iraq that can defend the interests of workers and the oppressed throughout the country. Once we have achieved all of this, then maybe we really can draw a line under it and move on. **WA**

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Missing the point . . . again

Neil Murray looks at the Respect Coalition in the light of recent developments in and around the labour movement and the left

On January 25, Respect – The Unity Coalition[1] was founded at a conference in central London. This was the culmination of a longer process. Rumours circulated last summer that the Socialist Workers Party was having secret meetings with central figures in the Muslim community in Birmingham about forming a new electoral coalition. This was never denied, although attempts by others involved in the Socialist Alliance, of which the Socialist Workers Party was – and is – the largest component, to find out what was going on were brushed aside. Then in October of last year a 'manifesto' was published by Salma Yaqoob, the chair of the Birmingham Stop the War Coalition and a member of the Birmingham central mosque, and the environmentalist George Monbiot for this year's elections to the European parliament. Later that month George Galloway was expelled by the Labour Party and this immediately became a bloc of three. Monbiot has since distanced himself from the project, saying: 'I cannot continue to belong to a party which stands against the Greens in the European elections, particularly as this might endanger the seats of two of the best elected representatives in Britain: Caroline Lucas and Jean Lambert.'

All this is an attempt to translate the unprecedented opposition to the war on Iraq and the demonstrations against it into electoral form. Both the authors of the manifesto and the SWP believed that this was possible and that the Socialist Alliance was not the vehicle for doing so. A wider formation was necessary, reflecting both the diversity of the anti war movement and its less developed politics.

The SWP's frustration with the Socialist Alliance was becoming palpable. Over a period they attempted to remove or silence critics within the Alliance's structures, believing they were holding back its development. This was a 'clearing of the decks' to enable them to make wider alliances without the burden of those who might raise awkward questions.

Having encouraged this new manifesto, the question remained as to whether the SWP could persuade the Socialist Alliance to support it. Or, rather, there was no question. With its domination of the Socialist Alliance and having walled off the critics, there was never much doubt. As far as the SWP was concerned, the SA had to accept Respect wholesale and any attempt to amend the Respect platform had to be seen off. The SWP's totally uncritical approach to Galloway in particular and Yaqoob meant that it was in no mood to accept that the SA would argue for even the most basic of amendments. Attempts to argue that the SA should do this were duly defeated.

The Respect 'conference' itself was not much more than a rally to endorse the existing 'draft' platform. Amendments were defeated with SWP members arguing: 'I entirely agree with this policy, but it is too far advanced for this coalition.' An executive was elected of SWP CC members, non-critical independents from the Socialist Alliance, a token comrade from the International Socialist Group – Alan Thornett, added at the last minute – Galloway, Yaqoob, and a few new faces from the Muslim community. The only new face from the labour movement was Mark Serwotka, general secretary of PCS (in a personal capacity). Predictions that Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT, would also sign up weren't realised. In fact, the conference was pretty much the 'usual suspects' of the left; the much vaunted new forces certainly weren't present at the conference, nor have they been particularly evident at the initial Respect meetings around the country. Whether they can be attracted to this new formation remains to be seen.

Respect may be a new formation, but its attitude to democracy is certainly old-fashioned. At the launch conference those moving amendments to its draft platform were heckled and shouted down, while candidates were announced for the European elections before even the launch conference had taken place, let alone regional meetings supposedly charged with selection! (Those who denounce the lack of democracy in the Labour Party should note that candidate selection is *still* far more democratic than this.)

The final blow for those who want to keep the Socialist Alliance alive came at its national conference on March 13, when it voted 2-1 that the Socialist Alliance would stand no candidates in this June's elections, even where Respect is not standing. The bulk of the minority left the conference at this stage, vowing to keep the Socialist Alliance alive. The difficulty they have is that the majority have not yet voted to kill off the Alliance, thus preventing its name being used in elections by anyone else. This was despite the candid admission by Alliance chair Nick Wrack, supporting the majority, that 'Respect may well fall flat on its face'. Perhaps the most telling statement was that by SWP national organiser Chris Bambery that the Euro elections were not boring at all. They were the chance for Respect to break through the barrier imposed on the left by the perception that it is not electable. If Respect should fail by one per cent or so to reach the score required for a Euro seat (eight or nine per cent in some areas, under the proportional representation voting system), then he, Bambery, would know who to blame: the fainthearts who had critical reservations about Respect, or tolerated other political ventures alongside it.

Nostalgia for the Socialist Alliance

These votes mean that the Socialist Workers Party has progressively lost the support of all those previously involved except ISG/Resistance and a few independents, with the CPGB hanging on in for entirely opportunist reasons (wanting to talk to the largest audience). The Socialist Party walked out when the Alliance adopted a constitution it disagreed with, and Workers Power when it became obvious that the Alliance was going to dissolve into non socialist forces. The Alliance for Workers Liberty has made it clear that it will not participate in anything in which George Galloway is a figurehead, and many independents involved in the Socialist Alliance reject Respect as being non-socialist.

There has been much debate among the far left about the platform of Respect – whether it is socialist, whether it can attract the support that the Socialist Alliance has been unable to attract.

For Workers Action, this debate, while not unimportant, completely misses the point. Whether or not Respect and the Socialist Alliance are socialist, and the extent to which they manage to draw small forces around them, is of far less significance than the fact that they fail to address the main barrier to creating a substantial force for socialism in Britain – the Labour Party. While the SWP, frustrated with the lack of progress of the Socialist Alliance, looks to Galloway and 'Muslims' to crack the problem and others blame the SWP for the failures of the Socialist Alliance, they refuse to learn anything from history. Was the failure of the Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Alliance (and of many others before them) to make that magic break-

through purely down to the faults of particular individuals and organisations, or is there a more fundamental problem?

Many within the Socialist Alliance blame its inability to grow more substantially on various aspects of how the SWP has behaved – primarily its unwillingness to promote the SA outside of election campaigns, to make it an ongoing 'party'. The most quoted example is the refusal of the SWP to give the Socialist Alliance any profile on Stop the War marches. Undoubtedly true, and stemming largely from the fact that the SWP sees *itself* as the party and does not want to set up an alternative, this might explain some of its shortcomings, but it would take a great leap of faith to believe that making the SA more of a party would make the difference between a formation which obtained on average 2-3 per cent in elections and a serious force which could mount a major challenge from the left.

Internal critics often cite the Scottish Socialist Party, the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) of Italy, and the French far left groups Lutte Ouvrière and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, sizeable organisations that have made an electoral breakthrough, as examples of what the Socialist Alliance ought to become. Yet this ignores the concrete circumstances in each of these cases which have made their growth possible. In every case, proportional representation in elections (parliamentary, and in some cases local) has made it possible for these parties to get representatives elected who then give it a higher profile. In several cases these are organisations which have a long history of standing in elections before making any kind of breakthrough. In the case of the PRC it was a major split from the long standing, and mass, Communist Party, not a party created from nothing. In several cases the class struggle is at a much higher level, and in Scotland the national question also plays a particular role. In parallel with the latter, even in Wales we have seen Labour votes transfer to Plaid Cymru, rather than any socialist alternative.

A vacuum on the left?

Supporters of the Socialist Alliance (and now Respect) repeatedly assert that there is a 'space' to the left of Labour that they aim to fill. Of course, on one level this is a truism – with the Blair government committed to neoliberalism and the pursuit of imperialist wars, nothing exists to fill the vacuum it previously occupied in its (theoretical) commitment to the redistribution of wealth, public ownership and even socialism.

Thousands, if not millions, of previous Labour voters are indeed disillusioned with the government and would like to see different policies, such as the renationalisation of the railways. However, the questions facing socialists are whether such disillusionment is active or passive, and how far it goes, and consequently whether it is translatable into substantial support for a new left organisation.

Outside of the massive anti-war movement, the level of struggle in Britain is still pretty low. Although strike statistics have improved in the last few years, this is in comparison with all time lows of the previous period. When there were stories in the media last year about a new 'winter of discontent', after several strikes took place or were threatened, much of the left believed them. Rather than welcoming the strikes and attempting to build on them, but warning against over-optimism, they went overboard. While there have been small successes in these struggles, none has grabbed the consciousness of the wider working class to the extent of making such struggle immediately attractive. The working class has not managed to defeat any of the major privatisation, deregulation or marketisation initiatives of the bosses and their government; indeed, there has been little serious resistance to any of them – virtually every dispute has been about immediate issues of pay, terms and conditions. Opposition is on the level of grumbling discontent rather than active resistance. At the same time, unemployment is at a low despite there being some blackspots, and economic stability has meant increased prosperity – which does not contradict the fact that the gap between the wealthiest and the rest is also growing. Opinion poll opposition to policies such as continued private ownership of the railways does not mean people are prepared to go on the streets to protest against them. A further indication of the low level of struggle is the lack of involvement in trade union structures. Leftists outside the Labour Party are more than keen to point to the fact that there is little life in many of its structures. They are less willing to acknowledge that the same is true within the unions.

The far left has its own illusion – that all that is necessary in this situation is to plant the red (or not so red) flag and people will flock to it. Thus, much Socialist Alliance propaganda, while declaring support for certain key policies such as the nationalisation of public services or opposition to the demonisation of asylum seekers, contained little about *how* people might campaign for these things beyond joining, or just voting for, the Alliance.

With all major unions still affiliated to the Labour Party (even after the RMT's expulsion), and this unlikely to change in a major way in the near future, the Labour Party remains the main site for the struggle over the future of working class politics. The expulsion of one union, or one anti-war MP, does not change this any more than the haemorrhaging of members, mostly to inactivity, since 1997.

The SWP, among others, have been loud in their proclamation that the government was nearly brought down over the war – an exaggeration in this writer's view – and that Blair is in trouble after the votes on foundation hospitals and tuition fees and the backfiring of the blatant whitewash of the Hutton report. Yet the logic of such a view demands that it is necessary to keep up the pressure *within* the Labour Party, accompanied, of course, by activity outside.

In a cackhanded sort of way this is acknowledged when the Socialist Alliance says it is for 'democratisation' of union political funds, but not their disaffiliation from the Labour Party, or when it called for opposition to Galloway's expulsion from the Labour Party, or protests at the Labour Party NEC's decision to expel the RMT. Yet it cannot see that there is a contradiction in each of these cases – if it is necessary to maintain the struggle in the Labour Party, then it is necessary for militants to fight that struggle. Instead, they are happy to leave it to others whom they accuse at the same time of deluding themselves about the potential success of such a fight, even going so far at times as to accuse the Labour left of being the main obstacle to the building of a new left force.

In the absence of these factors, and with a still large Labour Party, it takes a significant dose of wishful thinking to believe the Socialist Alliance could simply grow into a major force.

Respect clearly hopes to win the support of those opposed to the war and get a sizeable vote in the elections on June 10, aiming to win a seat in the European parliament or the Greater London Assembly. What are its prospects? Given the general lack of enthusiasm for Euro elections and the disillusionment with Labour and the other parties, this should not be ruled out, provided Respect can get itself known. The latter is, though, a tall order in massive multi-member constituencies within a few months. The number of votes required to get a Respect member elected to the Greater London Assembly (about 12,000) is roughly the same as the Socialist Alliance gained in the whole of England in the last general election!

The SWP obviously believes that the drawing power of Galloway and the hook-up with sections of the Muslim community will overcome this. It could be that a sufficient protest vote is mobilised to elect Galloway, although this seems less than likely, but would this translate into substantial growth of Respect as a party? There are many experiences of protest votes, but much less of them representing something lasting. Even many Labour members have been known to register their objection to Blairite candidates and policies by voting for others, without any intention of leaving the party. What is needed is not just a tactic to garner votes, but a strategy to build a substantial socialist opposition.

There is no indication that, for instance, Labour members are flocking to join Respect, even to the extent that some did when the Socialist Labour Party was formed. Galloway is not quite the charismatic and adored figure that the SWP believe he is. Indeed, to build him up they have had to distort history somewhat. They have downplayed the role of many other Labour MPs in the anti-war movement (such as Jeremy Corbyn, who has probably spoken at as many anti-war meetings and rallies), portraying Galloway as almost the only anti-war MP; they have ignored the fact that, while Galloway was clearly expelled for his opposition to the war, the reason he, rather than others, could be picked off was because of the additional excuses he gave the party leadership (such as the declaration that he would stand against Labour if expelled and his dubious relationship with the Saddam regime); and discounted his isolation within the Parliamentary Labour Party – Galloway never joined the Campaign Group, for instance (indeed, he discouraged others from joining), and has a much poorer record of rebelling than many others. The SWP declared, with Galloway's expulsion, the 'reclaim the Labour Party project' to be dead, without recognising that he had never been part of such a project.

The appeal for support from the Muslim community is also fraught with problems. The appeal is to Muslims *as Muslims*, rather than attempting, as socialists should, to win them away from religious influence. This is inherent to the approach of seeing Muslims as a community, rather than seeing this community as containing the same class divisions as any other. This absurdity would be obvious if socialists appealed to the 'Christian community' or the 'white community'. In fact, by appealing to 'community leaders' as Respect does, it is not likely to attract those rebelling against precisely those leaders and looking to the left for answers. Moreover, to the extent that Respect appears to be appealing to one 'community' above others, it will as likely as not repel others.

Despite the S in Respect, it is difficult to see Respect as a socialist formation. Socialism, rather than being seen as an overarching ideology which unites the other aspects, is seen merely as one of several strands of thought. There is no distinctive appeal to workers as workers; rather they will be appealed to as part of an amorphous mass. Indeed, Respect's platform is really opposition to the war with other issues tagged on. Yet there is little indication that the millions opposed to the war have drawn socialist conclusions from such opposition. The Brent East by election showed, if anything, the opposite – that if voters want to protest against the war they will vote for the party which they perceive as both opposing the war and having a chance of winning the election. The Liberal Democrats' decision to boycott the Butler enquiry will no doubt serve them well in maintaining this pretence.

Respect, and the Socialist Alliance, talk of 'giving Blair a slap'. Some around the Socialist Alliance welcomed the Liberal Democrat victory in Brent East for precisely that reason. But socialists should not only be concerned to defeat Blair and his policies, but to do so with a socialist alternative, rather than by any means. If the objective is merely to 'ditch Blair' then voting anything but Labour will do.

Many have pointed out that, with his expulsion from the Labour Party, Galloway ought to have resigned and caused a by-election in his Glasgow Kelvin constituency to prove the point that his stance on the war is more popular than the government's. That he has not stems from the fact that his supporters in his Constituency Labour Party, while opposing his expulsion, refused to follow him out of the party, and from the belief that he might lose, which would cause considerable embarrassment. He has chosen to stand in London, rather than Scotland, in the Euro-elections partly because his base is more among the metropolitan left, but also because of his differences with the Scottish Socialist Party. Galloway would not join the SSP (and they would not have him) at least in part because of his rejection of their policy of 'a workers' representative on a worker's wage', claiming he needs an income several times this. At the same time he recognises he would make himself a lot of enemies in the wrong places if he stood in Scotland in the Euro-elections.

Electoral anti-fascism

While the far left has been engaging in these failed projects, the British National Party has been winning council seats, particularly in depressed northern towns. It has been capitalising on disillusionment with Labour's national policies, the hysteria caused by the media and government around asylum seekers, and Labour councils' neglect of their constituents. The BNP has adopted 'pavement politics' à la Liberal Democrats, taking up people's local concerns directly, but, of course, with a 'rights for whites'/anti-asylum seeker edge to it. The BNP has been standing in places it hadn't previously touched, and is looking to grow from this in June. There are predictions that it could win a Euro-seat in north-west England, as well as a further swathe of council seats (it is expected to stand for about 500).

There has been much discussion on the left as to how to respond to the neo-fascist threat. Much has been said of the need for the left to be taking up in a consistent

fashion the concerns of local communities, whether it be housing, the council tax, or whatever, and showing there is a socialist answer on these issues. Some small successes have been registered in this by the Socialist Party (mainly in Coventry and Lewisham) and the Independent Working Class Association (IWCA), though the latter is not explicitly socialist and appears to make some concessions to racism when, for instance, its whole emphasis in relation to asylum seekers is on the concerns of the local inhabitants, with little attempt to address racism and the rights of asylum seekers.

Unite Against Fascism has recently been formed by the coming together of the Anti Nazi League and the National Assembly Against Racism, bringing together a host of celebrities, union leaders, politicians, etc. While this should be welcomed, and local campaigns work within the orbit of UAF wherever possible, its platform is liberal rather than socialist. Its founding declaration states: 'The BNP is now trying to present itself as a "respectable" political party. In fact they are a fascist party. Currently they seek to attract votes on the basis of racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and the vilification of refugees and asylum seekers. But fascists also stand for the expulsion of Black and Asian people from this country, the destruction of the trade unions and the elimination of basic democratic rights. We believe that this dangerous situation requires a new and united response from all those dedicated to freedom and democracy. Now is the time for all of us to combine our forces and unite in a broad and common front against this common threat.' Signatories to this statement include Teddy Taylor, the right-wing Tory MP. While the statement and the campaign should be supported, there needs to be a note of caution. Past experience shows that both the ANL and NAAR have run campaigns on the basis not only of 'don't vote BNP', but have gone further to argue 'vote anyone but BNP'. NAAR even went so far as to condemn the Tories for not standing candidates in some elections.

Two problems underlie this approach to anti-fascism. Firstly, simply to describe them as nasty and 'beyond the pale' of democratic politics is to misunderstand the very nature of fascism. Fascism is a movement resorted to by the ruling class when it is unable to suppress working class revolt by other, 'normal' means. While the British ruling class sees no need to reach for the fascist alternative at the current time, it would be no less willing to do so than the Italian or German ruling classes were should the need arise. But this means that, while parliamentary democracy should be defended against fascism, it needs to be defended by the labour movement with working class, socialist politics. Encouraging people to vote Tory or Lib Dem is no basis for opposing the rise of fascism.

Secondly, as outlined above, the growth of the BNP is partly due to disillusionment with the mainstream parties and their neglect of basic amenities and services. Socialists need to recognise this and be part of campaigning around such basic issues, not just the big national and international ones. And socialists must, of course, challenge the policy of the government, and the myths perpetrated by sections of the media, against asylum seekers.

But none of this means that socialists *have* to stand electoral candidates against the BNP as some on the left argue. Within the national umbrella of UAF, local campaigns will have a degree of autonomy to decide their own direction, and certainly need not endorse the line of 'anyone but the BNP'. Campaigns around local amenities, defence of asylum seekers, etc, are anyway often undermined if they are perceived as being the property of one particular political organisation.

Among those who argue that it is essential to stand 'socialist' candidates against the BNP there is, to a greater or lesser extent, a belief that Labour is 'no different' to the other mainstream parties, thus rejecting the idea that anti fascists can even call for a Labour vote.

What's the difference?

This is the argument underlying much of the far left's current confusion, in elections, the trade unions and elsewhere. If the Labour Party is simply another bourgeois party, like the Liberal Democrats or Tories, then it should get no support from socialists. This argument often stems from a superficial analysis which *only* looks at the programme of the government – war-mongering neo liberalism. If that were the only criterion, the conclusion would be correct, and there would even be some justification for those on the left who argue that a vote for the Liberal Democrats (and, even more so, the Green Party) is preferable to a vote for Labour, their programme being considerably 'to the left' of the government's on key issues.

The problem with this analysis is that it only looks at one part of the equation – programme alone. It ignores the question of the class base of a party and, in fact in relation to Labour, looks only at the government and not the party. However, the fact that the major unions are affiliated to the Labour Party at every level and have a major say in its policy-making' is what makes the difference.[3] That is why, for Workers Action, Labour remains, for all its massive shift to the right, a bourgeois workers' party, distinguishing it from the other mainstream parties.

A further criterion has to be introduced when looking at smaller parties (such as the Greens and Plaid Cymru). While their programmes may be well to the left of Labour's, and they may appeal to the working class, in some areas at least, that appeal is as individuals rather than as a collective force that can change society, i.e. on a socialist basis.

Those who pronounce the Labour Party 'dead' and full of the Blairite middle class would do well to read the opinion poll published in the Guardian.[4] This showed that Labour remains an overwhelmingly working class party, with 60 per cent of members in the social groups covering semi-skilled manual jobs and those dependent on benefits. Two fifths of party members said Blair should stand down before the next general election, a third believe the Hutton report was a whitewash, more than two-thirds would prefer to see the top rate of tax increased on incomes over £100,000 to pay for improvements in public services. While these results might not be as good as the left would like, they hardly paint the picture of a party in love with its leader and his policies.

The readmission of Ken Livingstone to the Labour Party, the 'big conversation' and Peter Hain's recent statements about party democracy, while motivated by cynicism, are all signs of a recognition by the party leadership that they are in trouble.

Squaring the circle

While those such as the Socialist Party and the Scottish Socialist Party, who argue that the Labour Party is now just another bourgeois party, can avoid all contradictions by never calling for a vote for Labour, and calling for the disaffiliation of the unions from the Labour Party, others, particularly around the Socialist Alliance, attempt a more 'nuanced' position.

Their attitude is more 'good luck to those fighting in the Labour Party, but we think they are wasting their time'. Yet the contradictions of this are becoming more and more exposed, most particularly in the unions. Alliance-dominated branches tend not to vote in Unison for political committee positions, allowing the right wing to win; SWPers block the nomination of anyone in Labour Party selections, and they greet with euphoria the RMT's decision to 'stand firm' against the Labour Party's 'diktat'.

While declaring their opposition to Gal-

loway's expulsion from the Labour Party, and organising half hearted lobbies of the hearings, they did little to organise opposition to the expulsion in the unions, and, of course, nothing in the Labour Party. The impression was given that while wanting to appear opposed to the expulsion they rather welcomed it

The RMT's expulsion – a leap in the dark

The ruling by the Labour Party's National Executive Committee in February that the Rail, Maritime and Transport union had 'disaffiliated itself' was hardly unexpected. At last year's Annual General Meeting the union had decided that in future its branches and regions could decide to support alternative parties to Labour, subject to the endorsement of its Council of Executives. At the same time it had written into its rulebook, for the first time, that the national union was affiliated to the Labour Party. Thus it became the first union to adopt the 'disaggregation' policy promoted by much of the far left.

Subsequently, several Scottish branches of the RMT, followed by its Scottish Regional Council, voted to affiliate to the Scottish Socialist Party. Labour Party officers announced that if it went ahead the RMT would put itself outside the party. The RMT executive called a Special General Meeting with the same delegates as last year's AGM, at which the only item for discussion was whether to endorse the 2003 decision.

In the run-up to this SGM, while refusing to allow an RMT delegation to meet the full Labour Party NEC, a meeting took place between delegations from the Labour Party NEC and the RMT's Council of Executives. Ian McCartney, the Labour Party's chairperson (as imposed by T. Blair), wrote to RMT Labour Party members for the first time ever. The Labour Party NEC declared that if the RMT continued with its policy it would have disaffiliated itself. The SGM did so anyway, by the overwhelming majority of 42 to 8.

None of this was very surprising. Within the RMT there is widespread disgust at the policies pursued by the Labour government, and the votes of the AGM delegates broadly reflect this. In fact, given a free vote, the AGM would probably have voted to disaffiliate directly from the Labour Party. The move by Bob Crow, RMT general secretary, to write affiliation into the rulebook was widely viewed as a manoeuvre to pre-empt this and to attempt to ride two horses at once.

The Labour Party bureaucracy was incapable of pointing to a specific rule that the RMT had broken. While the Labour Party's rulebook specifically states that *individual members* may not support the candidates of other parties, it is silent on the issue of affiliates, beyond a vague formulation about them supporting the Labour Party's policies (one wonders if this applies to anyone else). Indeed, this is as it should be; trade unions are independent, autonomous, organisations, and the Labour Party should not be able to dictate their rules.

Opponents of the RMT's expulsion have pointed out that several unions supported Ken Livingstone when he stood as an independent for London mayor last time around and had declared they would do the same this year before he was re-admitted to the Labour Party. One branch of Ucatt has been affiliated to the Socialist Labour Party almost since its formation, and there may be branches of other unions in the same position. No action has ever been taken against these unions. The Labour Party stands accused of hypocrisy.

According to its own rules, the Labour Party had no basis for effectively expelling the RMT, and this decision should be opposed for this reason, along with condemnation of those NEC members (including all those trade union representatives present, except the RMT's) who voted for this policy. However, it is not surprising. The other examples have not been written into the rulebooks of the unions, and in the case of support for Ken Livingstone, the Labour Party bureaucracy clearly took a political decision not to act against those supporting him, in the recognition that many London Labour Party members, and members of unions not explicitly supporting him, voted for him. Any attempt at disciplinary action would probably have backfired.

But the RMT decision was, of course, riddled with contradictions. In elections, candidates of the SSP, supported by some RMT branches, would be opposed by candidates from the Labour Party, to which the union was nationally affiliated, and possibly supported by other branches of their union. The RMT might be willing to live with this, but to expect the Labour Party bureaucracy to do so under its current intolerant regime would be to stretch credulity. The only way it would do so is if other trade union leaders felt that to do otherwise would be more damaging. Clearly they think not, if only because the 'big four' feel that they can clamp down on such moves, if necessary by bureaucratic means.

However, the opposite is more likely. Already, in advance of the NEC's confirmation of its decision, the Scotland No.2 branch of the Communications Workers Union (CWU), representing about 4,000 delivery staff, counter staff and mail sorters in Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife, central Scotland and the Borders, voted at its AGM that if the RMT was 'disaffiliated' by the Labour Party, it would affiliate to the SSP (although quite why such a supposedly progressive step should be dependent on the Labour Party's actions is a mystery). This shows the tactical ineptness of sections of the left at its worst. The RMT decision is in line with its conference decisions, rightly or wrongly. CWU conference has made no such decision, and this move is only likely to bring the branch and its officers into conflict with the national union, hardly a great step forward for the left.

Supporters of disaggregation will use the Labour Party's decision as a further example of its undemocratic nature to raise the stakes at this year's round of union conferences. Already, it is possible that the Fire Brigades Union will vote to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. Several regions have submitted resolutions to this effect, though the FBU NEC seems to be using the rulebook to attempt to stop them being taken. The national leadership's response is to propose a cut in the affiliation rate (i.e., membership payments), but this may be a concession which does not help the argument, not least because there is also a fight within the FBU over the leadership's disastrous handling of last year's dispute.

Contradictions will continue within the RMT. Its national executive has endorsed Lucy Anderson as Labour Party candidate in the Greater London Assembly elections (she has committed herself to backing key RMT policies), but moves are likely by the London Transport Regional Council to give endorsement to Respect, standing in the same elections.

Meanwhile, apart from a handful of Scottish branches, RMT branches are no longer affiliated to *any* political party. Bob Crow showed his confusion on this when he wrote in the *Morning Star* a few days after the RMT's confirmation of its decision, 'there are still many unanswered questions. For example, if RMT ceases to be affiliated nationally, questions arise in respect of RMT bodies at all levels who may wish to remain affiliated to the Labour Party'. There is no such 'unanswered question' – a union not affiliated to the national party cannot affiliate, or send delegates, to the party at any other level.

It is clear that neither Crow nor the bulk of those arguing for 'democratisation' of union political funds have anything approaching a coherent strategy. While the RMT is continuing to send its cheque for national affiliation to the Labour Party in the forlorn hope that it will get accepted, there is no discussion within the RMT of

a serious attempt to put pressure on other unions to get the expulsion decision reversed. The basis for such a campaign already exists, the CWU NEC having opposed the expulsion, and sufficient support exists in other unions to make a fight over the issue. But, of course, without RMT backing such a campaign is a non-starter. Instead, there has been vague talk of a *legal* challenge to Labour's interpretation of its rulebook.

Crow has talked in the past of possible support for Plaid Cymru and the Green Party, and the RMT gave national support to John Marek standing as an independent for the Welsh Assembly after he was deselected as a Labour candidate. Marek has now founded a new party, Forward Wales (almost exclusively based in his constituency of Wrexham), which Ron Davies has now also joined. But in both cases, this is primarily personal expediency dressed up as political principle, neither having shown political consistency or a willingness to build an opposition to New Labour.

This 'pick and mix' approach, likely to lead in the hands of others to an even more eclectic mix of parties, significantly weakens the ability of the RMT (and possibly the FBU) to fight *alongside* other affiliated unions against the policies of the government. For those on the far left who applaud the RMT's stance, this is not an issue; they are merely concerned with getting union backing for their projects, not the bigger picture.

Other affiliated unions have done little to express this fight to date. While at last year's Labour Party conference the 'big four' (Unison, TGWU, GMB and Amicus) did call joint public meetings and declared that they were going to conduct a joint campaign for 'Labour policies', at the same time they refused support for the RMT's attempts to get a substantial discussion of the war on Iraq onto the agenda. Since the conference there has been little evidence of such a campaign. Nor, beyond occasional verbal opposition, has there been any attempt by the union leaders to organise serious action against the government's neoliberal policies.

The far left in confusion

It is not only Respect that is floundering in its attempt to find a niche in the electoral market for itself. Having left the Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Party has been saying its policy is to found a new workers' party, without explaining how this would come about. However, it recently held a meeting in Liverpool, addressed by ex-Coventry Labour MP, now a councillor, Dave Nellist, and attended by sacked Liverpool dockers and former Liverpool councillors, which adopted a declaration for the establishment of a new party based around Labour's old Clause 4.[5] However, although we respect and supported the past struggles of the dockers against casualisation and the councillors against rate-capping, this hardly sounds like the basis for any more of a 'breakthrough' than the rest of the far left has made, containing as it does all the same problems.

Within the unions, beyond the issue of the future of the political funds, the far left hardly shows a consistent approach either. With few exceptions, stable democratic campaigning left organisations have not been built in the unions which can take up industrial as well as political issues, with much of the left seeming to have turned its back on the basic issue of building up workplace union structures.

We also see within the unions that outside of the Labour Party does not always mean to the left of those fighting within it. The left on the CWU postal executive, including SWP member Jane Loftus, recently voted for the Single Delivery Agreement which involves somewhere between 7,000 and 30,000 job losses. Hardly surprising then that *Postworker*, the SWP's 'paper for rank-and-file postal workers', failed to produce an edition taking a position on the ballot on the agreement, one of the most crucial issues facing postal workers over pay and conditions. In the PCS Civil Service Union, the Department for Work and Pensions Group Executive voted to defer strikes on the pay deal after management offered a 0.2 per cent increase on their previous offer, despite the fact that strike action was being co ordinated with other sections. Although they later reinstated the strikes after talks broke down, momentum was lost. Members of Left Unity, including members and ex-members of the Socialist Party, dominate the Group Executive.

Broad Left members of the CWU Executive have excluded from their caucus a member who has refused to accept 'caucus discipline' to vote for a productivity-based scheme in BT on the executive. This despite the fact that the Broad Left AGM has called for her to be readmitted to the caucus and the membership in BT has thrown the scheme out in a ballot! Now the caucus has accepted that the scheme will be implemented by BT without a further ballot! Among those responsible for such actions are several members of the Socialist Party.

Labour Representation Committee – a new start

A more substantial straw in the wind is the campaigning by Mick Rix, ex-general secretary of Aslef, for a Labour Representation Committee, bringing together the unions, CLPs and others. However, having announced the launch at last year's Labour Party conference, to date there have been only a couple of organising meetings in the House of Commons. While these were well-attended by activists including NEC members of several unions and the Labour Party, plans were stalled for several months while Rix pursued his belief that he could convince at least some of the 'big four' to come on board. Having hit a brick wall on this (hardly surprising, since it would involve these unions accepting the democracy of a wider movement), plans are now underway to hold a founding conference in July, building on the support which already exists, such as from the CWU nationally.

Such a step is desperately needed. What has been missing from the fight within the Labour Party is a significant force that appears to be putting up a struggle. While an opposition exists at every level, this is dispersed among several organisations (sometimes competing, sometimes co operating) and individuals and CLPs that feel isolated. A unifying organisation, with some weight behind it in the unions, could begin to act as a pole of attraction both within the Labour Party and to those who have left out of disillusionment. Socialists should do all they can to build support for the conference and for the LRC itself.

NOTES

[1] Respect (now referred to as a party on its website) is said to stand for 'Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community, Trade Unionism. Its full manifesto can be seen at www.respectcoalition.com/index.php?ite=3

[2] That they rarely exercise this right is not the point here.

[3] Those who argue that trade unions also support the US Democrats miss the point of affiliation and the role in policy-making. It is not even possible to join the Democrats!

[4] Guardian, February 24, full results at www.guardian.co.uk/guardianpolitics/story/0,3605,1154484,00.html

[5] The full statement can be found at www.socialistparty.org.uk/2004/337/index.html?id=pp4.htm

WA

May Day March

Saturday May 1

Assemble 12 noon
Clerkenwell Green
London EC1

March to Trafalgar Square

Dialogue of the deaf

The Convention of the Trade Union Left was an opportunity missed, says **Pete Firmin**

On Saturday February 7 around 700 union activists from 250 organisations attended the 'Convention of the Trade Union Left', originally called in the name of the Socialist Alliance, although subsequently sponsored by many trade union branches and regions. Of those present, most were probably Socialist Alliance supporters, with a majority of them from the Socialist Workers Party, though with a good spread of Labour Party members too.

Called around the issues 'Who should we vote for in the next election?', 'What can we do about political representation?', and 'What should we do about the political fund?', the convention had come in for some criticism in advance for failing to address many other crucial issues facing trades unionists in Blair's Britain. Clearly, however small the words 'Socialist Alliance' became on the leaflets, the convention was organised around its priorities.

With the opening and closing plenary sessions being rallies, the only chance for discussion and debate was in the union caucuses and set piece debate on the union link.

The main speaker in the opening rally was Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT, fresh from the union's Special General Meeting which had confirmed the decision to allow branches to affiliate to political parties other than Labour, thus triggering the decision to expel the RMT from the Labour Party.

In a defiant speech, Crow declared that the RMT would not be dictated to by the Labour Party and Ian McCartney, that it was a free trade union making its own decisions. He said he felt liberated by the Labour Party's decision, though the RMT would still be sending its affiliation cheque to the Labour Party and it was up to them whether they cashed it. He went out of his way to praise the Campaign Group of Labour MPs for the support they had given the RMT, but also said the union's Scottish full-timer would be going on to the Scottish Socialist Party's executive.

Crow's speech was received with a standing ovation and enthusiasm, including from one of the other platform speakers, Linda Smith, London region treasurer of the Fire Brigades Union, who said the RMT's decision was magnificent. She argued that if the unions' only link is to the Labour Party, the forthcoming votes on political funds could well be lost. She denounced several government ministers (John Prescott, Jim Fitzpatrick, Alan Johnson) with a record in the trade unions for their current anti-union policies. She compared the union-Labour Party link to that of a woman in an abusive relationship.

Siobhan Logan (Leicester College Natfhe) spoke on their all-out strike and the support they are receiving. Paul Mackney (general secretary of Natfhe, the college lecturers' union, and Labour Party member) attacked government policies on education and the war. He made some important points about the need for activists not just to capture union structures but to be active in the workplaces, and the need for activists at the base to hold the 'awkward squad' to account. However, he failed to address the issue of the link, simply arguing that we are all on the same side really.

Then to the union caucuses. If the CWU caucus was anything to go by, these were rather shambolic and definitely a missed opportunity. No-one had been asked to organise the meeting, but it was made clear by Socialist Alliance supporters that its purpose was to discuss how to move the CWU to the same position as the RMT whereby branches could decide to affiliate to other organisations. This did not go unchallenged and what followed was a small-scale version of the main debate and a discussion on where the CWU stood. Despite some people raising them, there was a marked reluctance to discuss the industrial issues facing postal and telecoms workers, a major failing in a meeting of 20-odd militants.

So to the main debate. Both of the speakers billed to kick it off, Mark Serwotka, general secretary of PCS, and Billy Hayes, general secretary of the CWU, sent apologies, so the chair announced that the debate would start with contributions from the floor of the convention, and proceeded to call the author of this article as the first speaker – tough job, but someone had to do it!

To give credit where it's due, unlike similar conferences in the recent past, it was a balanced debate, with alternate speakers from the different sides.

Content wise, it was a bit of a dialogue of the deaf. Many of those defending the link stressed the unaccountability of union reps in the Labour Party – for example, all bar one trade union representative on the Labour Party's NEC had voted for the expulsion of the RMT. I didn't hear a single proponent of 'democratisation' respond to that; they all just talked of how terrible the government is. Some talked of how 'we want democratisation, not disaffiliation', even though the situation around the RMT showed this to be pretty untenable in the short term. They certainly weren't willing to address the contradictions of this position, even when others pointed out that their position was for the fragmentation of the unions' political influence. Much of the argument from those favouring 'disaggregation' did not get beyond anecdotes about their workplace, union branch or dispute. Thus when one speaker talked of the victory of tenants over Camden Council in a ballot over the future of housing in the borough, it was obvious to many of us that this fight would have been strengthened if it had also been taken *into* the Labour Party. While the debate probably didn't change anyone's opinion, it was worth having if only to confirm the lack of serious argument coming from those favouring 'democratisation'.

Speakers in the final plenary were the London region convenor of Unison, Geoff Martin, Sue Bond of PCS and George Galloway MP. Geoff Martin spoke of the dreadful policies of the government and Labour councils, such as Newham's attempts to derecognise Unison and the London weighting issue. He stressed the need for debate on the issue of the link, strongly criticising attempts by Unison general secretary Dave Prentis to prevent him speaking at the convention. Pointing out that if those in favour of a fight in the Labour Party weren't willing to debate they would be ceding the argument to their opponents, he also talked of the need for people on the left, whatever position they took on the link, to work together around issues they agreed on.

However, while Mackney and Martin made many important points, and it was good that they took part in the debate, they were not really willing to tackle the affiliation issue head on. Working together on industrial strategy and campaigns regardless of views on the political funds is obviously crucial, but it hardly amounts to a political strategy. **WA**

Left in a vacuum

Richard Price finds out what Respect means to him

Every couple of years, it seems, a new, bold and inspiring left-of-Labour coalition comes to town. The Respect/Unity coalition is the third such initiative to hit the borough of Waltham Forest in north east London in recent times. First it was the Socialist Labour Party – that curious hybrid of old-time Stalinism and ultra leftism – with a packed meeting in excess of 200 people. The void left by the SLP's rapid descent into micro Stalinist irrelevance was filled by the Socialist Alliance, which kicked off locally with a 150-strong launch. On February 23, the all new improved Respect/Unity Coalition pitched up in Walthamstow.

Respect is essentially a less is more version of the Socialist Alliance. Out have gone most of the troublesome Trots. The CPB won't play ball, the Greens have refused an electoral pact for the Euro elections, and the Socialist Party claims it's all insufficiently socialist. In their place, the SWP has made a pitch for big names and big forces – the anti war movement, the anti capitalist movement, George Galloway and the Muslim community.

While we wait for people to turn up, someone has usefully put on one of those 'classic soul' tapes containing *Respect* by Aretha Franklin. It underlines just how down with the youth tonight's meeting will be. Here we are in Walthamstow's Asian Centre, in one of the most diverse parts of London, and Respect is making a big pitch for the Muslim community. But when the people turn up, there's not a single representative from the local Asian population and the demographic of the 58 strong audience is overwhelmingly white, 30-something to 50-ish, and drawn almost entirely from the public sector.

This isn't a put down. In fact, it's not surprising. This same layer of activists has been in evidence at all the false dawns of recent years. It represents a group of survivors from the struggles of the 80s and 90s that has doggedly sustained trade union branches and campaigns through the darkest days of Thatcherism and the disappointments of New Labour. Appalled by Blairism and buoyed up by the strength of the anti war movement, they cling doggedly to the notion that there is a vacuum waiting to be filled to the left of Labour. The problem they can't get their heads round is the fact that the rest of society doesn't share all of their concerns at present, and they don't have a strategy beyond doomed electoral interventions to reach out to those beyond the immediate periphery of this embattled public-sector left.

While the talk is of many different strands coming together to form Respect, the top table reflects the SWP's controlling interest. The chair and two out of four speakers are SWP members, as is nearly half the audience. The unity on show is very much the unity of the SWP with its own periphery.

Linda Smith of the FBU London Region kicked off, asking rhetorically where the voices of the two million people who marched against war in Iraq were reflected in parliament. Clearly, for her, the first of the three massive parliamentary rebellions didn't register, even as a distant echo of the movement outside. As for building Respect, she spoke of taking its message into people's own local networks and communities, much in the way that a Liberal Democrat Focus team might.

SWP member Sue Bond, who is vice president of the civil service union PCS, warmed to the theme of the vacuum that exists to the left of Labour, without getting bogged down in the tricky business of explaining why not only nature but the vast majority of the electorate abhorred the Socialist Alliance's attempt to fill it. In order to sustain what we shall call for convenience the theory of the vacuum, all you have to do is repeat the mantra that New Labour is evil and ignore the unpleasant fact that the defeats of the 80s and 90s led to large sections of workers and the organised left withdrawing from politics. Meanwhile, some groups of workers have benefited directly from the uneven economic boom of the last decade. And while the last two years have seen a modest revival of trade union struggle, in comparison with the 70s and 80s, it remains low.

Another essential part of the Respect outlook consists in seeing the trade unions simply as victims of the New Labour steamroller. Sue Bond believes that the Labour leadership was responsible for keeping Iraq off the agenda at Labour Party conference. In fact, it was the trade union leaders who ensured that no motions on Iraq were heard. In relation to the expulsion of the RMT, there was no mention of the inconvenient fact that a key role was played by a Unison delegate to the NEC. As for the trade union-Labour Party link, the impression was given that without its corrupting influence, most things in the trade union garden would be rosy. Quite how members of non-affiliated unions like the PCS under Barry Reamsbottom, the NUT under Doug McAvoy or the NAS UWT under Nigel de Gruchy have benefited from the absence of a link with Labour is, of course, never spelt out.

Film director Ken Loach was at least more measured, and attempted to give his position some historical context. But arguing that the contradiction inherent in Labour reformism has finally been unrav-

elled, and that Labour is now a party of capital, pure and simple, has strong echoes of the 'revolutionary socialism' he first encountered around Gerry Healy's SLL over 30 years ago. Opposition, he argued, now came from the trade unions, not the Labour left. But in ignoring the tens of thousands of Labour Party members who vote for the Grassroots Alliance, marched against the war, and oppose foundation hospitals, top-up fees and privatisation, isn't he guilty of the sectarianism he sees Respect as overcoming? And as for arguing that 'We cannot go on supporting the Labour Party if it embodies pro-war policies', isn't he aware that the Labour leadership has supported *every* war fought by Britain in the last 100 years with the sole exception of Suez?

Last up, it's John Rees, a leader both of the SWP and Respect. His job is to rally the troops, and he gives it his best shot. Labour reformism is finished, the Labour Party has been reduced to a mere shell, and the mass anti-war movement, backed by the Muslim community, has created a space to the left of Labour.

But Rees also has a more elaborated version of the theory of the vacuum. Not only does Respect have a general duty to fill that vacuum, by virtue of its superior politics. It's more serious even than that. If Respect didn't act to fill that vacuum by standing in the European elections, don't laugh – the BNP would rapidly occupy it. The time to break with Labour is of course now. But since Rees's organisation hasn't set foot in the Labour Party since 1968, this only serves to raise more questions than it answers.

Interestingly, another SWPer took up the issue of the BNP in what passed for discussion. Some people, she said, argued that it wrong for the left to stand against Labour and split the anti-BNP vote in areas in which the fascists are strong. But it was, she said, correct for Respect to stand, because it had clear anti-racist policies while New Labour's policies were fuelling racism. It's apparently a matter of indifference whether a right-wing Blairite or a BNP candidate is elected.

Rees spoke of turning the European and GLA elections into a referendum on the Blair government. But the reality is, that with barely one in five expected to vote, nobody expects the European elections to be a referendum on very much. But you can bet that Respect will claim a victory whatever happens, using its special multi-purpose logic. If, by a miracle, Respect won a single European seat, it would be claimed as a historic victory. Even polling something crap like three per cent on a low turn-out would doubtless be hailed as a real step forward. But at the same time, a low turn-out will be interpreted as part of the mass anger building up against New Labour.

Having provided half the main speakers, the SWP decided to hog the discussion too, with seven out of 14 speakers from the floor. The speeches and the discussion transported me back over 25 years to a similar sized meeting held in north-east London by the WRP. The same ringing denunciations of a Labour government, predictions of its early demise, calls for the trade unions to break with Labour, and appeals to build the necessary leadership in the brief window of history that is available.

I could in retrospect plead youth and inexperience. Ultra-leftism is a natural part of growing up. But what excuse have the assembled activists at this meeting got, with ten, 15 and 20 years of experience already under their belts?

Of course, the presentation is different. There's no talk of imminent military coups or Bonapartist governments. But the world outlook of Respect, on this showing, is a strange brew, and no mistake. The perspective is courtesy of wild-eyed 70s Trotskyism, with new added anti-capitalism. The language is homely Old Labour – common ownership, good public services, equal opportunities, communities, peace and decent treatment. No to privatisation, war, racism and a society based on greed. The delivery is early twentieth century socialist propagandist: the betrayals of the Labour leaders, the evils of capitalism, and Tony Blair – he's very, very bad. Rejoice, for the good news of socialism is at hand!

Of course, there is nothing wrong with consciously lowering your sights, acknowledging that working class political consciousness has dipped, and raising demands that are within reach of ordinary working people. Deep down, the leaders of the SWP know that political awareness and activity remain at a fairly low ebb, in spite of the anti-war movement. Why else would they be keeping all their revolutionary vanguard party stuff under wraps?

The trouble is that Respect doesn't acknowledge that there has been a decline in either consciousness or combativity. Month in, month out, the SWP maintains the fiction that the Blair government is teetering on the brink of collapse, and that the working class is on the offensive.

Respect clings to the idea that the anti-war movement is a pledge that can be cashed in come election time. If only half of the two million people who marched against the war vote for Respect, wonders Rees aloud . . . But if one thing has become clear over the last two years, it is that support for the anti-war movement does not translate into anti-Labour votes for the left. Indeed, while the anti-war protests grew enormously, votes for parties to the left of Labour tended to decline from even their previous very modest levels, and the protest votes have mainly gone elsewhere.

Respect may be chasing a million voters, but if it wins a million votes, I shall have to give serious consideration not only to eating my hat, but slowly ingesting several volumes of *Theories of Surplus Value* too.

One comrade did manage to argue that Respect's scenario lacked any clear strategy, and that what was needed was a struggle within the structures of the Labour movement. If the working class couldn't force the Labour leaders to carry out modest reforms, was it more likely that it could form a government led by Respect? Full marks, however, to John Rees for a top bullshit response. The speaker from the floor, he felt, had illusions that New Labour *was* carrying out progressive reforms. This was clearly not the case.

I would be lying if I didn't say that the level of political debate was depressingly bad, and the prospects for Respect highly inflated. Respect will, in all likelihood, waste the time, energy, talents and money of many good activists. Like other initiatives in recent years, it will probably disperse more than it brings together. The withdrawal of George Monbiot from Respect, and the refusal of the Muslim Association of Britain to support it has removed two of the key players wooed by the SWP. At this rate, the campaign tune from the Aretha Franklin songbook won't be *Respect*. More like *Say A Little Prayer*.

WA

Hero or villain?

Simon Deville assesses the contradictory politics of London mayor Ken Livingstone

In April 2000, Ken Livingstone was expelled from the Labour Party in an attempt by New Labour to prevent the one candidate with overwhelming support amongst London party members, trade unionists and broader layers of the electorate from becoming mayor. This failed spectacularly when Frank Dobson narrowly avoided being pushed into fourth place as the official Labour candidate. Having claimed that Livingstone would not be readmitted for at least five years, Blair has now been forced to make a humiliating climb-down without Livingstone having to make any concessions (publicly at least) to the Labour leadership.

Tony Blair's claims that Ken would be a disaster for London only served to underline how little Londoners took notice of Blair, and how popular Livingstone was amongst Londoners. Whereas the RMT have been expelled from the Labour Party for allowing five of their Scottish branches to support the Scottish Socialist Party, the balance of forces did not allow that to happen over the London mayoral election.

Throughout the trade union movement and within the Labour Party at a grass roots level there was overwhelming support for Livingstone as mayor, whether as a Labour candidate or as an independent. London Unison voted overwhelmingly to support Livingstone for mayor even after he had been expelled from the party, though union rules would not allow financial support, and the national union gave funds to Dobson's campaign against the express wishes of London members. Those unions that did support Labour did so without consulting their members. Throughout the election campaign party activists boycotted any work for the Labour campaign, and many actively campaigned for Livingstone, though Livingstone and his campaign team were careful not to provoke a head-on confrontation that might have precipitated mass expulsions from the London party.

Flair

Having been expelled from the Labour Party, Ken Livingstone has continued to pursue his own agenda through the GLA. Despite ultimately losing his battle against the PPP on London Underground, he pushed his struggle as far as he could within the constraints of a campaign in the courts. He has again demonstrated his flair for risk-taking with the introduction of the congestion charge that has clearly paid off both in terms of the results it has achieved and in winning public support, despite a widely predicted reaction against the charge. His two big successes as mayor have clearly been to improve bus services throughout London, and to reduce congestion without facing a massive backlash. Even as Livingstone was reapplying for party membership, he refused to back down over opposition to the war in Iraq or George Bush's visit to London.

Ken has generated deep hatred from figures across New Labour, including Margaret Hodge, Clive Soley, Gordon Brown, David Blunkett and John Prescott. Such is Prescott's hatred of Ken that he even allowed his normally unswerving loyalty to his leader to take a back seat as he voted against Ken's readmission to the party. For many of us on the left of the Labour Party it has been an amusing sight to see right-wingers who have spent the last few years vilifying Ken squirm as they try to explain their Pauline conversion to the ranks of his supporters. With credentials like this, by rights Livingstone should be hero-worshipped by swathes of the left. Instead he appears to be just as much a hate figure among sections of the left as he is among the right.

Readmission

With a bizarre interpretation of Ken's readmission into the Labour Party, and despite claiming to want to work with and support the Labour left, George Galloway wrote in the *Guardian* that Livingstone had crawled back to the party on his hands and knees. Left-wing organisations such as the Alliance for Workers Liberty have supported Galloway's stance, describing Ken as being part of New Labour. With the exception of the small, tightly knit circle of advisers and researchers employed by him, Ken Livingstone has made surprisingly few friends.

To try and understand why Livingstone creates such strong feelings both for and against him, it is necessary to look at a number of inter-related factors: his role as leader of the GLC, his refusal to collapse to the right in the way that many of his contemporaries have, his relationship with the left and the perception of all of this in the eyes of ordinary Londoners who are not deeply involved in the left.

Pragmatic

In many ways Livingstone's politics aren't spectacularly radical – his politics could best be described as a pragmatic, old-style Keynsianism. His political style is probably both the thing that has won him a degree of support and has helped him make so many enemies. He has shown an astute ability for using the media, and for launching populist campaigns, usually in support of progressive causes. At the same time he has shown little interest in working as part of a team – let alone as part of a mass movement.

Between 1981 and 1986 in the GLC he won a great deal of popularity for his 'Fares Fair' policies aimed at keeping down the cost of travelling by public transport. Having made a manifesto pledge to cut bus and tube fares by 25 per cent, the GLC cut them by 32 per cent, reducing London traffic by 15 per cent. Even when this was defeated, he was able to portray this publicly (and quite correctly) as the GLC being forced to raise fares by a Tory council – Bromley – taking them to court.

Abolition

Another imaginative use of publicity was as the GLC campaigned against its abolition by the Tory government: a large banner was hung across the length of County Hall (opposite parliament) bearing London's unemployment figures.

The GLC policies that brought on the most vehement attacks from the Conservative government and the press have now become part of mainstream politics – a commitment to anti-racism, anti-sexism and to lesbian and gay rights. While the discourse has less of the radical edge it had in the 1980s, even right-wing Tories now by and large pay lip service to an equal rights agenda. Livingstone's overall agenda was denounced by the right wing of Labour as being about gesture politics and lacking a realistic perspective. However, when you compare his record to that of the Labour leadership it's hard not to draw the conclusion that many of the GLC's battles acted as a rallying point against Thatcherism, whereas the Labour right have conceded so much that New Labour has become the true heir of Thatcherism.

Rate-capping

It was the battle against rate-capping, however, which led to Livingstone falling out with many (at the time) left-wingers on the GLC. The rate had gone up from 21p under the Tories in 1980 to 39.7p in 1983 and then 36.9p in 1984. In March 1985, the GLC led a campaign against setting either a rate or a budget, although Livingstone eventually caved in at the eleventh hour. The leader of the GLC was denounced as selling out not only by John MacDonnell but also by latter-day Blairite MPs such as Tony Banks and Paul Boateng.

Livingstone further distanced himself from the left by writing for the *Sun* newspaper when the overwhelming majority of the left was boycotting Rupert Murdoch's titles following the year-long print dispute at Wapping.

At various points Livingstone has found allies amongst the far left, though he could never be described as part of the revolutionary left. In the 1980s, he launched the *Labour Herald* newspaper alongside Ted Knight and the Workers Revolutionary Party. *Labour Herald* broke with Ken over rate capping, but Ken continued to defend Gerry Healy after the WRP imploded amid allegations of rape, violence and intimidation of comrades.

This odd mixture of politics has left Ken hated by the right wing as a reminder of much that Labour once stood for, and that most Labour MPs either never accepted or broke with in order to pursue their parliamentary careers. Most MPs view Livingstone with a degree of mistrust; whether from the left or right they see him as a loose cannon whose main motivation is self-promotion.

Manoeuvre

Doubts about him on the left may in part be because of his role in the rate-capping struggle, but are more generally about his political method of achieving results through the cunning manoeuvre rather than through public campaigning. Since being elected as London mayor he has spent a lot more time developing a relationship with the City and large developers than he has relating to the labour movement. He has supported projects such as the bridge across the Thames in east London which appears to serve little useful purpose to the local population, but which will bring considerable sums of money to construction companies. Despite his opposition to PPP on London Underground, the mayor didn't call or organise a single demonstration to oppose privatisation. His strategy was always one of hiring highly paid experts and taking the challenge through the courts. At a recent London policy forum, when asked how Labour Party activists could support his agenda his answer seemed to be to demand more money and power for the mayor. The current 7.5 per cent rise in the GLA part of council tax is almost entirely for more police – hardly left terrain. His close supporters attempt to argue both that Livingstone is the best thing that could possibly happen to London, and that he has no real power and can't be held responsible for anything that happens in London.

Popularity

While Ken can hardly be said to be idolised by anyone, his personal standing is much higher than almost any other individual politician. Despite the views of many left activists, Livingstone has a popularity amongst Londoners that stretches across the political spectrum. Many see him as representing London's stand against Thatcherism in the 1980s, whereas others like him as mayor precisely because he is a maverick who ensures that the GLA isn't going to act as a Blairite machine in the way that parliament does. While he has a number of faults for which he should rightly be criticised, his project is far to the left of New Labour and needs to be defended against New Labour. Some left-of-Labour socialists argue that Ken won mass support as mayor precisely because he wasn't part of the Labour Party, and that this support will now collapse as he is seen as being part of the Labour machine. While a small section of the far left may have voted for Ken because he had been expelled, it doesn't hold water as a serious analysis of previous elections. Centrally, when Livingstone stood for mayor, the modest support for the Socialist Alliance GLA candidates proved fairly conclusively that there wasn't a tide of anti-Labour feeling which they could piggy-back on. Livingstone's support was largely to him as an individual, and he maintained the Labour vote precisely by doing all he could to stay a Labour Party member.

In the forthcoming London elections the Respect Coalition is not likely to win a seat, but if it stands it may just win enough votes to lose Labour's majority in the GLA. This would allow Livingstone and his supporters to present him as the champion of the people who had been robbed of the power to make a real difference (with less than nine seats in the GLA the mayor wouldn't be able to pass a budget), while the far left would simply drive a further wedge between itself and ordinary working class Londoners. **WA**

Civil servants face war on three fronts

Richard Price, PCS Group Executive Chair at the Office for National Statistics, reports on the unrest spreading among Britain's half a million civil servants

The largest wave of anger for many years is passing through the Civil Service. One hundred thousand members of the main civil service union, PCS, in the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office, the Treasury Solicitors, the Driving Standards Agency, the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Prison Service are currently in dispute over pay, having taken strike action in January and February over inadequate offers hanging over from 2003.

Sub-standard pay offers have also been rejected, mainly by big majorities, in the Vehicle Inspectorate, the Office for National Statistics, the Cabinet Office, the Department of Health, the Health and Safety Executive and the Foods Standards Agency.

On March 8, a two-week balloting period for strike action and a work to rule began in some of these departments and agencies. In two of these areas – the Office for National Statistics and the Health and Safety Executive – the specialist grades union Prospect is balloting its members for similar forms of action. Prospect members are also involved in pay disputes at three museums and in the royal gardens.

Meanwhile, on February 6, 20,000 members of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, including civil servants and other public sector workers, took strike action against a meagre two per cent pay deal, dependent on changes in working practices.

Pay bargaining in the Civil Service is supposedly devolved to departmental or agency level. The main effect over the past decade has been to create big disparities between workers in different areas who do similar work in similar grades. Differences of thousands of pounds have opened up, sometimes between civil servants working in the same building. At the same time, however, the hand of the Treasury is behind every departmental management, capping the overall value of offers in the 2003 pay round at 3.6 per cent, and where union members have rejected pay offers, imposing them.

Ceiling

In the 2004 pay round, the Treasury is rumoured to be setting the ceiling at 3.5 per cent. In every other part of the public sector, the cost of increments or pay progression to ensure staff can progress from the minimum to the maximum of the pay scale is funded separately from the annual pay rise.

Civil Service departments are expected to fund this element from their centrally approved pay remits. The result is that in many parts of the Civil Service there is no guaranteed mechanism to get to the maximum of your pay scale. It is possible, in departments such as my own, to be 25 years in the same grade and still not be at the max.

Because of the fractured nature of collective bargaining – there are now over 170 different sets of pay negotiations in the Civil Service each year – the grievances are not identical in each area. But the core problems that recur in different combinations are: low cost of living rises; inadequate pay progression arrangements; performance pay bonuses that disproportionately reward senior managers and discriminate against low paid, part-time and non white staff; and low levels of London pay.

Threat to jobs

At the same time as pay disputes are growing across the Civil Service, the government and the Tories are engaging in a Dutch auction to decide who can slash the most Civil Service jobs. Two reviews of the Civil Service are underway, both of which threaten the jobs of up to 100,000 civil servants – nearly one-fifth of the total. The Lyons Review, first announced in Gordon Brown's budget statement last April, aims to move 20,000 Civil Service jobs out of London and the South East (see "Location, location, location", Workers Action No.23).

The real purpose of Lyons is to save money on London pay rates and office space in the capital and the surrounding area. This was confirmed in the *Times* of March 11, which stated: "The bulk of the £2 billion savings from the initial 20,000 jobs will come from lower property costs, with the rest from efficiency gains and lower wages. Sir Michael [Lyons] will recommend that Government adopts a more "flexible salary strategy" outside London, so that civil service pay remains in line with local wage rates. He argues that if civil servants are paid higher wages than

other jobs in a region, it may displace private sector investment.'

A second review, headed by Sir Peter Gershon, is looking into 'the efficiency of the public sector, including the Civil Service'. An interim report was leaked to the *Financial Times* on February 16, threatening to cut 80,000 Civil Service posts. Gershon is clearly the man for the job. He was managing director of Marconi Electrics from 1994-99. In 2001, Marconi posted losses of £5bn, sacked 6,000 of its workforce, and was only saved from bankruptcy by financial restructuring.

Stereotypes

The right-wing press seized on the announcement. For most of the tabloids, civil servants are synonymous with two opposed stereotypes. On the one hand, there are apparently legions of wasters doing nothing all day but counting paper clips. On the other, there are the bowler hatted Sir Humphreys, with well-paid jobs for life and fat pensions to look forward to.

The reality for most PCS members is very different. In 2003, a quarter of the union's members earned less than £13,750, while 90,000 members earned less than £15,000, making them one of the poorest paid groups of public sector workers. In the largest government department, the Department for Work and Pensions, 10,000 staff earned less than £10,000. By any standards, this is poverty pay, and many PCS members qualify for some of the state benefits they administer.

On the same day that the Gershon interim report was leaked, the Tories went on the offensive, promising to make £35bn public sector spending cuts, and freeze Civil Service recruitment, so as to cut 100,000 jobs.

With a left-wing NEC, general secretary and president, PCS has come a long way since the union finally saw the back of Barry Reamsbottom, whose illegal attempt to prevent Mark Serwotka from taking office failed in 2002. Real effort has been put into co-ordinating the pay strategy, balloting periods and industrial action of groups of members in different departments. Membership has grown rapidly – nearly 10,000 new members joined in the first two months of 2004 – with the figure of 300,000 being reached ahead of expectation.

Derisory

But there is no doubt that the combined effects of Lyons and Gershon, the threat of redundancies and privatisation, and further attempts to offer derisory pay increases is a serious threat to the mass of low-paid civil servants. Staff in London and the South East will be in the front line, since the possibility of transferring to other government departments if the Lyons axe falls becomes much less likely with the impact of Gershon.

The challenge must be not only to deliver on the strategy of a national pay claim and campaign this year, but also to draw up a comprehensive campaigning agenda to combat Lyons and Gershon. Enthusiastic support for industrial action and the prospect of more to come shows that there is the basis for such a campaign among PCS members.

It needs to be centred upon members and branches in affected areas, and encompass political lobbying, public campaigning and, in all likelihood, industrial action. **WA**

Scottish nursery nurses take all-out strike action

Tower Hamlets Unison nursery nurse steward **Lizzy Ali** reports on the dispute that has swept Scotland

An all-out strike by over 4,000 nursery nurses across Scotland began on March 1. The decision followed an overwhelming vote by 81 per cent to 19 per cent on a 70 per cent turn-out. For the previous ten months, the nursery nurses, who are members of Unison, had taken a number of one-day and two-day selective strikes.

The strike is the result of a regrading claim that goes back two and a half years, and follows on from the breakthrough won by nursery nurses in Tower Hamlets in east London, who won the bulk of their demands for regrading last summer. They are demanding that their pay and grading reflects the increasingly complex responsibilities they take on. The last review of nursery nurses' pay and grading took place nearly 16 years ago.

At present, the minimum of the scale for nursery nurses is £10,500, rising to only £13,800 after ten years' service. Unison's claim is for a scale from £14,000 to £18,000. The employers' umbrella body, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), has continued to refuse to meet with Unison and argues that pay has to be negotiated through individual boroughs.

Carol Ball, chair of Unison's nursery nurse working group, said the majority of parents in Scotland are backing the nursery nurses. This is despite COSLA's attempts to intimidate parents who support the strikers by claiming that their child will lose its nursery place if they refuse to cross the picket line. She told BBC Radio Scotland: 'Our job is the same across the country. It is determined by national standards, by the national curriculum documents – early literacy, early numeracy – these are determined by the Scottish Executive. We've got the same qualification across the country, so therefore we maintain that we do the same job, so we don't want local settlements.'

Although local settlements have been reached in nine of Scotland's 32 councils, these only cover a small minority of the total number of nursery nurses in Scotland. The strikers gave a magnificent response to attempts to divide them on March 5, with a march of 4,500 in Glasgow. Unison had been expecting a turn out of 2,000. 'Virtually every one of our members who is on strike must be here,' commented Unison general secretary Dave Prentis, who addressed the rally. Six days later, on March 11, strikers lobbied the Scottish parliament, after Scottish Socialist Party members succeeded in forcing an adjournment debate on the strike.

■ Messages of support should be sent to Unison, 14 West Campbell Street, Glasgow G2 6RX. Cheques should be made out to: 'Nursery Nurses Campaign Fund'. **WA**

Fighting for accountability

Bob Wood reports on the recent AGM of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy

For more than 30 years, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy has been working for the democratic accountability of the party leadership to the rank and file membership, and for the implementation by the leadership of policies adopted at the party's annual conference. There has never been a time when the task was more necessary or more difficult.

The main speaker at this year's AGM of the Campaign, held on February 21, was Billy Hayes, the general secretary of the Communications Workers Union (CWU). He gave a brief overview of what had been an eventful year for the CWU, and said that the key issues for the coming year were state funding for political parties, the rise of the BNP, and the manifesto for a third Labour term.

What had happened with the RMT, he believed, was a 'backward step'. The strength of the Scottish Socialist Party was overestimated – they had no first-past-the-post members in the Scottish parliament. The Respect Unity Coalition had been seriously weakened by the defection of George Monbiot and their inability to reach an understanding with the Greens. The CWU would stick with the LP, although he recognised that there was a 'long and painful' struggle ahead. The problem with disaffiliation is that it could quite easily lead to apolitical trade unions.

Vladimir Derer, the Secretary of the CLPD, reported that five trade unions were affiliated, the Bakers, Beetu, CWU, FBU and the RMT, as well as 63 CLPs. In the upcoming NEC constituency section elections, the Campaign will be supporting the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance candidates (Mohammed Azam, Ann Black, Irene Graham, Mark Seddon, Christine Shawcroft and Pete Willsman), as well as Rosma McRae for the National Constitutional Committee and Alice Mahon for the Conference Arrangements Committee. The CLPD retained 'friendly relations' with Save the Labour Party.

Several resolutions were adopted by the AGM. One on changing the leadership noted 'the widespread dissatisfaction within the Party with many of the policies the present leadership had been pursuing' and accordingly resolved to urge 'CLPs and affiliated organisations to express their dissatisfaction by invoking, through contemporary or emergency conference resolutions, the constitutional provisions for changing the leadership'. Motions opposing state funding for political parties as an attack on the union link, opposing 'Thatcherite' top-up fees, and supporting Unite Against Fascism, were also carried.

On Partnership in Power, the AGM noted 'the growing disaffection of active members from party organisation and procedures that are stifling democratic expression and decision-making' and concluded 'that the restoration of party democracy requires the scrapping of Partnership in Power and the National Policy Forum'.

However, an amendment was also adopted that called, as a first step toward dismantling PiP and the NPF, for 'the promotion of rule changes . . . such as the right of CLPs and affiliated organisations directly to amend NPF proposals at conference'. Although the amendment did not actually say so, it could represent reform of the constitutional status quo, rather than its root and branch demolition, and a return to a motion based conference.

Policy making

A final motion on the current 21st Century Party consultation document argued that the 'defence of General committees must go hand in hand with a campaign demanding restoration of CLPs' and affiliated organisations' right to input into policy making'. The AGM resolved to:

> . . . encourage responses . . . in defence of inner party democracy, along the following lines:
>
> 1. The supreme body within each CLP is the GC . . .
>
> 2. The role of each CLP's EC is to discharge organisational functions under the overall directions of the GC.
>
> 3. Reducing the status or frequency of GC meetings would weaken the Party's organised activist base.
>
> 4. Both GCs and branches should normally meet monthly . . .
>
> 5. Both GC and branch meeting agendas should regularly include space for political debate and speakers.
>
> 6. GC meetings should normally be open to attendance by any member of the CLP.
>
> 7. CLP GCs should . . . be able to submit amendments to final stage NPF documents for debate and decision by the Party's Annual Conference.

Towards the end of the meeting there was some discussion of recent events surrounding the RMT. It was noted that national officials had scrupulously (or perhaps unscrupulously) avoided stating exactly what rule the RMT was being expelled for infringing, and that all the TU representatives on the NEC had voted for the expulsion – with the exception of the RMT's representative.

Given that two NEC members, Ann Black and Christine Shawcroft, were present, and that they had voted in opposite ways over the RMT expulsion (Ann for and Christine against), it seems a pity that the opportunity for a full debate on the issue was not taken. **WA**

Joint action over pay and top-up fees

AUT member **David Lewis** reports on the recent series of co-ordinated strikes by university lecturers and students

The last week in February saw the first ever joint action by students in the 'old' universities and their lecturers. The National Union of Students organised a week of action against top-up fees. The Association of University Teachers called a week of strikes in support of its pay claim and against the 'modernisation' agenda of the employers. Both the NUS and the AUT are determined to resist the marketisation of higher education.

The New Labour plan to introduce top-up fees was explicitly ruled out by the 2001 general election manifesto but has been transformed by Blair and fellow neo Thatcherites into a flagship policy. In the process, they have provoked the biggest rebellion of Labour MPs yet. Although the Higher Education Bill introducing top fees has received its first reading, by a majority of five, it has a long way to go before it becomes law. The parliamentary opponents are still determined to sink it and the NUS has rediscovered the ability to mobilise students. The AUT has played a key role in ensuring that the TUC did not cave in after Blair's concessions for students from the lowest income families.

While some commentators have interpreted the campaign against top-up fees as a middle-class concern, the fact is that the most pernicious consequence of their introduction would be to deter working class and lower middle class children from entering university. The abolition of the maintenance grant and the introduction of the £1,200 flat rate annual fee for all courses has already worked in that direction – turning back the clock 40 years. Top-up fees will take this country back to the pre-history of university funding, with the promise of worse to come. Some university heads are already lobbying for there to be no limit to top-up fees. Privatisation of selected universities cannot be far behind.

Since the universities will be allowed to vary top-up fees from subject to subject, up to a maximum of £3,000 per year, the NUS rightly castigates this as the marketisation of higher education. As the head of Imperial College, Richard Sykes, said last year: 'Why do we need differential fees? The name may change but the answer is the same: because our universities are different and we all operate in a competitive environment.' The top rated universities like IC, the ones that students most want to get into, will be able to charge the maximum for all their courses, universities in the middle range will have to vary their fees to fill their courses, and the universities at the bottom of the pile will be lucky if they can charge the minimum rate. The vice-chancellors have got their greedy little eyes on the extra cash they imagine they will be raking in. But even that is not certain. None of the proceeds of the fixed up-front fees that the Labour government introduced has found its way to the universities.

However, regardless of the impact of top-up fees on university finances, many of them are already raking it in. Between 1994 and 2002, university staff pay rose by 25 per cent. In the same period, the vice-chancellors saw their pay go up by 49 per cent, with the top 20 earners going up by 70 per cent and the highest of the lot, Laura Tyson of the London Business School, by 157 per cent to £316,000.

In contrast to this snout-in-the-trough stuff, the lecturers, researchers and other staff that the AUT organises are now being offered a 6.4 per cent deal over two years, plus 1.2 per cent for market supplements and performance-related enhancements. There are other strings attached: a new pay 'spine' with three per cent instead of five per cent increments, wholesale job evaluation, and the abolition of national scales for all staff except lecturers. All very New Labour. The resulting variation in pay by subject and institution will lead to a pernicious market in jobs just as surely as top up fees will lead to a market in university places.

In this context the only surprise about the 66 per cent vote for strike action and 81 per cent vote for boycotting exams is that the numbers are not higher.

An unfortunate aspect of the 2003-4 pay claim is associated with the fact that all the non-academic unions have already accepted the deal offered by the employers. In December, Unison, Amicus and T&G launched an attack on AUT on the grounds that AUT had made false claims about the implication of the agreement. This has included a joint letter to the members of the three non-academic unions claiming that the AUT was saying that the deal would have a detrimental effect on their members, when all the analysis and criticism made by AUT has referred exclusively to the impact on its members. This was followed by a letter from Unison's general secretary, Dave Prentis, to all university vice chancellors and principals saying much the same. These attacks are uncannily similar in nature to those of the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association. However, at a branch level in most universities, all unions accept each other's position and continue to work together. The AUT has referred the dispute with the other unions to the TUC.

Meanwhile, the AUT action has now escalated to a boycott of assessment, including examinations and coursework marking. Although this action has serious implications for students, the NUS is supporting it to the hilt and is urging students to send their essays and project reports to their vice chancellors for marking.

The campaign against Blair and his right-wing agenda for the universities now embraces students, academic staff and a large section of the Parliamentary Labour Party. If all these elements continue to work in the same direction, the long term impact on New Labour could be devastating.

■ As we go to press, it is reported that Brendan Barber, general secretary of the TUC, has brokered a 'deal' between AUT negotiators and UCEA which is little more than a repackaging of the offer that AUT rejected in the February ballot. It is being sold by AUT head office as the best that is achievable, but the AUT Delegate Council may take a different view. **WA**

The defeat of the miners

The landscape after the battle

The 1984-85 miners' strike is widely recognised as a watershed in British politics. Two decades on, **Nick Davies** looks back at the strike's significance and asks whether things could have turned out differently

It is often said that history is written by the winners. Therefore it might seem odd that the majority of what has appeared so far in commemoration of what was the most significant event in British working class history since 1945, or possibly 1926, and what was, indisputably, a defeat, has appeared in the left press. The right, secure in victory, sees no need to dwell on it. Some in the media, from a comfortable distance of 20 years, can afford to be generous – portraying as intelligent human beings the people they once slandered as thugs. If the Labour leadership feels the faintest twinge of embarrassment that without Thatcher's victory there would be no New Labour, and no Blairism, it isn't showing.

Inevitably, much of the coverage in the left press will be heavily tinged with sentimentality, remembering the dedication of the striking miners and the generosity of their supporters. It is right that this should be remembered. We should contrast the miners, determined to defeat the attack on their jobs, their communities and their union, with the desiccated, pro-business technocrats of New Labour. We should contrast the radicalisation which produced Women Against Pit Closures and the hundreds of support groups, many set up by people who had never been anywhere near a coal mine, with the clammy, depoliticised pragmatism of Blair and Brown. We should contrast the solidarity and warmth engendered by that struggle with the anomic individualism which is the official ideology of the Tories and New Labour. The anti-war movement of 2002-2003, with its size and spontaneity, gave New Labour a nasty reminder of what it thought it had left behind for good when the miners accepted defeat and went back to work.

However, it is not enough just to do this. The twentieth anniversary of this momentous event must also be an opportunity for us to draw some lessons from the miners' defeat. Famously, when Chou En Lai was asked about the effects of the French revolution, he replied that it was 'too early to tell'! The remark was not quite so flippant as it sounds. The reverberations from the defeat of the miners' strike are being felt to this day. Therefore, the lessons of the miners' defeat are not purely a matter of recent historical interest. Those lessons must be learned if the struggle, newly underway, to renovate the labour movement so that it can again fight, industrially and politically, in its own interests, is to be successful.

In part, the miners were defeated because they were fighting the government at a time and in circumstances which were not of their choosing. Although the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was the most militant and the most combative union of all, it could not have won on its own. It could only have won with the solidarity, in the form of industrial action, of other unions. However, the Tories had prepared well, picking off a number of other unions before deciding that it was time to take on the NUM. Following the defeat of the steel strike in 1980, the steel industry had been devastated by closures. Car workers at Longbridge and Cowley, in particular, had been defeated and prominent shop stewards Derek Robinson and Alan Thornett had been sacked. Railway workers had seen their union defeated, although not destroyed, in a dispute over the introduction of flexible rostering.

Deflationary

The 1980-81 recession, combined with the savagely deflationary economic policies pursued by Margaret Thatcher and her Chancellor Geoffrey Howe, had wiped out great swathes of the engineering industry all over Britain. Unemployment was over three million, even on the Tories' own highly dubious figures. Those workers lucky enough to have a job were terrified of losing it.

The TUC leadership found the entrance to 10 Downing Street locked and barred, but had failed to lift a collective finger to save a single job. The Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982 had, among other things, restricted the closed shop, picketing, and secondary action and the Trade Union Act of 1984 made it compulsory to have secret ballots for elections, and before strike action. Significantly, the TUC had in 1983 sold out striking printworkers who were up against the anti union laws. It could only offer the striking miners and their communities tins of baked beans, children's parties at Christmas, and, to ease its conscience, money. All very nice, enough to stop the miners from starving, but not enough to help them win.

Closures

The Tories had built up coal stocks over two years, and had weakened the NUM with a trickle of pit closures. They had increased the power, and the pay, of the now semi-militarised police. Regarding some of the National Coal Board senior management as a bit too conciliatory with the union, the Tories brought in an anti-union American, Ian MacGregor, as NCB chairman. The government picked a fight with the NUM by closing Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire, in March, just before the clocks went forward.

Crucially, the NUM was divided, with the Nottinghamshire and South Derbyshire area cursed, historically, by a right-wing union leadership (in 1984 the Nottinghamshire leadership supported the strike but found itself isolated), but blessed by geology and a generous productivity bonus system. While 1983 saw a spate of unofficial strikes in the Yorkshire coalfield, Nottinghamshire miners were persuaded, by the government and the National Coal Board, that their jobs were safe and they had no need to strike. For a whole host of reasons therefore, while the striking miners received considerable support from other trade unionists and the general public, they were also, in industrial terms, relatively isolated.

The miners had no support from the Labour leadership. The then recently elected Labour leader Neil Kinnock has claimed since that he was caught in a dilemma, his solidarity with the miners vying with his dislike of Arthur Scargill. If, in fact, Kinnock, who exploited his South Wales mining background when it suited him, did wrestle with his conscience, he won hands down. The real position was that support for the NUM was in conflict with his project to move the Labour Party to the right. This process, which was to culminate in New Labour, would never have got off the ground under the leadership of, for example, Denis Healey. The former left winger Kinnock was crucial to its success. For the 'modernisers', betrayal of the miners was crucial for Kinnock's leadership.

In contrast to the Labour Party leadership, there was widespread support for the miners among rank-and-file Labour Party members. There was official support on a local level from Constituency Labour Parties, which affiliated to support groups and raised money. There was a lot of support for the NUM at the 1984 Labour Party Conference, both from the floor of Conference and in fringe meetings.

In 1984, the Communist Party still enjoyed a measure of support from workers in South Wales, Yorkshire and Scotland, and therefore had some influence among left wing miners. The CP was divided into two factions, the 'Eurocommunists' around the journal *Marxism Today* and the more pro Soviet group around the *Morning Star*. The Eurocommunists gave Kinnock's 'modernisation' project an air of political and intellectual credibility. Indeed, 'modernisation' presupposed a conflict between 'modern', right-wing politics, and 'old-fashioned' left-wing politics based on class struggle and socialism. As the state was sending its bodies of armed men, in the form of a highly paid, semi-militarised police force, into mining communities to crack the skulls of trade unionists, *Marxism Today* was burbling about the 'irrelevance' of class politics. Within the NUM, the 'Euros' were arguing covertly for a return to work. The *Morning Star* faction, which enjoyed more support among miners, did not go as far as this, and at pits where it was strong, such as Maerdy in South Wales, not a single miner tried to return to work. While most miners with sympathies for the CP nevertheless went out on picket lines and fought the police, the CP's influence made it difficult for those miners' politics to develop any further in a leftward direction.

Leadership

All these factors made it difficult for the miners to win. However, the strike could have been won. Part of the blame for its ultimate defeat has to be laid at the door of the NUM leadership. The leadership of the strike, in particular Arthur Scargill and his allies, was remarkable in that it was not constantly looking for a way out. It did actually want to win, and for this it earned the implacable hatred of the British media.

However, the leadership underestimated the effect of all the factors that had come into the equation since the successful strikes of 1972 and 1974. Scargill thought the job could be done by picketing out the scab coalfields, and exhorting other workers to show solidarity. But since he closed down the coke depot at Saltley in Birmingham in the 1972 strike by using flying pickets, the police had refined their tactics, and most of the West Midlands workers who had helped him on that day were now signing on the dole. Back in 1972, mass picketing had been more effective because of the greater role played by coal in the economy. The successful strike of 1974 which brought down the Heath government came in the wake of a quadrupling of oil prices by OPEC.

The confrontation at Orgreave in June 1984 showed that while the ruling class had moved on, the NUM leadership had not. The Orgreave defeat showed the limits of the NUM policy of simply picketing out workplaces. Coke workers may have been overwhelmingly sympathetic to the miners, but they were fearful for their jobs if they took unofficial action. Undue pressure was put on rank-and-file workers, at the expense of waging a political struggle within the Labour Party and the TUC. The failure to close the coke plant had a demoralising effect on many miners, and after Orgreave, the strike had nowhere to go.

Solidarity

Rather than simply relying on other workers' instincts of solidarity with the miners, it was essential that other unions in dispute with management or the government bring forward those disputes with the aim of building strike action in co-ordination with that of the NUM, as a second or even third front, each section staying out until the demands of all had been met. The threatened strike by NACODs, the pit deputies' union, which unfortunately came and went, showed that this was possible, as did the national rail strike, threatened for May 1984, but nipped in the bud when the rail unions' leadership accepted a small pay rise with the question of job cuts being deferred until future talks. Dockers in the TGWU were called out twice over the summer over scabbing. The TGWU leaders refused to argue clearly and openly that this was action in support of the miners, but also failed to build the strikes into a consistent struggle for the dockers' own interests, which only confused matters.

Another missed opportunity for a second front was the dispute over rate-capping between the government and a number of Labour councils, including the Militant-led Liverpool and Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council. The lack of a united front between the councils enabled the government to pick them off one by one, so that by the end of the strike only four councils were still in dispute. The government's job was made much easier by the failure, or refusal, of the council leaders to mobilise local government workers in support of jobs and services. While local government unions could not have actively assisted the strike in terms of refusing to move coal stocks and so on, they would have given the government something else to worry about. However, Scargill and the other left NUM leaders did not really oppose the betrayals by these supposedly left trade union leaders and council leaders or demand that those leaders really fight.

While Scargill wisely avoided official TUC involvement in the strike because he feared a sell-out, he did not attempt to mobilise the rank and file of unions other than the NUM. Relations with other unions were kept very much on a leadership to leadership basis. Rank-and file miners should have built joint rank-and-file committees with rail, transport and other workers to spread strike action, appealing to other workers to co-ordinate their claims with the miners' strike, and to control and monitor solidarity action.

One of the weapons used by the NUM's enemies was the lack of a national ballot before strike action was authorised. It was used as an excuse by a majority of miners in Nottinghamshire, South Derbyshire and Leicestershire not to support the strike. Those working pits were a valuable weapon for the government. Was Scargill right on this? Among the miners' supporters on the left, it was, and still is, nothing short of heresy to suggest otherwise. Twenty years on, it might be worthwhile to reconsider this question. Having a ballot would not in itself have won the strike. It would not have made the

Tories or the media love the NUM. Those intent on scabbing come what may would have scabbed even if there had been a ballot. However a ballot might have deterred some Nottinghamshire miners from scabbing, or at least made it more difficult for them to do so. It would have also deprived the media of an important weapon in the propaganda war. Scargill didn't make it any easier for himself by using the supposed need for a national ballot as a reason not to call an immediate national strike in 1983 over the closure of Lewis Merthyr colliery. In that case a Welsh NUM delegate conference balloted all 33 pits in the Welsh coalfield. Scargill's opponents could therefore argue that he was being inconsistent.

Momentum

However, if the decision not to hold a national ballot was a mistake, it was one that was understandable given the mood of the times and the way the strike developed its momentum. Many activists were in favour of striking on the basis of votes taken by the NUM's regional and national executive, as that was seen as a rejection of the hated anti-union laws. Furthermore, most militant miners in areas most threatened by the pit closure programme were opposed to a ballot on the basis that it would delay or undermine strike action, as had happened the previous year in South Wales. In a mirror image of the attitude of many Nottinghamshire miners, a number of miners in South Wales, for example, had reservations about the lack of a ballot, but they decided that when the chips were down, the need to defend their union and their industry was more important than formal democracy. However, it is arguable, at least, that a ballot could have been held after the strike had started, as a means of reinforcing the executive decision.

Even if we do see the ballot question as a weapon used by the Tories and the media to beat the NUM (which it was), this should not have been a way of avoiding the need for the NUM to democratise itself. This was necessary if the politics needed to win the strike were to be fought for. The fact that the NUM leadership was a cut above other union leaderships did not excuse the fact that the union president was elected for life. The fact that Scargill wanted to win the strike did not mean that his tactics should not have gone unchallenged, or that he should not be accountable and subject to recall by the membership.

What should the NUM have been fighting *for*, other than simply fighting *against* pit closures. Was every pit to stay open, regardless of how dangerous or unprofitable it was to mine? And would the NUM take the Coal Board's word on that? Surely the NUM should have been calling for the Coal Board's accounts and geological surveys to be opened up for scrutiny by the NUM. How much money was being made out of the coal industry by private contractors? Could, according to the NUM's own experts, new seams be opened or existing seams be exploited further? If not, the demand should have been that the work be shared out with no loss of pay. Instead, Scargill took the government to task for failing to keep its word and adhere to the previous 'Plan for Coal', a three way plan for the industry, agreed in the 1970s between the government, the NCB and the NUM, based on subsidies for the mining industry to keep it 'competitive', and which the government was intent on ditching. Making these demands should not have suggested sectarianism towards the leadership of the union. These demands should have been made on the leadership, and that leadership supported insofar as it implemented any of them. At the same time, that leadership had to be defended when it was under attack from the right.

Class war

Not only did Scargill fail to grasp how the strike could be won, he also lacked a political strategy. That Scargill was a sincere socialist was beyond doubt. In an interview given to *New Left Review* in 1975 he declared that: 'The issue is a very simple one: it is them and us. I will never accept that it is anything else, because it is a class battle, it is a class war . . . I want to take from them for us – in other words, I want to take into common ownership everything in Britain . . .'(*New Left Review*, July-August 1975)

As for how this could be achieved, in the same interview he argued that: 'I think that the ideal way that the working class can achieve working class power is to change the Labour Party . . .' And in a 1981 interview with *Marxism Today* he stated that: '. . . I believe that we can bring about political change through parliament, but only if it is backed by mass mobilisation of working people desirous of change. If we do that we've got the basis for a real revolutionary change in British politics that I want to see . . .'(*Marxism Today*, April 1981)

Power

Some of these formulations may be mistaken, such as the notion that changing the Labour Party could enable the working class to achieve power (although they were widely aired at the time), or ambiguous, especially concerning the relationship between parliamentary and workers' democracy, but it was not half bad for a leader of a powerful trade union. He wasn't going to be Lord Scargill of Worsborough talking like that.

But there was nothing of this during the strike. While Scargill recognised the political nature of the strike, and saw the significance of the physical confrontations between the miners and the state, his strategy and tactics were those of a highly militant, yet conventional economic trade union struggle.

What were the political implications of a miner's victory? Business as usual, with the Tories promising not to close any pits? A Labour government headed by Kinnock? Scargill never said, and so with no perspective for bringing other workers out to open a second front and no political perspective either, the strike settled into a grim war of attrition.

While Scargill fought the strike as if it

were a 'normal' economic struggle, the Tories saw the strategic importance of it, in terms of the structure of the British economy, future energy policy, the position of the trade unions, the power of the police, and of the 'secret state'. With this in mind, an agent, Roger Windsor, was installed in the NUM leadership, and was the source of, among other things, the story that the NUM received money from Colonel Gadaffy.

Scargill's utterances from 20 or 30 years ago represent his political high point. Even then, having previously been a member of the Young Communist League, he was always heavily influenced by Stalinism, giving short shrift to those who, at the TUC, tried to build support for *Solidarnosc* in Poland. He has since reverted to an even more rancid version of Stalinism, as expellees from his miniature despotism, the Socialist Labour Party, can testify.

What of the revolutionary left and the miners' strike? Much of the far left was, in 1984, in the midst of a sectarian phase, whether in the Labour Party (Militant) or outside it (Socialist Workers Party, Workers Revolutionary Party). However, its input into the miners' strike was somewhat muted. It failed to gain much influence in the coalfields, which was due as much to the imagined self-sufficiency of the coal field communities as to the metropolitanism of the far left. Most of its activity seems to have consisted of simple solidarity with the NUM, and participation in support groups. It was important to be involved in the support groups. They were a focus of support and solidarity, arranging twinning and helping with picketing. At times, they were a forum for lively discussion as to how the strike could be won. However, for some reason, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) refused, initially at least, to get involved, regarding the support groups as mere charity mongers.

Loyalists

Some of the demands referred to above were voiced by various groups, but often somewhat circumspectly, for fear of alienating any contacts they had among Scargill loyalists. The call for a general strike should have been raised with care, rather than bandied about in a fit of ultra-left sloganeering. However, had other workers linked their own demands to the miners' strike, with a view to opening up a second front, the question of a general strike would have become much more immediate. But the SWP refused to consider raising this demand on the grounds that the class struggle was in a 'downturn'. How the period after the defeat of the strike became an 'upturn' in the eyes of the SWP leadership has never been satisfactorily explained. The Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) refused to look reality in the face, maintaining that the miners had been 'betrayed but not defeated', a formulation lifted from Scargill, of whom the WRP had become, over the course of the strike, increasingly uncritical.

The trio was completed by Militant who solemnly assured anyone who would listen that as the class struggle intensified, workers would 'objectively' pour into the Labour Party. In fact, within a few years, it was its own members who would be pouring *out* of Militant. The point is that if the far left was unable to interpret the reality of the miners' strike, the chances are that it is unable to interpret the reality of its defeat also. In some ways, the defeat of the miners ushered in a crisis for the far left. Within six months of the end of the strike, the WRP had imploded. The Labour Party leadership now had the confidence to start purging leading supporters of Militant, a process which would end with an exodus of Militant supporters from the Labour Party, and the eventual loss by Militant of the majority of its membership.

Privatised

Following the miners' return to work, the Tories wasted no time in making them pay. The first wave of pit closures came shortly after the strike, the second in 1992-93. The remaining handful of pits was privatised and the NUM was reduced to a rump. Even those miners in the East Midlands organised in the scab Democratic Union of Mineworkers were not spared, having outlived their usefulness. In some of the pit villages of South Yorkshire and South Wales, the only discernible economic activity was heroin dealing and tattoo parlours. The fourth biggest economy in the world still has pockets of poverty worse than almost anywhere in the EU, with only the accession of the likes of Lithuania and Slovakia likely to lift them off the bottom of the league.

Britain has now some of the most restrictive anti-union laws of any democratic country, with all secondary action unlawful. In the 1990s, the number of strike days was the lowest since the 1890s. As yet more centres of working class militancy were wiped out, and in the public sector, Best Value led to what was effectively a second-tier workforce, the level of union membership continued to scrape along at around seven million throughout the 1990s (as opposed to around 13 million in 1980). In 1999, the average age of a worker was 36, but the average age of a trade unionist was 44; it appeared that a whole generation of younger workers accepted the effective outlawing of union activity as the norm. The collapse of Stalinism from 1989 to 1991 reinforced this process. There was no other way to organise society, so the relentless propaganda went. Socialism, or even basic trade unionism, was a waste of time, of merely historical interest, or possibly something rather retro and quaint, like *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*. Onto this blighted landscape emerged Tony Blair, to promote his toxic blend of ruthless neo-liberal capitalism and bland apoliticism, aiming to transform the Labour Party into a version of the US Democrats and its membership into a supporters' club. Blair climbed onto the summit of the Labour Party from the shoulders of Margaret Thatcher and Ian MacGregor.

Some of those on the left of what could be loosely termed the green movement (or on the 'green' end of the left) tried to convince themselves, and us, that things weren't really so bad. Outside South Wales and South Yorkshire, most miners had got other, safer jobs, many of the old slag heaps had been greened over, and an ecologically disastrous industry was in decline. But in effectively destroying the deep-mined coal industry, the Tories and their New Labour disciples did not promote the development of renewable energy sources.

Instead, the 'dash for gas' left British energy needs tied to long-term contracts with North Sea gas fields, at high prices, and for reserves which will last only a few decades. Open-cast mines continue to blight the landscape of Yorkshire and South Wales. Most importantly, the decline of the admittedly ecologically destructive coal industry was not at the hands of workers themselves, making their own decisions about the future of the industry, or particular mines, on social or environmental grounds. It was something *done to* the British working class by the Tories and their allies, which left a lasting effect on its morale and its ability to organise.

Diminished

And yet it was during this period that Militant, having undergone in 1991 a split which was formalised in 1992, withdrew from the Labour Party. Having lost most of its membership it decided to re-christen itself first Militant Labour, and then, subsequently, the Socialist Party! It gathered around it a number of other far left groups, all severely diminished in size, calling itself the Socialist Alliance, and proclaimed by its leadership as a sign of the strength of the left! It was subsequently joined by the SWP. The election of the Labour Party in 1997, with a huge parliamentary majority, and on such a right-wing programme,

tells us something – which was not heeded by the Socialist Alliance – about the wisdom of an electoral challenge to Labour at this time.

Breathtaking

By 2000, advocates of the Socialist Alliance were arguing, in the words of the SWP, that it was the best time in a generation to fight for socialism. During Blair's second term, they saw the anti-war movement and the increase of trade union militancy as proof that they were right. Now the anti-war movement was breathtaking in its size and scope, but while it would be wrong to underestimate this movement, it is equally wrong to assume that because two million people, from the SWP to the Muslim Association of Britain and Peterborough Methodist Church, took to the streets against the war they would also be prepared to sign up for and vote for a new party to challenge Labour. That is why the Respect Coalition looks to be a dead end. No political party can exist on the basis of George Galloway's oratory and the anti-war protests. It is significant that even when the protests against the war were at their height, trade unionists protested only on a Saturday afternoon, or after work, in their own time. In other words, the anger among trade unionists against the war did not (other than in a few exceptional cases) translate into working class action against the war.

Sequestration

The threat of fines and the sequestration of union funds is still a powerful one. It gives bureaucrats a powerful argument against secondary action, which even the militant rank and file is not yet sufficiently organised or confident to defy. The recent increase in industrial action is a welcome development, which must be built on, but it is starting from an extremely low base. With the exception of the recent unofficial action by CWU members, the action is always official, following the ballot procedure, and always between the employer and the union. The election of cities of Blair to union leadership positions is a positive development, but despite being named the 'awkward squad', their awkwardness is nothing more than basic trade unionism. They are still negotiating from a position of weakness. That is why the idea of union disaffiliation from Labour is such a mistake. It confuses the start of a fightback with its culmination. It is a development that, in the present situation, is not necessarily a move to the left. Once the disaffiliation genie is out of the bottle, then why not affiliate to the Liberal-Democrats or the Greens?

If the left is to learn anything from the defeat of the miners' strike, then now is the time to start. It must come to terms with the extent of that defeat, and the economic, political and cultural effect it has had on British society. It must realise that in the wake of that defeat, the task is still a patient, and painstaking struggle to regenerate the labour movement, starting from the need to restate basic trade union and socialist principles: the need to defend public services, the need for decent pay, the need to tax the wealthy, the need for effective trade unionism, for an end to the anti-union laws and for effective rank-and-file organisation, and the need to oppose imperialist wars. That struggle must be as broad as possible, not confined to a group of far-left activists, or channelled into electoralism. The place for that struggle is in the labour movement itself, including the Labour Party. If we are to fight Blair and his allies in the trade unions and the Labour Party, then that is where we must be. However, those who believe that this is no longer necessary, who believe that the fightback from the miners' defeat is almost complete, rather than just getting underway, demonstrate that after 20 years, they have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. **WA**

Class of '84

Andrew Berry recalls the effect the miners' strike had on his own political development

The miners' strike had a huge political impact on me. I was not new to politics in 1984, as I had been active in Bristol CND and YCND from two years earlier when I was 13. In the early 80s I marched for nuclear disarmament on what were thought at that time to be very large demonstrations – although the recent anti-war marches have dwarfed them. A year later I became involved in the campaign for the election of Tony Benn in the newly formed constituency of Bristol East, mainly because of his involvement in CND. He lost the seat, which to me at 14 seemed a massive set back.

By 15, I was thinking more about politics and I was not keen on the Labour Party despite my involvement in the Benn campaign a year earlier. I was looking elsewhere, mainly at those involved in CND, the Greens (then the Ecology Party) and the Communist Party. I even gave the Liberal party a glance – they were then a bit more radical in the south west and their leading light was chair of our local CND group. The Labour Party had supported the Falklands War and I found it hard to consider a party that had done that despite that fact that many members I knew had opposed it.

Then the miners' strike started. I wanted to support the miners but the only people organising any solidarity were the Labour Party, and despite the lack of support from the Labour leadership it was clear to me that without the Labour Party membership the miners would have been starved back to work much earlier. From the start of the strike I would go up to my local supermarket in Clifton Village every Saturday and collect food from shoppers. Despite vehement anti-NUM propaganda in the press – both 'quality' and popular – and even on the television news, the public completely backed the miners. Hardly anyone attacked us for collecting and very many people gave food generously.

This collection was organised by the local Labour Party and Labour Parties all over the country were doing the same. That was enough to convince me to join – the membership on the ground represented something different and the fact that the trade unions were affiliated to the party made the party relevant to the working class and organised labour, despite the discrepancy with the top. Fundamentally the relationship today is still the same; it is true now that a lot of those good people have left or gone into hibernation but it is still the Labour Party members in droves who oppose the Iraq war and it was Labour party members, even with a Labour government, whom I saw at FBU support groups and who were essentially the core of those groups. I think the decisions that I made 20 years ago, despite Blair and the New Labour machine, have stood the test of time. **WA**

Veil of tears

Banning the hijab from France's state schools will increase racism and further alienate the Muslim community, argues **Charli Langford**

At the beginning of February, the French parliament debated a law which will ban the wearing of ostentatious religious symbols in state schools.

This ban covers everyone in the school – students, teachers, caretakers, support staff, even visitors. Reaction has been extreme – early surveys suggest about 70 per cent of French people support the ban, including some Christian and Jewish leaders, yet a Paris opposition march drew 25,000 and there have been spontaneous demonstrations in schools against it. There have also been demonstrations in other countries.

The ban will cover the Jewish yarmulke and the Sikh turban. About 5,000 families from France's small Sikh population are saying they will have to emigrate due to the ban.

But by far the greatest effect will be on Muslim women. Government ministers have explicitly stated that the law is primarily aimed against the hijab (headscarf). Jamila Farouk of Le Mouvement pour la Justice et la Dignité, interviewed in the *Observer* of February 1, says: 'Ever since the debate started around this law, people have begun to . . . harass women wearing scarves, not just in schools. Mayors refuse to marry them. Banks won't open their doors to them for "security reasons".' The reference to banks is important; the original draft of the law would also have banned wearers of religious garments from public buildings.

Anti-Muslim

Leftists and liberals in the rest of Europe have denounced this law as racist and anti-Muslim, but there has been some support for it among Muslim women on the basis that the hijab is one of the means of oppressing women. In France there has been some support from the left and also among feminists. The reason for this lies in cultural differences based upon French history. The values of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*, coming from the rationalism of the enlightenment period and central to the French revolution, were the background to the French constitution, and the principle of *laïcité* – roughly translated as secularism and involving the complete separation of church and state – was written into the constitution in 1905, after a century of power struggle between the state and the Catholic Church. Its basic aim was to prevent the proselytising of children at school into Catholicism, but even now, 100 years later, the Catholic Church exerts a huge influence – one-third of French schools are Catholic, non-state, and the anti-hijab law does not apply to them.

Today, liberal opinion in France remains that the state must be neutral towards religion and that the religious affiliation of state functionaries – from President to school-cleaner – must play no part in the performance of their duties. It is partly due to this secular principle, and the fact that religion has a very strong influence on culture, that the French attitude to immigration is much more one of integration into existing French society, rather than multiculturalism as it is in much of the rest of Europe.

Pretensions

Laïcité represents a great victory against religious obscurantism in France; it puts the pretensions of the state/church separation of the US constitution to shame, and it makes the British system – with bishops exercising political power through the House of Lords and indirectly but more effectively by having Tony Blair and David Blunkett in their pockets – look medieval.

But despite being a great advance, *laïcité* is still limited. The primary effect of the 1905 law was to strengthen 'rational' French capitalism against the obscurantist Catholic Church. The working class gained through the limiting of religious influence but the conflict of interest between the working and ruling classes remained. The Christian influence on French culture remained strong and still does today.

The anti hijab law has grown out of the report of a committee led by a former government minister – the unfortunately-named Bernard Stasi. The report recommends 26 measures supposedly designed to promote state secularism and equality between religions. Some of the report's recommendations can be judged as progressive, such as the teaching of Berber and Kurdish (both of which are non-state languages and are far more likely to be languages of oppressed nationalities) and the teaching of the history of slavery and colonisation. Others seem strange for a secular state – it would surely be more secular to dethrone Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, rather than to create new public holidays of Eid al-Adha and Yom Kippur. The plans to 'rehabilitate urban ghettoes' tally well with the policy of creating a monolithic French culture rather than encouraging a diverse multiculturalism, as does also the plan to adopt a 'Charter of *Laïcité*' which would be used in public ceremonies, including naturalisation rites for immigrants. But the proposal to ban 'ostentatious religious dress' has stirred up a huge debate.

Principle

The proposed charter illustrates very sharply the problem. *Laïcité* may be a principle for the ethnic groups that comprised France from the early part of the twentieth

century, but these groups had a shared, Christian-based culture which had grown up through the development of *laïcité*, so the 1905 secularism law enshrined a generally accepted principle. Unfortunately, Muslims in France (estimated to be between 3.5 million and 7 million – no-one knows the accurate figure because *laïcité* does not permit the French census to ask religious affiliation) are a constituency which does not subscribe to *laïcité*, where that battle has to be fought again.

Reactionary

The anti-hijab law is clearly anti-Muslim because it attacks a part of Muslim culture. The part of Muslim culture it is attacking is reactionary, as both feminists and leftists agree, but that does not excuse the law. You can make a very good case for imposing a law against clitoridectomy because protection of young women from the damage and agony the practice imposes is more important than the claim that it is an integral part of a particular culture. Similarly, you can justify a law against swastika armbands in view of the historic use of the symbol and the threat implied against other people. Hijab wearing falls into neither of these categories; in some extreme cases the wearers have internalised the reasons for wearing it to such an extent that to be without it is akin to being naked in the street. At the other extreme it can be a symbol of solidarity with other Muslims against a perceived threat from society. In either case, banning it would not be helpful.

Principles such as *laïcité* are views that people have to be won to, not forced into observing. There is no point in legislating how an individual responds to the principle; what you need is discussion and education to persuade people of the principle's validity. The situation is different in collective terms – a religious display in a state building in France is illegal and this is progress, a gain for rationalism and against superstition. But it is inappropriate to legislate against individuals holding particular personal beliefs or (outside situations where it is generally perceived as threatening such as the swastika) against displaying signs of allegiance to a particular belief.

Beliefs

It may be necessary to legislate against the activities consequent on those beliefs – as with non consensual genital mutilation – but the beliefs themselves must not be illegal. It is on this basis – that principles should be won rather than imposed – that we should oppose the hijab ban not just for school students but for everyone.

While the proposed law is not racist in itself, it will have the consequence of stirring up racism against people who come from predominantly Muslim parts of the world. Farouk has already quoted instances of discrimination against hijab-wearers. It seems unlikely that banks and other institutions will continue to see hijab-wearers as security threats without extending the view to other Muslims or generally people 'of Middle-Eastern appearance'. The mere consideration, let alone the passing, of discriminatory laws tends to validate both casual and institutional racism. In the US there have been many such cases of discrimination as a result of the travel security measures.

It is also likely that the law will exacerbate the separation of Muslims from society, rather than integrate them. Young Muslim women will be cut off from wider views if they are forced out of integrated schools. The first Muslim school in France was set up in Lille last year as a direct result of girls being expelled from state schools for wearing hijab. Worse still is the possibility that parents will simply not send their daughters to school at all. The overall effect is not of promoting *laïcité* but of removing young Muslim women from places where they might be won to it.

Instructed

Opposition to the anti hijab law does not signify any support for the hijab, or for Islam either. In fact, there is nowhere in the Qur'an where women are instructed to wear any particular garment. The only requirement is to 'dress modestly'. Of course, this requirement is in itself classic sexism, at one with St Paul who requires women to cover their heads 'lest they should inflame male lust'; blaming the victim, it puts the responsibility for men's faults onto women. But it is the religious leaders of Islam who have taken it on themselves to promote the hijab in particular.

The left must oppose this law. It will exacerbate racism; it will not liberate women from the hijab – instead it will have the opposite effect – and it will not defend *laïcité* because principles have to be won rather than legislated.

While defending women's right to wear the hijab if they wish, we must be very clear that we also defend the rights of women who don't want to wear the hijab against those within Islam that might want to coerce them to do so. We should oppose the setting up of Muslim schools. But we have to be calling clearly for the abolition of *all* religious schools, not just Muslim ones. We have to understand, as the religious do, that schoolchildren are at an age when they are most susceptible to brainwashing. **WA**

Not so sweet smelling

Nick Davies looks at the events which shaped Georgia's so-called rose revolution

At the end of last year, the British and US media had a great story to tell. It was about how in Georgia the 'rose revolution', headed by Mikhail Saakashvili – young, good-looking, sharp-suited, English speaking, and good on TV – had ousted from power Eduard Shevardnadze, a grizzled, corrupt old Stalinist who had tried to rig the election. Surely, this was a pre-Christmas 'feelgood' story that could not go wrong.

However, whether they knew it or not, the media were not giving us the full story. A dead give-away that all was not quite as it seemed was the phrase 'people power' to describe the storming of the parliament building. Usually, those who try to storm parliaments the BBC, CNN, and the rest denounce as a mob. So when does a mob become 'people power'? The answer, in an echo of events in Belgrade in 2000, is when the USA says so. In fact, the apparently spontaneous events of November and December last year were the culmination of a project, sometimes open and sometimes covert, aimed at making Georgia a client state of the USA, and bringing together the supposed 'war against terrorism', the very real war for oil, and the post cold war jostling for influence between the USA and Russia.

The grievances that brought so many people to the parliament building were very real. The Georgian tradition of *dzmakatsoba*, or loyalty to an inner circle of friends, combines powerfully with post Stalinist mafia capitalism to produce one of the most corrupt societies in the world. It has been estimated that 60 per cent of Georgia's GDP is 'off the books'. The local elite plunders state resources for its own benefit. The majority of Georgians earn about $20 per month, and state pensions are as low as $7. The economy is flatlining, virtually dependent for its day-to-day functioning on the World Bank and the IMF. Having been told that future loans and aid depended on tackling corruption, Shevardnadze lacked the means or the will to root it out.

For years, western governments had been prepared to stick with Shevardnadze. Replacing the violent and erratic Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's first post-independence leader, in 1992, he was long seen as a safe pair of hands. There was a sense of obligation towards Gorbachev's foreign minister for his having opened the Berlin Wall without a shot being fired. The USA, in particular, wanted a leader in Georgia it could do business with, because of Georgia's strategically important position between the Caspian and the Black Seas. The Caspian Sea is home to the world's third largest oil and gas deposits. A way had to be found to bring this oil from the Caspian Sea without passing through Iran, hence the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, now under construction, which will take oil through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey (through several conflict zones, and in a seismically active area, it has to be said). For the BTC pipeline to be viable, the USA needed to bring the southern Caucasus into its sphere of influence, and away from that of Russia. Back in 2002, the USA sent ten helicopters and 150 military instructors into Georgia, under the pretext of helping the Georgians combat al Qaida militants and their Chechen allies who were, it was said, establishing themselves in the lawless Pankisi Gorge. Although the Russians expressed satisfaction that their murderous campaign in Chechnya had been rebranded as part of the 'war on terror' in return for their support for the US attack on Afghanistan, they were furious at being upstaged in Georgia. The response was closer ties between Moscow and two of the areas fighting for greater autonomy within or independence from Georgia: South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The leaders of both asked Moscow for associate status within the Russian Federation, thus threatening the fragmentation of the Georgian state.

The Bush administration is, needless to say, up to its neck in the BTC project. Chevron (former board member Condoleeza Rice) is the principal firm involved in the BTC consortium. Dick Cheney's Halliburton, better known for its role as a war profiteer in Iraq, was bidding for the engineering work on the Turkish sector of the route. James Baker III, a family advisor to the Bushes, heads the law firm Baker Botts which represents the consortium of firms drilling and exploring in the Caspian Sea, and sits on the US-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce. Clearly, when the toxic Texan has Georgia on his mind, he is not losing sleep over whether five million Georgians are happy with their government.

But why did the USA decide to abandon its old ally Shevardnadze? Before November last year, it seems that Washington was happy for him to stay on as president until his term expired in 2005, provided he did something about rooting out corruption, and let the opposition, which had won the election, form a majority in parliament. Even Shevardnadze's clumsy attempt to defraud the opposition of its victory might not, in itself, have told against him. In October, the same kind of behaviour by the Aliev dynasty in neighbouring Azerbaijan, and the jailing of those who protested against it, provoked only token US disapproval. But the pro-western Shevardnadze was not sufficiently anti-Russian for the US's liking. The Bush administration was furious with the Georgian government last year when it made a deal with the Russian state gas supplier Gazprom to supply gas to Georgia. The US ambassador made the extraordinary demand on what is supposedly an independent state, that it inform the US government about such deals in advance, while Bush's energy advisor flew to Tbilisi to demand that Shevardnadze pull the plug on the deal. What tipped the balance against Shevardnadze was the fear on the US's part of full-scale civil war if Shevardnadze resorted to force, and the subsequent opting out of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and possibly Ajaria too. The last thing the USA wanted was a 'failed state' on its pipeline route, and no return on the $1bn given in aid since 1991.

What was crucial was that the USA had been grooming a client, who was waiting in the wings. That client was the US-educated Saakashvili, formerly justice minister under Shevardnadze. According to the Russian newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (November 24, 2003) he 'was specially invited to a seminar in Belgrade this summer [2003] on how to make a "velvet revolution" like the Serbian one. Mr Saakashvili received detailed instructions and followed them line by line'.

Saakashvili denounced the Gazprom deal last year and since becoming president has pressed for the speeding up of the closure of the two remaining Russian bases in Georgia. His nationalist agenda makes him popular with right-wing Georgians opposed to any more concessions to separatist movements, although this carries risks if he alienates the other nationalities too much. There has already been a sign of this when, on January 8, the parliament of the western region of Ajaria declared a state of emergency, alleging that members of the Georgian youth organisation, Kmara, active in the overthrow of Shevardnadze, had been distributing leaflets calling for the overthrow of the government of the Ajarian leader Abashidze.

To the majority of Georgians, who do not have their snouts in the trough, Saakashvili will bring no real improvement. The crony capitalism of the post-Stalinist mafia may be replaced by, or find a form of coexistence with, the rule of western multinationals, taking advantage of the WTO 'free trade' rules to make what they can out of Georgia's natural resources and what is left of its industry and public services. Georgia is valuable to those multinationals primarily because of where it is, and because of the need to take oil through its territory. Saakashvili's Georgian nationalism is no answer to the complex inter ethnic rivalries and disputes in the southern Caucasus, but then neither is the fragmentation of the region into numerous mini-states, each with its own ethnic minorities, and striving to be a client state of either Russia or the west. While socialists must support the right to self-determination, up to and including secession if necessary, the only way in which that right can be exercised on any equitable basis by *all* the nationalities involved is through a socialist federation of the Caucasus, with its natural resources and industry under the control of its workers, not of home-grown gangsters or foreign multinationals. **WA**

No escape

After his release from prison this month, nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu will be confined to Israel and kept under constant surveillance, explains **Roland Rance**

Mordechai Vanunu is due to be released from prison on April 21, at the end of his 18-year sentence for revealing the scale of Israel's nuclear weaponry. However, supporters and activists, who plan to greet him on his release from Ashkelon Gaol, are concerned that he will still not be at liberty, but will face continuing restrictions and even threats to his life.

In 1986, Vanunu, a former technician at the plutonium separation plant in the Dimona nuclear installation, revealed to the *Sunday Times* the extent of Israel's secret nuclear armoury. On the basis of Vanunu's accounts, and the photographs which he had managed to take at the plant, experts estimated that Israel had manufactured and stockpiled about 200 nuclear warheads. This showed the hypocrisy of Israel's repeated pledge not to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East. Israel, which is not a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, is believed to have developed its nuclear weapons during the 1970s, in secret collaboration with the apartheid regime in South Africa. The two states apparently tested a prototype in the South Atlantic in 1979.

Although the existence of this armoury was long suspected, Vanunu's revelations provided the first independent confirmation, as well as indicating its scale. But, even before the story appeared in the *Sunday Times*, Vanunu was in the hands of the Israeli state. In a classic underground operation, he was lured from London to Rome by Mossad agent 'Cindy' (now known to be Cheryl Ben Tov, an estate agent in Florida). In Rome he was drugged, and smuggled in chains back to Israel, where he was charged with treason and espionage.

For several months, Vanunu's fate was not known, until his name was accidentally included on a court record, and spotted by a sharp-eyed journalist. The trial was conducted in great secrecy. Vanunu was brought to court in a windowless van, wearing boxing gloves and a motorcycle helmet, after he wrote on his hand 'I was hijacked in Rome 30.9.86' – the first confirmation of how he arrived in Israel. Vanunu's brother Meir, who had earlier reported this kidnapping, was himself threatened with arrest, and forced to flee Israel for several years.

At the end of the trial, to the surprise of some observers, Vanunu was convicted of aggravated espionage and treason, and sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment. Since then, he has spent 12 years in solitary confinement, in a clear, but unsuccessful, attempt to break his spirit and drive him insane.

The campaign for Vanunu's release, and for a nuclear-free Middle East, has continued almost from the time of his arrest. In London, activists – many of them Israeli exiles – have organised a regular weekly picket of the Israeli Embassy in Kensington for the past 11 years; many of them are planning to join the delegation to greet him on his release.

While in prison, Vanunu has received many peace awards. In 1987, he received the Swedish Right Livelihood Award (the alternative Nobel prize), and he has since received many others. He has been awarded an honorary doctorate by Tromso University and has been nominated for the Nobel peace prize. Amnesty International, while not regarding Vanunu as a prisoner of conscience, has described his treatment as 'cruel, inhuman and degrading'.

Censorship of both the nuclear issue, and Vanunu's situation, has been intense. In 1987, the Alternative Information Centre in Jerusalem, which had organised press conferences on the Vanunu case, was closed by administrative order for six months. When it reopened, I joined the Centre as editor of the English-language monthly *News From Within*. All articles on Vanunu were subjected to severe censorship; on one occasion, we were obliged to make over 30 changes to one short article, and I was myself threatened with prosecution for indicating that these changes had been made.

This censorship now seems set to be applied to Mordechai Vanunu himself on his release. Earlier press reports in Israel suggested that he was still such a security threat to the state that following his release it might be necessary to place him under Administrative Detention (indefinite imprisonment without trial), but at the end of February it was announced officially that, although this would not be imposed, he would be denied a passport and subject to constant surveillance. Any statements he makes about nuclear matters, or about the circumstances of his arrest, will lead to further charges against him.

Vanunu, who converted to Christianity in 1986, and who has been legally adopted by a couple in Minnesota, has no wish to remain in Israel – where his conversion is viewed by many as a greater treason than his whistleblowing. But it seems that he will not be allowed to carry out his wish to settle in the USA and teach history.

Meanwhile, Nobel peace prize winner Shimon Peres – the man who as director general of the Defence Ministry in the 1950s initiated Israel's nuclear development, and as prime minister in 1986 ordered Vanunu's kidnapping – is still leader of Israel's opposition Labour Party, and remains free to continue his advocacy of war crimes and ethnic cleansing. **WA**

Hardliners strike back

Laurence Barrett examines the latest twist in the power struggle inside Iran

Iran's Ayatollahs started the year under pressure on three fronts. Firstly, in a concession which they regarded as a humiliation, the Islamic Republic was forced to suspend uranium enrichment activities and sign the additional protocol in the non proliferation treaty allowing short-notice UN inspections of its nuclear facilities.

This climbdown, in the form of a compromise with the governments of France, Britain and Germany, averted the threat of sanctions by the UN security council, which would have followed in the event of Iran failing to meet the October 31 deadline imposed by the International Atomic Energy Authority, by which it had to prove that it had no weapons programme. Iran blinked first, as sanctions would have meant the real possibility of a US-Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear installations.

A previous blow to the authority of the hardliners in Iran had been the awarding of the Nobel peace prize to human rights activist Shirin Ebadi. This provoked a furious reaction from the hardliners because, in awarding her the prize, the Nobel committee was taking sides against them in Iran's power struggle. It was also a signal from the liberal west that it approves of Ebadi's gradualist approach to reform of the Islamic Republic, as her conception of human rights is firmly within the liberal Islamic tradition. In a society such as Iran, where there are virtually no human rights, particularly for women and girls, this nevertheless brings her into conflict with the regime, and her courage and tenacity are widely admired – hence the large crowds waiting to greet her at the airport.

And then there was the earthquake in Bam, from which the hardliners were again feeling the heat. There was widespread anger at how, in a country used to earthquakes, modern buildings such as hospitals were not earthquake proof, and at the amateurish response of the government, such as its inability to cope with the rush of blood donors. The USA was quick to exploit the situation caused by the earthquake. 'Earthquake diplomacy' was a convenient way of ironing out the differences between the neo-cons around Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, who are attempting to intervene in the Iranian political power struggle, and the pragmatists around Colin Powell, as it provided a way of exerting pressure on Iran without actually attacking it. The Bush regime provided aid, and announced a partial lifting of 25-year old sanctions to allow US citizens to make charity donations. Any further normalisation of relations with the USA, however, would carry a political and economic price.

The hardliners struck back, however, when the unelected Council of Guardians, a bastion of the hardliners, vetoed about half of the candidates due to fight the elections held on February 20, thus purging the reformist candidates at a stroke. The parliament, or *Majlis*, is, or was, a strong hold of the reformists, led by president Khatemi. Even after the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had intervened, at the request of Khatemi, over 2,000 candidates were barred from standing. Many candidates who were sitting MPs resigned in protest, and a number of MPs staged a sit-in in the parliament building. When Ayatollah Khamenei decreed that the election should go ahead, despite, or because of, over 2,000 candidates being unable to stand, Khatemi meekly agreed, thus losing any shred of credibility he had left. This surely spells the end of Khatemi's strategy of gradual reform and liberalisation of the Islamic Republic. It must tell even the most optimistic of Khatemi's supporters that the hardliners in the theocracy were prepared to allow the channelling of discontent against the regime into electoral campaigns, only on the basis that there were to be no political parties, and that the candidates for the election and the laws passed by the parliament had to be approved by the unelected hardliners. In other words, under no circumstances could the fundamentals of the Islamic Republic be threatened.

In going along with this farcical election, Khatemi is now actively propping up the Islamic Republic. The largest parliamentary faction, the Participation Front, led, ironically, by Khatemi's brother, called for a boycott of the election. Khatemi himself called for maximum participation in the elections to defeat the hardliners, but who could people have voted for?

Predictably, the early returns gave the hardliners a substantial lead, even in Tehran, a reformist stronghold. The indications were that the turnout was substantially down on previous elections, a fact seized on by the reformists in the Interior Ministry in an attempt, too late in the day, to regain the initiative.

The 'earthquake diplomacy' of the USA showed that the divisions among the political elite revolve, to a large extent, around hostility to the USA. Or at least, that is how those divisions are expressed. The hardliners call it the 'Great Satan', while the reformists, while maintaining, for form's sake, a certain hostility, are more conciliatory. Neither is correct. Many Iranians, especially those in contact with the Iranian community in the USA, know that the denunciations of the 'Great Satan' are so much sloganeering tosh from a barbaric regime which may be approaching its death throes. To any Iranian under 30, the constant harking back to the occupation of the US embassy of 1979-80 is meaningless. However, in opposing this rhetoric of the hardliners, the Iranian opposition must also avoid the opposite danger. The welfare or freedom of Iranians is not George W. Bush's primary concern. In the first instance, Washington wants to 'neutralise' Iran to ensure that it does not use its influence among the Shia community in Iraq to destabilise the USA's plan to set up a pliant regime there, prior to withdrawing in time for the US elections in November. Ultimately, by hook or by crook, the USA would like to establish a friendly regime in Iran itself, so as to regain control of its oil and gas reserves.

Most recently, the agreement with the IAEA has hit trouble, with Iran's foreign minister accusing the USA of bullying the Europeans on the Authority. He has also insisted on Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Much of the rhetoric may be for internal consumption, reflecting the recently regained confidence of the hardliners. They want to use the pride many Iranians feel in the nuclear industry to try to mobilise the population behind them.

The hardliners may have won a battle but they have not won the war. The Islamic Republic is as crisis ridden and as unstable as ever. As Khatemi and his reformist allies are not going to exploit the opportunity for overthrowing it, some other force has to. February's official celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic were, by all accounts, peopled mainly by pro-regime hardliners such as the Revolutionary Guards, and by state employees who were bussed in. What the official speeches did not mention was the role of the Iranian working class, mainly the oil workers, in the overthrow of the Shah. Those workers were imprisoned or killed and their organisations outlawed by the newly established Islamic Republic. The Iranian working class needs to regroup, rebuild its organisations and bring behind it an alliance of all those forces desperate for change, and who took to the streets last summer – women, students, intellectuals and young people – with the aim of bringing down the Islamic Republic. **WA**

Uneasy peace in the Ivory Coast

Bob Wood explains the background to the conflict in the west African state

Once the situation in Liberia was stabilised, so the story ran, then peace would descend on the rest of the west African region. Conflict in neighbouring countries resulted merely from the spilling over of the Liberian conflict across porous borders. Yet the root causes of the recent unresolved civil war in the Ivory Coast have little to do with Liberia.

The Ivory Coast obtained its independence from France in 1960 and was ruled for some 30 years afterwards by the patrician President Felix Houphouët-Boigny. Originally a representative of the African planter interest, and from a chief's family, Houphouët Boigny achieved lasting popularity when, as a representative at the French Constituent Assembly in Paris in 1945, he successfully moved the abolition of forced labour, one of the most hated aspects of colonial rule. For many years after independence, the Ivory Coast prospered, its exports of agricultural products, mainly coffee and cocoa, making it the economic star of the west African region. There is some offshore oil and pineapples and cotton are also exported.

But in 1978 coffee and cocoa prices collapsed, not to recover until well into the nineties. The Ivorian economy entered a period of crisis, and an IMF-imposed structural adjustment programme resulted in cuts of between 15 and 40 per cent in civil service salaries. Under both international and domestic pressure (demonstrations by trade unionists and students erupted in early 1990), Houphouët-Boigny finally agreed to end the one-party rule of his Democratic Party of the Ivory Coast (PDCI).

Opposition

In the presidential elections held in November 1990, Houphouët-Boigny was challenged by Laurent Gbagbo, who had a long record of opposition to the regime. Originally a university lecturer and active in his trade union, Gbagbo had been imprisoned for two years in the early seventies and had then spent a period in exile in Paris, where he had launched the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI). In the presidential election Gbagbo was soundly beaten, getting only 18 per cent of the vote, although there may have been some electoral fraud.

An astute politician who had always endeavoured to incorporate all ethnic groups in his party, Houphouët-Boigny appointed the northern bureaucrat, Alassane Dramane Ouattara, as his prime minister.

When Houphouët-Boigny died in December 1993, Ivorian politics began to unravel, in spite of an economic upturn when produce prices reached record levels in 1994. Henri Konan Bedié assumed the presidential mantle in the run-up to the elections due in 1995, and Ouattara went off to work at the IMF.

Once Houphouet Boigny's masterly and centralising grip had been released, regional tensions began to surface, and a split from the PDCI produced the Republican Rally (RDR) with support mainly in the north and north west. When the RDR asked Ouattara to be their presidential candidate, Bedié fell back on the most scurrilous possible strategy of racism and ethnic hatred.

Islam entered west Africa across the Sahara a thousand years ago – the people of the savannah and the desert are still Muslims. But Islam barely entered the forest or reached the coast. Not until Europeans began to colonise the coast did indigenous religions begin to be replaced by Christianity. Thus a pattern was set, still the case in many west African countries, of an Islamic north and a Christian south. In the Ivory Coast the northern people have more in common, in both ethnic and religious terms, with the Burkinabè of neighbouring Burkina Faso than they do with the people of southern Ivory Coast.

Seeking work on the agricultural plantations, immigrants have come to the Ivory Coast from many other nearby countries, but particularly from Burkina Faso and Mali. Nearly a third of the population of some 16 million are of foreign origin, 'strangers', and northerners are often tarred with the same brush.

Ethnic tension

Fearing Ouattara's candidacy, Bedié and the PDCI exploited ethnic tension and anti-Muslim prejudice and attempted to narrow the definition of Ivorian nationality. And in a scarcely veiled attack on Ouattara, an electoral code was introduced which declared that the parents of any presidential candidate must both be Ivorian nationals, and that the candidate must have lived in the country for the previous five years. It was alleged that Ouattara's father was Burkinabè and he had of course been out of the country working for the IMF. Both Ouattara and Gbagbo boycotted the election in protest, and Gbagbo declared that the electoral law was both racist and xenophobic, an opinion which as we will see was not all that deeply held.

Bedié romped home in the 1995 election with a claimed 96 per cent of the vote, but his reign was to be relatively short-lived. In 1999 a bloodless coup led by Staff Sergeant Ibrahim (I.B.) Coulibaly ousted Bedié. General Robert Guei was asked to lead the subsequent junta.

In the run-up to the presidential elections the FPI and Gbagbo opportunistically moved to get the racist vote, and launched a virulent campaign against the 'fraudu-

lent' citizenship of foreigners. Ouattara was once more declared unacceptable as a presidential candidate by the Supreme Court, but this time it was the turn of the PDCI to join the RDR in boycotting the election. It was a straight fight between Robert Guei and Laurent Gbagbo.

When the government announced that Guei had won with 53 per cent of the vote, Gbagbo's supporters took to the streets and Guei was forced into exile. Gbagbo was then declared the winner with 59 per cent of the vote. Now in power, Gbagbo and the FPI continued their racist campaign against 'foreigners' and the RDR. Mosques were burnt and an estimated 300 northerners killed in ethnic and religious violence. The campaign continued into the following year, in spite of which the RDR did remarkably well in local elections.

In September 2002 heavy fighting erupted in Abidjan in an attempted coup, and General Guei was killed. Unable to immediately establish control of Abidjan, the rebel soldiers retreated to Bouaké in the centre of the country. They rapidly established control of the northern half of the country, and could almost certainly have taken Abidjan had they attacked it.

French intervention

They were only prevented from doing so by the intervention of the French, ostensibly in order to protect foreign nationals. There is an extensive French expatriate community in the Ivory Coast. A ceasefire was brokered after a month of fighting, dividing the country in two – the south held by the old government and the north by the rebels, with the French forces attempting to police the ceasefire line.

The rebellion quickly took on a political face, when the Patriotic Movement of the Ivory Coast (MPCI) was formed. The leadership of the MPCI is contested between three men – Guillaume Soro, a young and very able former student leader (but also, interestingly, a Catholic), I.B. Coulibaly, the staff sergeant who led the coup which installed the Guei regime, and Louis Dacoury Tabley, a former close ally of President Gbagbo. Of these, it is Soro who seems to be in the ascendancy, particularly after Coulibaly was arrested and detained during a visit to France. Recently there have been signs of internal conflict in the rebel camp.

Over the last 18 months the numbers of foreign soldiers has gradually increased. French forces have multiplied, and there have been contingents from other west African countries. Both are resented. Neither side welcomes the intervention of the former colonial power (Ivorians talk of the need for a 'second independence'), and Nigerians would be particularly unwelcome. Ivorians are only too well aware of the corrupt practices of Nigerian troops during their interventions in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars. More recently United Nations forces, small in number, have entered the fray.

UN peacekeeping force

There seems to be little direction or consistency in French policy towards its former colony, except perhaps to keep the United States at bay. It is symptomatic that when the French proposed at the UN security council an increase in the UN presence, this was opposed by the Americans. After a period of reluctance, though, the US has agreed to the deployment of a UN force of some 6,000 troops, organised separately from the French. The peacekeeping force will begin its operations in early April, and the intention is that it will supervise disarmament and the presidential elections due in October 2005. This will bring the total number of UN troops in west Africa (in Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Ivory Coast) to some 30,000 – a nice little earner for the third world countries which supply the soldiers.

Following peace talks organised by the French, it was agreed to set up a transitional government, including ministers from the rebel movement, pending elections in 2005. Although President Gbagbo went along with the agreement, he has dragged his feet in implementing it. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the rebels have no intention of disarming without political progress. They say that 'political agreements will have to be linked to each major phase of disarmament'. Guillaume Soro has also emphasised that 'the disarmament of our combatants is conditional on free and fair elections'.

Urban militias

One of the most worrying aspects of the Ivorian crisis is the growth of urban militias in Abidjan and some other southern towns and cities, based on unemployed youth and students – the lumpen proletariat. The politics of these groups can be judged from an interview given by one of the leaders to an Ivorian newspaper: 'National reconciliation is not going to happen with these divisive accords [the French-brokered agreement], you can count on me. . . . We're going to liberate the Ivory Coast; we want to tear the Ivory Coast away from the sons of immigrants who want to take everything away from the Ivorians. . . . we're fighting to clean the Ivory Coast of its sons of immigrants . . .'

The president's wife and leading members of his party have made similar comments, although Gbagbo himself in his presidential role had pretended to be above 'political squabbles'. He has nevertheless not prevented several thousand young men from these urban militias from being incorporated into the Ivorian army. That he has any intention of reaching a compromise is also belied by his extensive purchase of arms since the ceasefire. These include 30,000 rifles, 5,000 machine guns, twenty tanks, three helicopter gun ships, four helicopters, two bombers and two fighter planes. In the last year alone, Gbagbo has spent about $150 million on arms. These are not the actions of a man bent on conciliation.

Although apart from sporadic incidents, the ceasefire has held remarkably well for the last two years along the line dividing the north from the south, there has been a great deal of fighting and turmoil in the west of the country adjacent to the Liberian border. Here there has been a veritable imbroglio of competing armed groups and warlords, variously aligned with the southern Ivorian government, the northern Ivorian rebels, the former Taylor government in Liberia, and various Liberian rebel groups. There have also been some Sierra Leonean 'soldiers of fortune', who now know no other trade than warfare. There are now some thousands of 'internally displaced persons' and refugees.

Apparently willingly imprisoned by an extreme nationalist movement, which operates with a narrow and exclusive definition of what it means to be Ivorian, Gbagbo has little room for manoeuvre. Northerners are reduced to second class status, guilty by association with Burkinabè. If the civil war is renewed there is a danger that Burkina Faso will be sucked in to a regional conflict. Extensive population transfer and bloodshed remains a real possibility.

Impasse

Given the current impasse, it is tempting to suggest that some kind of federation, with relatively autonomous north and south regions might defuse the ethnic hostility. But the experience of Ethiopia, where local government has been parcelled out on ethnic lines, is not comforting. For it has led to increased ethnic conflict, not less.

There is a pan-african socialist tradition which denies the sanctity of inherited colonial borders, and prioritises the identity of class over ethnicity. That tradition will need to be rediscovered. It is certain that the current western solution to Africa's wars and fragmentation – gathering together the warring parties into 'transitional' governments under UN tutelage, rather like mediaeval barons gathered at the king's court – merely freezes the problems rather than resolving them. **WA**

US calls time on Aristide

Ten years ago, US troops invaded Haiti to reinstate the elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. On February 29 they escorted him out of the country as right-wing rebels advanced on the capital. **Nick Davies** reports

Did he jump, or was he pushed? That is the question surrounding president Jean-Bertrand Aristide's rapid departure from Haiti. Bertrand says he was kidnapped by the US forces which now occupy the country at the head of a UN-sanctioned 'peacekeeping' force. The US government says he went of his own accord. Even if the kidnap allegations are exaggerated, it is clear that Aristide was leant on to some degree. That he did not know that he was headed for the Central African Republic until 45 minutes before he landed there, and that 60 US marines were on the aircraft with him (as is alleged by CAR government sources), suggest that he was a man not entirely in control of his own destiny.

Given that an elected government was being ejected from office by armed gangs, much of the media coverage of the violence in Haiti was strangely ambivalent. Many people in Britain could be forgiven for thinking that the 'unpopular' (sic) government of Aristide and the opposition were as good, or as bad, as each other. The racist assumption is that Haiti is yet another 'failed state', its people incapable of living together. The frequent media references to 'voodoo' reinforce the impression of violent, superstitious people who cannot rule themselves. However, it is not Haitians themselves but the poverty and inequality resulting from US imposed economic policies which bear the chief responsibility for the present crisis. It is also clear that the Bush administration wanted rid of Aristide.

Armed gangs

Much of the ambivalent media coverage can be traced to the official attitude of the Bush administration. Colin Powell insisted that the US did not want 'regime change', and called the armed gangs which overthrew Aristide 'terrorists', yet, considering that the USA is supposed to be in the thick of a 50-year war against 'terrorism', Washington was strangely relaxed about 'terrorism' Haiti-style, treating a democratically elected government and goon-squads in the pay of self-styled 'patriots' as equivalents. Judging the Haitian government by standards radically different from those observed by the US government, Powell appealed to Aristide to 'reach out to the opposition', adding, with a note of understated menace: 'It would be inconsistent with our plan to attempt to force him from office against his will.' While paying lip service to democracy, the USA was giving covert support to the elected government's anti-democratic, reactionary opponents.

Jean Bertrand Aristide was, in 1990, Haiti's first democratically elected president. Then a Catholic priest, he championed of the cause of the poor who make up the majority of Haitian society. He referred to capitalism as a 'mortal sin'. Needless to say, Haiti's elite and the army did not care for Aristide's populist programme. In 1991 he was overthrown in a coup, led by former CIA contacts Emmanuel 'Toto' Constant and Raoul Cedras. Then, as now, the US political establishment was facing both ways. The CIA and the extreme right, typified by Senator Jesse Helms, saw Aristide as a 'beardless Castro'. Cedras reminded the US right of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier. Papa Doc was the thug and dependable US ally who ruled Haiti from 1956 to 1971. His was the casting vote that got Castro's Cuba thrown out of the OAS. His son and heir, 'Baby Doc', fled to France in 1986, where he proceeded to fritter away the millions he had looted from the Haitian treasury.

President Clinton, however, saw the brutality of the right-wing paramilitaries in FRAPH, active in the coup against Aristide and the heirs to Duvalier's dreaded *Tontons Macoutes*, as a liability, and the presence of large numbers of Haitian refugees in the United States as a problem and decided that the best policy was a US-led invasion to restore Aristide, which duly happened in 1994.

Of course, there was a catch. Aristide was only allowed to return as president on condition that he accepted Washington's neo liberal agenda: a 'structural adjustment' package which dismantled the public sector, economic activity geared towards debt repayment, an open investment policy, and a pandering to the interests of the Haitian business sector. Correctly, Clinton figured that these policies stood more chance of acceptance when implemented by Aristide than by Cedras. Aristide was in an impossible position, damned if he did, damned if he didn't, and he knew it. 'Either we enter a global economic system, in which we know we cannot survive,' he wrote in his 2000 book *Eyes of the Heart*, 'or we refuse and face death by slow starvation.'

Free market

The results have been catastrophic for the majority of Haitians. Back in 1996 the World Bank itself predicted that up to 70 per cent of Haitians would be unable to survive the proposed free market policies. By the end of the 1990s, Haiti's rice production had halved and over half Haiti's rice sales came from subsidised imports from the US (*Guardian* April 11, 2002). Inevitably, Aristide has taken some of the blame, a situation which has been exploited by his opponents among the elite who resented Aristide's continuing presence as much as for what he represented as for what he had

actually done. Cynically, they used the disappointment felt by some of the poor for their own ends. However, many of those who voted for Aristide in the past were all too aware of what he was up against, and so he continued to enjoy popular support. He won the November 2000 presidential election overwhelmingly, although it was boycotted by much of the opposition, which had accused Aristide's Lavalas Family Party of gaining its May 2000 victory in the parliamentary and local government elections by vote-rigging and fraud. Although the OAS only found fault with the method used to calculate the senate election results, international lenders and aid donors were happy to use the opposition's allegations as an excuse to suspend help for Haiti.

One of Aristide's principal advocates in the United States is Congress member Maxine Walters. If her claim that more schools have been built in Haiti since 1994 than between 1804 and 1994 is even only partly true, it is an achievement worth defending. Yet for all that, it is difficult to see what benefits there have been. Agriculture, on which most Haitians depend, is suffering as a result of subsidised US imports and soil erosion, and two-thirds of the population lives in abject poverty. Whatever the pressure he was under, Aristide was nonetheless timid and vacillating towards his opponents in the elite, but also a top-down politician as regards his supporters, or potential supporters, in that he would not mobilise the massive support he had, or could have had, in defence of his programme, for the interests of the poor, and against the elite. He could not be relied upon to fight consistently for his own policies. He earned praise when he disbanded Haiti's army in 1995, but he left himself nothing to defend himself with. Armed pro-government gangs fought back against the insurrectionists. Obviously, given the circumstances, the government has no option but to defend itself, but that is not the same as a mobilisation of the masses in support of the government's programme. Some of the charges of corruption and vote rigging may well stick, although if true, they are as nothing compared to the activities of previous Haitian presidents.

Motley coalition

The opposition that brought down Aristide is a motley coalition of the Haitian elite, right-wing paramilitaries and gangsters. Its name, Democratic Convergence, is at best only half-accurate. Prominent in the opposition is the Group of 184, a pro-business organisation the leaders of which, such as Andy Apaid, are sweatshop owners. Apaid led a successful campaign in 2003 to oppose Aristide's attempt to increase the minimum wage. Also heavily involved is Louis Jodel Chamblain, the head of the Duvalierist death squads in the 1980s and a leader of the FRAPH. Two formerly warring gangs who have now joined forces orchestrated the violence in Gonaives. The leader of one of these gangs, Jean 'Tatoune' Pierre, was convicted for his part in the 1994 Raboto massacre of Aristide supporters. Also convicted in his absence for this role in the same massacre was Chamblain. While the opposition's political wing distanced itself from the looting and murder of the armed gangs, the Raboto affair shows that there are connections between the two. The political leaders of Democratic Convergence can profit from the current situation without getting their hands dirty.

Spooks

The connections between the Haitian opposition and right-wing politicians and intelligence spooks in the USA are many and obvious. Emmanuel 'Toto' Constant, a close associate of Chamblain, has admitted that the CIA funds and directs FRAPH. Constant was involved, with a US agent, in the planning of the assassination of the pro-Aristide minister for justice in 1993. It is significant that the US refuses to release the FRAPH documents it captured during the 1994 invasion. Those documents would give away the extent of co-operation between the USA and FRAPH. Chamblain and Guy Philippe, the former Cap Haitien police chief, have attended conferences of Haitian oppositionists in the Dominican Republic funded and attended by the right-wing US organisation, the International Republican Institute.

In the US itself, the same old faces who supported the Contras in Nicaragua and have more recently been up to their necks in the attempts to oust Hugo Chávez in Venezuela are now hand in glove with the opposition in Haiti. Otto Reich and Robert Noriega were linked over a year ago to the planning of a secret conference which discussed possible intervention in Haiti by French-speaking nations after the departure of Aristide. Where did the opposition get its weapons? It appears that in 1994 US troops were under orders to leave undisturbed FRAPH weapons stockpiles. Many of the weapons used by the opposition now can be traced to those stockpiles. Others come from a consignment given to the Dominican Republic by the USA in exchange for an undertaking never to use the International Court to accuse US citizens of war crimes.

There is no real inconsistency between the USA's declared aim of establishing democracy in the Middle East and its apparent sabotage of it in Haiti. All the USA wants, in any given country, is a regime in place that suits its interests, whether it is democratic or not. The differences in approach between Clinton in 1994 and George W. Bush ten years on are differences in tactics, and no more. The last thing Haitians need is for the USA to parachute in and impose 'democracy'. They have done enough damage doing that in Iraq. Therefore those in the liberal media who, correctly, blame the USA-imposed economic policies for the difficulties in building democracy in Haiti are contradicting themselves by blaming the USA for not doing enough to protect the elected government.

Generally, socialists have no difficulty in defending an elected government, particularly one that has the support of the working class and the poor, when it is under attack from the right. In Haiti, socialists should have been prepared to defend the government in so far as it was prepared to carry out progressive measures. This does not imply any political support for Aristide or the way in which he fought for the programme on which he was elected, in so far as he fought at all. Clearly there is a need for a third force in Haiti, led by the working class, which defends whatever the government has carried out which is worthy of defence. This third force but must be completely politically independent of Lavalas, while reaching out to those in the grass roots coalition that is Lavalas who see themselves as socialists. It must, of course, be implacably opposed to the right-wing opposition. Such a force should fight for policies which benefit the majority of Haitians, not the Haitian elite, and certainly not the US and European multinationals.

- US troops out of Haiti!
- Cancel the debt! IMF hands off Haiti!
- End the aid embargo!
- Fight back against the gangs and paramilitaries!

WA

Introduction

Bob Wood

In Workers Action No.23 we published an essay by Felix Morrow called 'Religion – its social roots and role'. The following article by Frank Ridley is intended to complement Morrow's essay. Both are relevant in the context of the discussion which has arisen in the anti-war movement over the relationship between religion and socialism, and over the wearing of the hijab.

Ridley's argument has three strengths. Firstly, he draws a distinction between 'natural' religion, which arises in primitive communal societies from fear and ignorance of natural phenomena, and 'supernatural' religion in class societies, where the fear is largely of man-made phenomena like unemployment.

Secondly, he makes a crucial distinction between religion in general and organised religion in the form of churches, mosques and other religious institutions. Whereas Morrow tends to emphasise the way in which organised religion is used by the ruling class to oppress other classes, to 'keep them in their place', Ridley gives more space to the ways in which the oppressed use religion in order to provide themselves with comfort, and indeed have sometimes engaged in social struggle through the medium of religion, using religious arguments.

Thirdly, Ridley argues strongly that religion cannot be abolished in capitalist society. The conditions which give rise to religion are continually reproduced. To abolish religion means to abolish capitalism. 'Religion is a *social* phenomenon in present-day society. Hence no amount of merely negative and critical propaganda can destroy it.' The religious, like the poor, are always with us.

This is entirely consistent with the approach taken by Marx in his introduction to the 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law' (*Collected Works*, Vol.3, pp.175-6). The famous quote that religion is 'the *opium* of the people' is taken from this introduction, and suggests out of context that religion is administered as a drug, rather like fluoride in water. What Marx actually says is rather more nuanced, and since neither Ridley nor Morrow quote it in full, here it is:

> The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*.
>
> *Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.
>
> To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears*, the *halo* of which is religion.

Ridley admits that in the past there have been 'revolutionary churches' and revolutionary heretics. There was certainly a religious aspect to the Peasant Rebellion of 1381, in which the lower clergy took a prominent role. In the mid seventeenth century, social struggles between royalists and parliamentarians, and between these and the common people, were almost invariably cast in religious terms.

But is this all 'ancient history', as Ridley suggests? In the wake of the influence of liberation theology in central and south America, this must be open to question. In El Salvador, Bishop Oscar Romero was assassinated for his opposition to military oppression. In Nicaragua, three Christian priests served in the Sandinista government.

In Brazil, Capuchin friars played a significant part in the emergence of the Sem Terra movement of the landless, as one of the leaders of the movement observes:

> In the sixties, the Catholic Church had largely supported the military dictatorship, but with the growing ferment of liberation theology there was a change of orientation, the emergence of the CPT [Pastoral Commission on Land] and a layer of progressive bishops. Before the line had been: 'No need to worry, you'll have your land in heaven.' Now it was: 'Since you've already got land in heaven, let's struggle for it here as well.' The friars played a good role in stirring up the farmers and getting them organised (João Pedro Stedile, 'Landless battalions', *New Left Review* 15, 2002)

In the present climate, Marxists can only hope that some sort of 'liberation theology' seizes hold of the Muslim world, even while we maintain a critical atheistic stance toward all religion. *Workers Action* has often argued that when workers and others embark on the road of struggle, they are likely to attempt to do so initially through existing institutions. In large parts of the world this will inevitably mean religious upheaval.

Francis Ambrose Ridley (1897-1994) was instrumental in forming, in 1929, the Marxian League, a small group on the fringes of the ILP which in some ways was the precursor of Trotskyism in Britain. Its leading members were Ridley and Aggarwalla, the secretary of the London branch of the Indian National Congress, and it included only a small proportion of workers. It produced a few issues of a duplicated magazine, *The New Man*, in which it published its generally ultra-left ideas.

The Marxian League exaggerated the threat of fascism in Britain, suggesting that 'The present regime in Britain is a transitional regime between Democracy and Fascism', and variously thought that fascism would be established through the National Government or the Conservative Party. It also believed that 'it was a waste of time trying to permeate' the Communist International since by 1931 it was 'completely controlled by Stalin'.

Ridley and Aggarwalla rejected the need for work in the trade unions, regarding them as totally embroiled in capitalism. As Trotsky commented: 'How can the radicalisation of the working class take place outside of the trade unions, without reflecting itself inside the trade unions, without changing their character, without calling forth a selection of new leaders?' Further, 'We must look for the workers where they are to be found today, and not where they may be tomorrow . . .'

Ridley joined the Independent Labour Party in the late thirties, serving on its National Council and jointly editing its weekly journal, *The Socialist Leader*. He was a prolific if slightly eccentric propagandist.

The pamphlet *Socialism and Religion* was originally published by the Engels Society in about 1947. The Engels Society was apparently a small and inconsequential grouping, amounting to little more than Ridley and a few of his friends.

For more details about Ridley and the Marxian League, see S. Bornstein and A. Richardson, *Against the Stream*, Socialist Platform, 1986, Chapter 2 *passim*; *Revolutionary History*, Vol.1, No 1, Spring 1988; and the appreciation of Ridley in *Revolutionary History*, Vol.5, No.3, 1994. Trotsky's criticisms of the Marxian League can be found in *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, 1930-31, Pathfinder, 1973. **WA**

Socialism and Religion

F.A. Ridley

Introduction

'Socialism is a system which in politics expresses itself as republicanism, in economics as communism and in religion as atheism' – August Bebel

The problem of religion is one that is important both in the practical and the theoretical spheres. How comes it that mankind in the past has devoted so large a portion of his energies to the investigation of alleged 'spiritual' phenomena to the point of neglecting his proper material environment? And in practice, whence comes the enormous power of organised religion – a power which has dominated what passes for 'civilisation' almost throughout its entire existence? A power which, whilst shorn of much of its former influence, still wields today an extensive authority throughout the world. And not only throughout the primitive world of barbarism but also among the 'civilised' and professedly scientific nations of the contemporary world.

This important question has naturally aroused much interest and discussion during those comparatively rare epochs in human history in which mankind has been free to think at all about such matters. It goes without saying that, throughout by far the greater part of history, it would have been found distinctly dangerous to ask such questions, indeed impossible, with any measure of legal and personal impunity. Such tribunals as the Inquisition saw to that very effectively! For that matter, in modern Germany and Japan it would have been the reverse of safe to question the divine origin of the 'herrenvolk' ('master-race'): in Japan, ruled by the divine descendants of the Sun-Goddess, it would have been distinctly hazardous to draw attention to too many *eclipses* of the Sun! Not even in Europe does complete religious liberty exist today: in Franco Spain, as in the Ireland of De Valera, the power of the Roman Church still preserves almost mediaeval proportions.

In particular, during the 18th and 19th centuries an extensive critical and scientific literature was devoted to these questions. For these epochs of capitalist growth and progressive expansion afforded extensive scope for religious toleration and for scientific and disinterested religious investigation. In such works as Frazer's monumental *Golden Bough*, and its French and German counterparts, the origins of 'natural' religion were subjected to an exhaustive and critical survey, as were also the 'higher' cosmopolitan and supernatural religions. The origins, dogmas, and general history of Christianity as the traditional religion of Europe were, in particular, made the subject of an elaborate and learned criticism from the time of Voltaire down to the latest researches of our own day.

As a result of these sequential investigations the natural origins and character of religion, including Christianity, are now tolerably well-known. On some details there is, no doubt, still room for controversy. But, in broad outline, we now *know* what religion is, in what kind of mental environment it originally arose and to what kind of intellectual attitudes its alleged 'truths' appealed. And since this is so, can we wonder that the rationalistic critics of the 18th and 19th centuries – the contemporaries of Voltaire, Renan, Huxley, Darwin, Spencer, Grant Allen and Frazer – believed confidently that, its origins and nature once known and ascribed to purely natural causes in human immaturity and ignorance, religion would speedily and automatically vanish from the social scene?

We now know that these too optimistic 'rationalists' were wrong: their 'rationalism' was not sufficiently rational! For religion has not died out. On the contrary, in many respects, it has increased its power. And it has done this because religion is not only an intellectual but a *social* product. Because, as a given society declines, it requires soporifics to drug the multitude. And religion is primarily a *social*, and not an intellectual phenomenon. For Marx laid bare its essential nature in his classical epigram: 'Religion is the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions, the opium of the people.'

For, as a social product, and one at that which arises in a society divided into classes and based on exploitation, religion discharges a *necessary* role in *that* type of society, and cannot die out while such an exploiting society continues to exist. Hence the socialist criticism of religion differs profoundly from the purely intellectual criticism of capitalist scholars. For religion is *necessary* to the class state and to class-society in general. And, as such, can only perish with it. Hence, no amount of merely expository or destructive criticism, useful and necessary as such criticism is in itself, can finally destroy religion. Only the coming of a classless society can do that, by abolishing the *social* antagonisms which necessitate its existence. It is from this standpoint that the problem of religion is examined in the following pages.

Part I: The origins and nature of religion

'If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him' Voltaire

1. The two roots of religion

Religion implies the belief in the existence of a god, or gods, with whom human beings can establish relations and from whom they can receive benefits. Usually, though not quite invariably, it also implies belief in the immortality of the 'spiritual' element in man: his soul. In practice, religion expresses itself in various forms of worship and intercession, both public and private. By means of such rites, as the Greek philosophers used to observe, mankind 'does business with the gods' and establishes reciprocal relationships.

The phenomena that together make up religion are unquestionably of extreme antiquity. Undeniably they can be traced back far beyond the dawn of civilisation to a very early stage in human social evolution. Indeed, if we assume magic to have been the earliest form of religion, which is probable, religion must be traced back almost to the earliest human societies. Amongst animals, as far as any test is possible, nothing that can be called religion seems to exist; indeed it is most improbable that any creature except man has any capacity for abstract reasoning. And the same was presumably true of the very earliest types of 'ape-men' who formed the very earliest societies that came in time to be fully human. We are necessarily dealing with conjectures, but religion in its primitive magical form can be traced with some certainty to the 'neolithic' (new stone) age, and may well have originated still earlier in the 'palaeolithic' (old stone) age. In such vast periods of time dates mean nothing: say, anything from 20,000 to 100,000 years ago.

The history of religion is therefore of vast antiquity, and is coeval in its entirety with many levels of cultural development. Between the witch-doctor beating his drum in the primitive rituals of the Congo, down to the intricate splendour of a High Mass in St. Peter's, Rome, a vast cultural cycle has been spanned. In investigating the evolution of religion *all* these stages of religion must be kept in mind. Only so can we do adequate scientific justice to the subject.

When we investigate the history of religion from the standpoint of the widest pos

sible perspectives it becomes obvious that we are confronted with, broadly, two main species of religion. With substantial accuracy we may style these as, respectively, 'natural' and 'supernatural' religion. In our next two sections we will glance at the historical sequence of these two main types of religious evolution. Here we will glance at their *social* origins and character.

'Natural' religion is the religion of primitive races; that is, of races which have not yet attained to the cultural level of civilisation, using this last word in a Marxist sense to denominate not only a general level of material efficiency and cultural attainment, but, specifically, a society divided into classes and regulated by the class-state. 'Natural' religion, contrarily, is the religion of primitive races who have not yet reached this last level; who still live in tribal communities based on common ownership of the means of production – which latter are obviously very primitive in such a society; and amongst whom class-divisions are either unknown, as in the most primitive races, or at least are weak and undeveloped.

These two types of religion are entirely dissimilar both in their character and in their motivating social causes.

In the case of 'natural' religion we are dealing with very primitive societies who carry on an unceasing battle with nature in order to wrest an uncertain existence from a hostile environment. Amongst peoples in this social stage religion becomes a 'heavenly' reflex of their actual life here below. And, as such, it is compounded chiefly of fear and ignorance, the two chief social features in all such primitive societies. Its gods are either personifications of natural forces, before which primitive man trembles, but which he does not understand: the Sun, the Moon, the Fire, the Thunder, etc. Or they are the ghosts of great chiefs, hunters, warriors, perhaps primitive agriculturalists, whose memory is held in reverence by the tribes which have solved their problem of existence under their leadership, or by means of their prowess in the chase or in war, the two chief occupations of all primitive races.

Hence, 'natural' religion, the religion of all pre civilised races, is a religion motivated by fear and misunderstanding of *natural* forces. It is the product of man's fear and ignorance of *nature*. Contrarily, its social roots are very feeble, and it does not reflect *social* antagonisms and *social* oppressions, at least, to any great extent, since history for such societies has not yet reached the point at which classes have grown up alongside the expanding means of production, at which the class-state presses heavily upon the enslaved masses.

We are consequently driven to this inevitable conclusion: primitive races profess a common type of religion which springs in general from a single source: misunderstanding, and, in direct consequence, fear of the terrifying and unknown forces of nature and of natural phenomena, upon which savage society depends for existence and before which it is so largely helpless.

With the expansion of the means of production and the consequent simultaneous and reciprocal growth of a class society, of the class-state, and of civilisation, the above state of things inevitably passed away. Along with the demise of primitive society there vanished concurrently the type of religion which was the reflex and expression of that society. In its place there developed a new and distinct type of religion: the religion of 'civilised man'; and therefore in itself the inevitable expression of the class-divided society and of the oppressive class-state, which came into being concurrently with 'civilisation' itself. To this 'civilised' type of religion we apply the term 'supernatural,' in sharp distinction to the 'natural' religion of primitive societies.

Supernatural religion differs sharply from natural both in its social origins and in its generic characteristics. Like all religion, like its predecessor, it is still based on fear and ignorance: the historic twin roots of religion. But on *social* rather than on *natural* fear. As society becomes progressively more civilised: that is, as it simultaneously acquires more knowledge of and more control over natural processes, its dependence on and consequent fear of nature becomes continuously less. For example, a citizen of a modern state has no reason to expect death by reason of the failure of the municipal water supply, unlike the dwellers in primitive societies, where droughts still take a heavy toll of human life. Nor does he fear the thunder, nor expect the wrath of celestial powers whenever an eclipse of the moon takes place. As civilisation advances, fear of nature declines along with growing knowledge of and power over its processes.

But fear and ignorance of nature are not the only kind of fear and ignorance. As civilisation progressively advances and frees mankind from the domination of natural forces, it concurrently enslaves it to social forces expressed in the exploitation of a class-society and oppression by a class-state. All civilisation hitherto is synonymous with slavery and exploitation of the majority by the ruling minority.

Consequently, in civilised society fear of man, of the ruling-classes and of the class-state which is their embodiment, takes the place of primitive fear of nature. Hence, in the 'higher' supernatural religions which accompany the rise of civilisation *social* causes predominate over natural causes. To revert to our previous illustration, the citizen of a modern capitalist state knows the nature of eclipses, and no longer lives in fear of drought, but he none the less has the liveliest fear of unemployment, bankruptcy, and military conscription; all of which are *social* causes, unknown to primitive and inseparable from (capitalist) civilised societies.

To sum up this necessarily brief discussion of the nature and evolution of religion: as a product, for all its supernatural pretensions, of *human* society, religion reflects the fundamental nature of that society. And hitherto human society has passed through the primitive classless society of barbarism and the class-divided societies of civilisation. Religion is at all times and places the product of fear and ignorance: but these last assume different forms in different societies: respectively, fear of nature, and fear of exploitation and of the ruling classes who direct and symbolise that exploitation.

To complete our preliminary survey of religion it therefore behoves us to glance at these two sequential species of religion: the natural and the supernatural, according to our terminology. After which we shall be in a better position to investigate the current problem presented by religion in our contemporary world.

2. Natural religion

In our contemporary society with which we are here primarily concerned, 'natural' religion, that is, the religion of primitive races, is merely a problem of historical interest. Consequently we only need touch upon it briefly.

How did religion originate? Of the various theories propounded, the respective merits of which still provoke controversy, two, in particular, stand out. According to the 'animistic' school, represented preeminently by such anthropologists as Tylor and Frazer, gods originally came into existence as the personification of the forces of nature: of the Sun and Moon, Dusk and Dawn, Fire and Thunder; all of which natural phenomena are incomprehensible to primitive peoples. According to the ghost-theory of Herbert Spencer and Grant Allen, gods always, or at least usually, represent the spirits of the dead 'heroes', who appear to their followers in dreams and are thus conceived as still alive in some spirit-land. Homer expressed the universal opinion of barbaric societies when he wrote that Sleep and Death were 'twins', and no barbaric race can distinguish between them. Consequently if the dead appear in dreams, in order to appear they must still be alive somewhere else! Hence the inevitability in such societies of

the conceptions of personal survival and immortality.

Actually, both schools of thought probably contain an element of truth, and it is not always possible to decide between them in the case of particular cults. For example, was the Jewish God, Jahveh (usually mis spelt Jehovah), originally a primitive thunder-god from the Sinai region, where the Jews seem to have originally adopted his worship, or a primitive Hebrew hero, worshipped after his death? Similarly, was the Scandinavian god, Odin, whom the primitive English worshipped, a personification of the Sky, or a primitive Norse 'Führer', an aboriginal 'Hitler'? There is nothing inherently improbable in either explanation.

At any rate, whatever the precise origin or origins of a particular barbaric religious cult may be, there can be no room for doubt with regard to the *social* character of such particular cults. Every 'natural' religion accurately reflects the primitive unsophisticated barbaric society of which it is the celestial replica. In the great epic poems characteristic of such societies, such as the Greek Iliad, or the Scandinavian Sagas, the 'gods' are merely glorified men who spend their existence fighting and drinking – like their earthly worshippers; and who periodically descend from Olympus or Valhalla (the Norse heaven) to fight men or seduce women. And, as befits the gods of barbaric peoples, in the composition of such 'reflex' deities, brawn predominates decidedly over brain!

Another point must be noted. Barbaric societies are but little troubled by abstract ideas, and the uncertainties and complexities of civilised life are unknown. Hence the religions of the nature peoples are naive, unsophisticated, joyous; not 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'; and in their exercise concrete visual acts take precedence over abstract speculations, since the theology of such primitive peoples is elementary in the extreme, in striking contradiction to the complicated metaphysics which usually characterise the theological systems of the 'higher' (civilised) religions.

To sum up: the 'natural' religion of barbaric peoples reproduces faithfully the elementary social organisms that characterise such primitive social states. Above all, it reflects as in a mirror the helplessness of such societies before the dark and unknown powers of an incomprehensible nature. Obviously, in the civilised societies of today such religions have little meaning. The artificial revival of antique paganism in recent Germany and Japan is not due to *natural* but to *political* causes! The 'supernatural' religions of today are as different in their character as in their motivating cause. Accordingly, we propose to glance briefly at this species of religion before turning our attention to the current problem of religion in present-day society.

3. Supernatural religion

With the advent of civilisation and concurrently of class-society and the class-state, barbarism began to disappear, and along with it the type of religion which we have seen above to be characteristic of barbarism. In its place there arose, at first, probably gradually, another and quite different species of religion; one which reflected the new and radically different social conditions which came into existence along with civilisation and class-society at some unknown period before the dawn of recorded history.

In Marxist (that is, in scientific) terminology words like 'civilisation', 'classes', 'the State', etc., are used in a definite and precise sense; unlike bourgeois 'science', in which such terms are used in an extremely vague and haphazard manner, frequently indistinguishable from sheer mumbo jumbo charlatanry. By the term 'civilisation' we imply a social order in which the means of production have expanded to the point where, for the first time, they yield a surplus wealth over and above the lowest needs of current society for immediate consumption. This wealth is owned and utilised in the form of private property by the ruling-class for the time being, which maintains its exploitation of the subjugated masses by the agency of a novel institution unknown in primitive society, that is, the class-state: that 'particular power of suppression', to employ the masterly definition of Engels. In all societies so constituted, from those of the oldest civilisations, Ancient Egypt and Ancient Babylonia, down to and including those of our own day, this fundamental state of things exists. In all such societies, accordingly, the class-struggle for control of surplus-value and for the consequent right to exploit, remains the decisive social factor.

Against the background of a society so constituted it is obvious that the primitive type of religion (in itself the reflex of an altogether different and more elementary society in which *social* antagonisms were relatively undeveloped and weak) could have no conceivable relevance and would, in fact, have been absolutely meaningless. For 'Man – Society – made God in his own image'! And a 'civilised' god can only be the work of 'civilised' men! Despite the recent ludicrous efforts of the German militaristic disciples of Ludendorf and Alfred Rosenberg, along with their Japanese Shintoist colleagues, to revive primitive pagan cults amid modern industrial conditions, the incongruity between the ideology of the machine-age and the nature myths (the Swastika, the 'Solar Wheel', the (Japanese) Sun Goddess, etc.) of primitive rustic paganism is altogether too great. The table-manners of the antique barbaric gods are simply impossible in a modern civilised society.

Unquestionably, the fundamental difference between 'natural' barbaric religion and 'supernatural' – civilised – religion is to be found in the broad distinction already noted above: that is, in 'natural' religion it is physical nature that predominates; whereas in 'supernatural' religion it is social forces, antagonisms and contradictions which play the decisive role. Barbaric religion is a reflex mainly of *Nature*; whereas civilised religion is a reflex mainly of *Society*: the accurate mirror of its *social* inhibitions and contradictions.

If we turn from the purely speculative consideration of the subject to the consideration of the positive evolution of religion this fact becomes crystal-clear. The earliest 'civilised' religions arose in the earliest civilisations; Egypt, Chaldaea, etc. These religions represent the faithful reflex of the societies wherein they originated. For example, each city-state in Egypt and Chaldaea had its own local God. The importance of the state god waxed and waned proportionately with the temporal political and military fortunes of his terrestrial worshippers here below! Thus, when Assyria, by utilising iron weapons for the first time in the history of war, became the dominant empire in western Asia (c.800 BC), simultaneously Assur, the local Assyrian god, was elevated to the first place in the heavenly hierarchy; viz., the *social* discovery of iron for military purposes led to alterations not only in the terrestrial, but, equally, in the celestial sphere! Similarly, when the Egyptian city of Thebes became the capital of a united Egyptian empire, Amon, the city god, became supreme over the other gods. Indeed, throughout the entire history of civilisation heaven faithfully reflects the vicissitudes of earth! The growth of equality in heaven accompanies the growth of inequality on earth!

When we turn to more advanced forms of religion than pagan polytheism the same phenomenon recurs. According to the writers of orthodox textbooks on the history of comparative religion, the broad distinction in religious evolution is that between 'polytheism' – belief in the simultaneous existence of many gods – and 'monotheism', that is, the belief in one god alone. But, in actuality, there is no absolute distinction between the two forms of belief. The historic link between polytheism and monotheism is found in 'monolatry', that is, the belief that many gods exist, but that one alone ('ours', of course), is superior *to*

all others. This was for centuries the belief of the Jews, the 'discoverers' of monotheism. And monotheism itself did not originate among the Jews as a result of speculative reasoning, but was due essentially to the hostility of the surrounding pagan peoples at the time of the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews (c.600 BC), the gods of whom became accordingly quite unacceptable as objects of worship. Hence the Jewish god, Jahveh (Jehovah), was left the solitary tenant in a vacant heaven.

The highest forms of religion faithfully reflect the highest forms of society. This age-old truth is seen with particular clarity in the case of the great cosmopolitan and ethical religions which have arisen in Europe and Asia during the course of the last 2,500 years: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and their modern off-shoots. These 'universal' religions reflect with the fidelity of a mirror the *social* evolution of civilisation throughout this era. They are cosmopolitan because society during this period had been steadily widening its boundaries and advancing from the tribal, first to the national, then to the cosmopolitan sphere. They are ethical, since in a society founded on the exploitation of the many by the few mere brute force is insufficient to hold the masses in subjection: for this last purpose, an ethic is required; that is, the masses must be persuaded to do what it is against their *real* interest to do, and submit *voluntarily* to exploitation on earth in the name of heaven! And they all presuppose the regime of classes, private property, and exploitation, not as temporary social phases, but as something fixed and eternal: 'the *sacred* rights of private property'! Such universally found commandments as 'Thou shalt not steal', 'Thou shalt not covet', 'Thou shalt not kill', etc., etc., presuppose a state of society based on private property, inequality, and violence. It is one of the most glaring paradoxes of all 'civilised' ethics that every society based on *social* theft and murder by the rich must peremptorily forbid individual theft and murder by the poor as an essential prerequisite for its existence!

Space is not, unfortunately, available to pursue in any detail the very interesting and instructive question of the social evolution of the higher religions. A word, however, may be usefully added on that of the one which most concerns us Europeans: viz., Christianity. Historically, this last may be described as the faithful reflex of the last phase of classical society. As the Roman Empire unified the local city states of the Mediterranean, so, concurrently, Christianity unified the local religious cults that were their ideological expression. For example, the Greek writer Plutarch (2nd century AD) went on record with the observation that every city-state (Polis) to be counted as such must have two things: 'A god and a town hall' – viz., seat of government. The Roman Empire abolished the second and the Catholic (Christian) Church the first. Similarly, it is well known that the rise of individualistic capitalism in the 16th century led to new forms of Christianity, in the reformed Churches, which accommodated themselves to the new competitive ethics so different from those of feudalism. For example, punctuality is pre eminently a *capitalist* virtue. Protestantism is the first religion to make it a *religious* virtue: the proletarian who is late at the factory gate cannot be in time at the door of heaven! One could give countless similar examples.

To sum up accordingly the first part of this pamphlet: Religion has historically passed through two main epochs. The era of barbarism, throughout which religion expressed chiefly man's fear of and helplessness before Nature. And the era of civilisation, in which religion was primarily an instrument in the hands of the successive ruling-classes and which primarily reflected fear of these classes and of the fundamental social antagonisms which have, hitherto, dominated every class-ruled society.

One further point may be added. Under capitalism and, in particular, under monopoly-capital, the most advanced form of capitalism which brings all its contradictions to a head, the first, natural root of religion, man's awe of natural phenomena, becomes extremely weak, and indeed, in the most advanced countries almost disappears with society's growing mastery of natural forces due to the machine age. Whereas the second, social root in insecurity and in *social* disharmony acquires a terrible and altogether unprecedented power due to the previously unheard of intensity of prevailing social contradictions expressed in war, crisis and universal instability. Hence, in dealing with current religion it is its second, *social* root that almost exclusively concerns us as, even a generation ago, Lenin had already specially insisted. The second part of this pamphlet is written from this last point of view.

Part II: Religion and society

'Religion is the opium of the people' – Marx

1. Religion and the class-war

The fundamental and decisive fact in every social order that has arisen since prehistoric times has been the class-war for control of the surplus-value produced by that society. And the control of surplus value, of 'the means of production', carries with it automatically control of the State, of 'the particular power of suppression' (Engels) and of cultural processes in general. Historically nothing is more certain or well established than that, in the words of Marx, 'the (dominant – FAR) ideas of every age are the ideas of its ruling-class'. Since the publication of the 'Communist Manifesto' (1848), which first laid the foundations of an exact social science, only prehistoric survivals can be found to dispute this primary fact of social development.

The part that official religion has played in this age-long process is evident on every page of the historical record. As 'the opium of the people'; as a drug, a soporific to deaden the effect of an inevitable social misery in a class-ruled society; religion has played always an important and often a decisive role in every known class-society that has hitherto existed.

In the very earliest civilised societies of which we have any exact knowledge, the sacerdotal theocracies of the pre-classical archaic world prior to Greece and Rome, the role played by religion in sanctifying social inequality and oppression was decisive and overwhelming. In the oldest civilised societies such as Egypt, Babylonia, Crete, 'God and the State' were virtually synonymous terms. (Though, we may add, Bakunin and his disciples were quite wrong in maintaining that the latter was derived from the former. Whilst undoubtedly influenced by religious ideas the earliest States did not originate from the 'idea of god', but from the concrete fact of the development of the means of production and the simultaneous development of classes.) The very name of the ruler of the oldest known civilisation, that of Egypt, derives from religious auspices: viz., 'Pharaoh' is derived from 'Per Ea', 'the Great House', the Temple. And has not the most learned of ancient philosophers, Aristotle, left it on record that the Egyptian priests, the first 'leisured class' in history, were the creators of civilisation?

The colossal monuments left behind by this earliest civilisation, the giant pyramids which still stand in the Egyptian desert, were about equally temples and tombs. Indeed, the imagination recoils before the spectacle of the ruthless slave-driving of whole generations necessary in a pre-machine age to erect these massive mausoleums. Literally, whole generations of slaves must have perished, worn-out in the task of building an adequate memorial to the ruling class of the first known civilisation, symbolised in the Divine Pharaohs, for whom the Pyramids originally served as tombs: a necropolis of exploitation!

When we turn to subsequent ages and civilisations we are confronted with the same or a closely similar spectacle. The Roman Empire, the greatest engine of ex-

ploitation known up to that date, identified its religion with the worship of Caesar, of the Emperor: and as to what sort of 'gods' the frenzied Caligula, the sadistic Nero, and the perverted Elagabalus were, even 'official' history bears eloquent testimony! And, so far as we know, none of the numerous moralists throughout antiquity protested against the frightful exploitation of the slave-majority by the free minority.

Nor is it any different essentially when we turn to the 'higher religions', such as Christianity and Islam. For if, as is not at all unlikely, Christianity itself started as a 'revolutionary' mass movement against Roman society, as Eisler and others have sought to demonstrate, and as some of its surviving early scriptures seem to indicate (viz., 'the Apocalypse', etc.), it is at least certain that it was soon effectively captured by the ruling-classes of the day and became an instrument in the hands of the class-state.

In that respect, the 'conversion' of the Emperor Constantine (4th century AD) was the perversion of (the original) Christianity. Even reputable bourgeois historians now admit that the Roman Emperors of the Decline, in adopting Christianity as the state religion, were motivated primarily by political and economic motives rather than by considerations of a purely religious character. They needed 'moral cement' wherewith to hold together their cracking administrative structure, and to arrest the decay of their exhausted civilisation in the era of the Barbarian Invasions. For a time it was doubtful whether Christianity or Sun Worship (Mithraism) would best fulfil this social role. Eventually, however, a combination of favourable circumstances enabled the Son of God to prevail over the Sun-God. Both gods, in any case, would have functioned in much the same way in that society!

Since its official adoption as a state-religion Christianity has faithfully acted as the docile instrument of the class-state; it was always for the classes against the masses; for the exploiters against the exploited. Under the peculiar conditions of the Middle Ages the Church indeed became itself the dominant force in society and the exploiter-in-chief. According to a moderate computation, one-third of the land of Europe was ecclesiastical property throughout this period: and this in an agrarian society when land was (in feudal law) *real* property, that is, the kind of property which pre-eminently bestowed social prestige and political power. It is well known how during this epoch, the golden age of (Catholic) Christianity, the Church waged the most frightful wars in the so-called Crusades (c.1100-1300 AD), and that its 'Gestapo', the Inquisition, bloodily and most effectively suppressed every free movement of the human mind throughout this entire era, during which a 'law against dangerous thoughts' (to employ modern Japanese terminology) was in unbroken operation.

And we may add there is strong reason to believe that the Inquisition was an engine of conscious *social* at least as much as religious repression. The heretical sects which it drowned in blood were the radicals of their period: indeed, some of them belong to the category of Utopian communist sects. The rack and stake of the Inquisition served both God and Mammon impartially. As Kautsky has aptly remarked: 'It was a fanaticism of avarice masquerading under the forms of faith.'

And all this transpired during the era of the greatest Church-power: 'the Ages of Faith'! For it is a matter of common knowledge that mediaeval culture was entirely dominated by the Church. Its leading theologians, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, were the highest cultural authorities. Throughout this whole millennium (c.500-1500 AD), the word 'clerk' denominated equally and impartially either a person in holy orders, or a literate person able to read and write; the two were regarded as virtually identical in mediaeval Europe, as in modern Tibet.

Nor has the situation been essentially different in modern times, even though religion has, in general, not exercised the overwhelming power that it enjoyed during the preceding era. From the time of that great 'rebel' Luther, who urged the German princes to 'stab and slay' their serfs revolting against intolerable oppression (1525) during the 'Peasants' War' (*Bauernkrieg*), 'the social record of Christianity' has been one of almost unbroken subservience to the rich and powerful. As Engels himself demonstrated, Lutheranism reduced the free peasants of Germany to the level of serfs. If Calvinism was revolutionary in its social effects, it was only so in the interests of the new bourgeois exploiters, the lords of money, against the older feudal exploiters, the lords of land. As Tawney and others have shown, it actually worsened the lot of the poor. It is notorious how the (reformed) Anglican Church has always been the obsequious tool of the English ruling-class: 'God bless the squire and his relations and keep us in our proper stations'!

And subsequent religious history is the same. Every social revolution from the French to the Russian has had to meet the full fury of the Churches. (According to some historians, it was the influence of Methodism which prevented the French Revolution from spreading to England.) In both its ideology and its property-relationships official religion has only played one role in the class-war: that of chaplain, apologist, and, where necessary, active auxiliary to the ruling-class.

The lack of real democracy on earth is made up by a fictitious democracy in heaven.

And what has been said above of Christianity is equally true and could easily be duplicated, had we the necessary space, in respect of other religions also. For example, Islam has always stubbornly opposed even the bourgeois revolution: Arabia and Afghanistan, still strongholds of Mohammedan clericalism, are almost completely feudal. Kemal Attaturk had to suppress it in Turkey in order to carry through the bourgeois revolution there. Whilst Hinduism, by means of its doctrine of reincarnation, has cleverly allayed the discontent of the Indian masses with their frightful conditions in *this* life! Even the originally rationalistic Buddhism has, in modern Mongolia and Tibet, become an obscurantist and oppressive priestly despotism.

To sum up: as far as the class-struggle is concerned, official religion is, and always has been, on the side of the exploiters. Indeed, granted its social background, it could not have been anything else. And the same is true today.

2. The churches and society

In the preceding section we have summarised the historical role of religion throughout all earlier periods. It remains to glance at the contemporary attitude of the Churches in present day society.

By far the most powerful, best organised, and logically consistent of the Christian Churches is the Roman Catholic Church. This originally mediaeval and feudal institution almost foundered in the storms of the Reformation era which witnessed the opening-up of the world market and the earlier phases of the bourgeois revolution against feudalism and clericalism. By a skilful combination of terror and demagogy the Catholic 'Counter Reformation' extricated the Church from its dangerous situation and, under the brilliant direction of the Jesuits, made a masterly adaptation to the rising capitalist social order.

Today, the Papacy is fully alive to the urgency of social questions, and even to the imminence of social revolution. If this ancient institution does not really know much about the next world it undeniably knows quite a lot about this one! It has not wasted its 1900 years' historical experience. And to meet its current dilemma it pursues a two-faced and subtle policy: here, we only touch upon its social aspect.

Despite its claims to Divine origin the Roman Church is an institution *with a very* strong sense of *'survival-values'. It was*

not an accident that the biologist Lamarck, who invented the theory of 'creative evolution', was a pupil of the Jesuits: to arrive at his theory of 'the giraffe' which deliberately 'grew a long neck' in order to survive, all he had to do was to study the evolution of the famous Order! Today, the Papacy knows that it is in even greater danger than at the time of the Reformation. For while it survived Protestantism it could not possibly survive Communism, which would necessarily be fatal to *all* religion. The Pope may, or may not, be 'infallible', but he knows this only too well!

There is no doubt at all that the fundamental aim of the present day Papacy is at all costs to defeat Communism. All its other aims are subordinate to this one. It fights for its life; and it knows it! To defeat the Social Revolution it resorts, as at the Reformation, to a combined policy of demagogy and terror. On the one hand, the Popes issue encyclical letters denouncing the 'abuses' of capitalism, and demanding a 'square deal' for the masses. On the other hand, whenever the masses attempt to secure a 'square deal' *for themselves* it backs terrorist movements against them. It is well known how actively it assisted Hitler and Mussolini to come to power; and how fiercely it denounced Bolshevism whilst the revolutionary phase of the Communist International endured. And the whole world knows how strenuously the Roman Church exerted its world-wide activity on behalf of Franco during the Spanish Social war.

Its pronouncements leave no room for doubt as to its motives: it was not taken in by the myth of (bourgeois) democracy promulgated by the Stalinists and their allies during the Spanish war. The Church knew as well as we do that in our era the alternative to Fascism is revolutionary Communism, and *not* bourgeois democracy. On this point, at least, the extreme Left and the extreme Right agree! Hence, in Spain, as elsewhere, the Church fought for its life against the 'Red Peril'. It will do so again whenever Social Revolution threatens and it will always support Capitalism – with whatever mental reservations, since the Roman Church is a pre-capitalist institution – when the alternative is revolutionary Socialism.

The Papacy is itself a totalitarian institution. For it, Socialism is not a question of politics but a 'moral' question. This is so. It is, indeed, fantastic to imagine that either Christian pre-scientific doctrine or Christian servile ethics could survive in a communist and libertarian society. Hence, as Cardinal Newman predicted long ago: whenever and wherever the Social Revolution appears, it will find the Catholic Church in the forefront of its enemies. And the workers of Spain, Ireland and Mexico, etc., know this already from bitter experience!

We accordingly conclude that the Roman Church – the one Christian Church which is still a world-power – stands in the front rank of the opponents of socialism.

The remaining Churches can be dismissed briefly since they have little real power, and that only local. Moreover, they are not organised on the efficient totalitarian lines which characterise Roman Catholicism.

In general, they can be described as anti revolutionary and anti-socialist, though some more blatantly so than others. For example, the surviving Calvinistic Churches: the State-Churches of Scotland and Holland are hotbeds of black reaction. Still worse, if possible, is the South African Church which adds colour to class-hatred. The above is somewhat ironic when we consider the prominent role played by the Calvinist Churches in the bourgeois revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. However 'predestination' automatically becomes counter-revolutionary *after* victory!

On the other hand, the Anglican Church, whilst at bottom probably equally reactionary, is so less openly in that it permits a certain amount of 'Leftism' among even its higher clergy: it goes without saying that this presents no real danger to the existing social order. Thus we have a 'red Dean' of Canterbury and have even had a 'pink' Archbishop! However, since the State controls the purse-strings in the form of endowments, it may safely be presumed that Anglicanism, in the future as in the past, will be the faithful servant of British capital and British Imperialism. The recent Education Bill, introduced by a Tory minister, evidently predicates a closer alliance in Britain between Church and State in the coming era for the purpose of promoting a common reaction.

The same goes for the others as well. The 'revolutionary Church' of the 'Christian Socialists' is a revolutionary myth. Historically, in the pre-capitalist days of such sects as the Lollards and Anabaptists, there were, undoubtedly, 'heretical' Churches that can accurately be called revolutionary, having regard for the circumstances of their time. But that is all ancient history. It is a far cry from the revolutionary Anabaptists of the 16th century to the smug Baptists of the 20th: from Jan of Leyden to 'Spurgeon's Tabernacle'.

The case of the Russian 'Orthodox' Church, recently re-established by Stalin, is a special case, and, as such, merits a word. In Tsarist days the Russian State-Church was one of the most ignorant, intolerant, and obscurantist of all. The brutality of its 'Holy Synod' was notorious. And its charlatan-in chief, Rasputin, had become a byword. The official recognition recently given for political reasons to this Church indicates undoubtedly the growing compromising character of the Stalinist regime and its increasing reversion to power politics. Every class-revolution in decay tends to compromise with religion. The example of Napoleon's 'Concordat' with Catholicism is a well-known instance (1801). The latest Stalinist policy demonstrates that even an originally socialist revolution is liable to retrogression in the cultural sphere if it remains backward and isolated. Only *International* Socialism can abolish religion.

Regarding the non-Christian world we have already alluded to its reactionary character. For example, the pacifist role of the Hindu 'Mahatma', Gandhi, is a most powerful contemporary obstacle to the Indian Social Revolution. Whilst Islam, as remarked above, is still an anti socialist barrier of feudalism. In Japan, the militarist cult of Shintoism was artificially revived by the Japanese warlords as a barrier against revolutionary ideas. But Emperor-worship is unlikely to survive the defeat of Japan. The Deity has now become a Democrat!

To sum up: as the social utility of religion becomes less, and as the Social Revolution gains ground, everywhere organised religion allies itself more closely with the forces of reaction in other spheres. The gods form a 'united front' against the Revolution! For the Revolution digs a common grave for all the gods!

3. Religion and socialism

After what has been written above it is unnecessary to devote much time to the question of the relations of Socialism and Religion: they necessarily mix about as well as oil and water! We have already seen what were the historical causes for the appearance and growth of religion and how it arose out of fear and ignorance; fear and ignorance in savage societies before the incomprehensible phenomena of nature; fear and ignorance of the uncontrollable forces of civilisation and of the social tyranny which is inseparable from the operations of a class-dominated society. In this last respect, the aphorism of that shrewd bourgeois politician Napoleon, 'I regard religion not as the mystery of the incarnation, but as the mystery of the Social Order', is abundantly borne out by history. Indeed, before Bonaparte, Robespierre had expressed to perfection the role of religion in a society based like all class-societies on fundamental inequality and injustice: 'Atheism is aristocratic. The idea of a god who avenges outraged innocence and punishes triumphant crime is essentially the idea of the people.'

Or in other words, if there is no justice here, there must be somewhere else! – an obvious case of 'wishful thinking'! 'If God

did not exist it would be necessary to invent him': this remark of Voltaire is absolutely correct of any society based on exploitation, even if the circumstances of his era prevented Voltaire himself from drawing this correct conclusion.

For, we repeat: there is nothing accidental about the rise and historical role of religion. It is a mere waste of time to try to kill it by argument or ridicule where the social or natural causes exist that inevitably result in its reappearance. To attempt to do this is, indeed, the cardinal error of bourgeois rationalism which lops down the branches of religion but leaves its *roots* untouched. Wherever injustice and fear exist men will seek a remedy elsewhere, if none exists here. Hence as an Anglican bishop recently naively remarked: 'Ages of fear have always been ages of religion.' For example, after the Roman slaves had failed to win their social liberty under Spartacus (73-71 BC), they resorted to the 'spiritual' salvation of Christianity.

Hence, to seek to abolish religion in a society founded on exploitation is futile. The ancient Greek and Roman freethinkers such as Epicurus and Lucretius demolished every theological argument as well as their modern successors have done, but when Paganism passed from the scene it was Christianity, not Atheism, which took its place. And, we may add, the mediaeval freethinkers who perished at the stake of the Inquisition could testify that the change, as far as freedom of thought was concerned, was merely from 'the frying-pan into the fire'!

If, however, it follows from the above that religion cannot die out or be abolished in a class-society, it follows equally and by the same reasoning that it could not survive under the world order of international socialism. Once a communist order was fully established the twin foundations of religion, ignorance and fear, would be torn up by the roots. International Socialism, by doing away with class-exploitation and by developing to the fullest possible extent the unfathomed productive potentialities of the machine-age, hitherto hardly touched under capitalism, would make poverty and insecurity absolutely meaningless terms in an age of universal plenty. Whilst war, the third partner in the unholy capitalist trinity, would necessarily pass into oblivion along with the competitive capitalism and imperialism which is its sole efficient cause.

All the social roots of religion would thus simultaneously disappear. And, of course, it goes without saying that the last remains of barbaric ignorance and superstition which still survive from pre-civilised eras would vanish before the impact of universal free education based on the scientific humanism that is inseparable from socialism, and no longer twisted as today by class-domination into a mere machine for producing standardised wage slaves, mechanical minders of machines, and servile robots.

Whosoever therefore is capable of reasoning scientifically from cause to effect must realise that the universal arrival of scientific socialism means inevitably the definative end of religion; which, deprived of all reason for existence, would become a mere anachronism in such a society: a modern version of Mohammed's coffin floating unattached in space without visible means of support. Under world-socialism we shall arrive at that pleasing state of things humorously depicted by Anatole France in one of his novels, where the then reigning Pope is forced to earn his living on the racecourse whilst discharging his official duties as a spare time occupation! Can we wonder that the Papacy dislikes the prospect?

What then are, or should be, the present relations of the revolutionary socialist movement with religion? Obviously, if and when the revolutionary workers seize power in a given society they will establish immediately the secular state and secular education, according to the principle: 'The free Church in the free State'. Equally obviously, they will rely on education and propaganda to abolish the remnants of religion in the new era. Despite clerical scares, the 'Red Peril' is a civilised and civilising force: it will not make use of the methods of the Inquisition. Of course, if, as has so often happened, the Churches support counter-revolutionary movements then naturally the workers' state will take strong measures against them as counter-revolutionary agents. But such obvious methods of self-protection have nothing in common with the persecution of religion as such, which would be offensive to the humanitarian ethic that is an integral part of international socialism. The workers' state will rely on education, on scientific socialist propaganda, and, above all, on the progressive achievement of the socialist society which will make religion superfluous. The Churches have more reason to fear *that* than a thousand persecutions.

In the meanwhile, prior to the conquest of power, the revolutionary socialist party continues its necessary propaganda against *all* manifestations of capitalism, including those which belong to the sphere of religion. Whether it is necessary to attack religion specifically depends on local and on particular circumstances, but every reactionary movement of the Churches in our current society should be duly noted and exposed. It goes without saying that a revolutionary party has no official relations with religion: though whether a specific 'anti-religious' test is necessary for each individual member is, again, a matter for local and particular decision in view of the existing circumstances. Under no consideration, of course, would any party member posture on religious platforms nor angle for Church support.

To sum up: Religion is a *social* phenomenon in present-day society. Hence no amount of merely negative and critical propaganda can destroy it. Only the *positive* achievement of a classless society can do that by abolishing its causes. The war against the gods is, henceforth, equivalent to the class-war for a socialist society: Forward to the Social Revolution!

Epilogue – The death of the gods

'Man is a bridge and not a goal' Nietzsche

There is little more to add. Religion in its present form becomes ever more obviously a parasite on the exploiting civilisation and society of which it is the ideological expression. As the machine-age develops it becomes more and more an absurdity, and its specific dogmas approximate ever more closely to self-evident mumbo jumbo. More and more, as his historic role becomes ever more retrogressive, the priest becomes a mere witch-doctor battening on ignorance and fear, and droning his meaningless incantations with an ever more wearisome monotony. Men of intellect like Calvin or Newman are no longer found in institutions the 'evidences' of which become continually feebler. The gods are old: they have become senile: it is time for them to die!

But they will die no natural death. Capital will keep them alive even, if necessary, by artificial stimulants! As the capitalist civilisation declines, as war follows war, each more 'total' and soul destroying than the last, religion again plants its feet firmly on the familiar ground of fear, and, like the fabled giant, grows stronger with every contact. In *this* society, religion will never die out. This is, above all, an age of fear, and fear and superstition are age-long twins.

Only the Social Revolution will destroy religion by abolishing its effective causes. Thereafter, man takes the place of god. An evolving earth succeeds a static heaven as Humanity, now, at long last, master of his *own* destiny in a free society, moves ever onward from the ape man of yesterday to the man of today, and to the superman of tomorrow. Today gods and capitalists stand together: tomorrow, gods and capitalists will fall together.

'Chase gods from the skies and capitalists from the earth.' Forward to the Social Revolution! Mankind comes of age!

WA

Resistance myths

France and the Nazis: Memories, Lies and the Second World War
By Adam Nossiter
Methuen, 2003, 305pp, £8.99

Richard Price

Memories of the Vichy collaboration have haunted France ever since the Liberation of 1944. After all, the self-image of the French state is all about a set of core republican values that are supposed to act as a beacon of freedom to other nations and sustain France as the centre of European, if not world, culture. The demand that all citizens subordinate themselves not only to the state but also to its values is at the heart of the current furore over the banning of overt religious symbols in schools. Defenders of the ban argue that only through acceptance of the authority of the state do you earn the rights of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*.

All of this sits uneasily with the darkest chapter of modern French history from 1940-44. Not only were the French armed forces routed in a few weeks. The overwhelming majority of the National Assembly of the Third Republic voted to install Marshal Pétain's authoritarian regime. Before the Nazis had exercised any significant pressure on it, this government of 'National Revolution' was passing its own anti-semitic legislation, which stripped Jews of the rights they had won in the revolution of 1789, and went on to play its part in the Final Solution, rounding up 76,000 Jews and sending them to death camps. Recent Jewish immigrants fleeing central and eastern Europe were denounced as a burden on the state and a danger to its racial integrity; long established Jewish citizens were a privileged cabal seeking to advance itself at the expense of the French nation. Only three per cent of those deported came back alive.

Collaborators

How the history of Vichy has been presented in France itself has a history. After a brief and very cursory purge of collaborators after the Liberation, the case was closed: '. . . in no other occupied country in Western Europe did a smaller percentage of the population receive prison terms – 12 per 10,000. And, minor exceptions aside, the genocide of the Jews was never a focus in this account-settling.' (p.9)

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the myth was carefully fostered of a nation united in resistance under the Nazi occupation, one that had been largely responsible for its own liberation. Curiously, this served the purposes of both De Gaulle, wartime leader of the Free French, and the Communist Party, which gained enormous prestige from its role in the Resistance.

Parallel to this myth was another – that in establishing the Vichy regime, Pétain had acted from a misguided sense of duty to protect at least part of France from Nazi occupation, and France's Jews from the Holocaust. He was, in any case, a senile old man, who only partially understood the implications of collaboration.

Of course, many knew the truth. Resistance activities were negligible until mid-1941. Only three months before the Liberation in 1944, Pétain was still popular enough – and certainly not senile at this stage – to draw huge crowds on a visit to Paris. For every Resistance fighter there had been several collaborators, and a mass of people in a grey area in between.

Consensus

Post-war French politics developed a kind of cosy consensus. Almost every city and town had a prominent street or square renamed after a Resistance hero, and presidents doled out medals to *résistants*. It was a myth, despite the fractured nature of both the Fourth and Fifth Republics, that both left and right could buy into in their different ways. At the same time, prominent collaborators continued to hold high office, and the message was that raking over the coals of the wartime period could only harm the unity of the nation.

Only after the 'events' of May-June 1968 did this consensus begin to be undermined, although significantly the first breaches were made by 'outsiders'. In 1971, *The Sorrow and the Pity*,[1] a film by Marcel Ophuls, was released. Ophuls was the son of a German-Jewish immigrant excluded from the film industry under Vichy legislation, who fled with his family to the United States in 1941. The film detailed collaboration and anti-semitism in the city of Clermond-Ferrand. Originally made for television, it was promptly banned from the small screen for 12 years by the Pompidou and Giscard governments. Then, in 1972, the young American scholar Robert Paxton published *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*,[2] which conclusively nailed the lies of Pétain's apologists.

As if to mock the national myth, the main French political parties in the early 70s were led by people whose relationship to the Resistance was at best tenuous. Gaullist leader Georges Pompidou had been a schoolteacher in Paris, and taken no part in the Resistance. The general secretary of the Communist Party, Georges Marchais, had been drafted to work in Germany by the Laval government – some say he volunteered rather than join the *maquis*.

And in 1971, the Socialist Party emerged out of a regroupment of the remnants of the SFIO and a few strands of bourgeois liberal opinion. It was headed by François Mitterrand – a figure with a deeply ambiguous relationship to Vichy. As a student in the late 1930s, Mitterrand had been associated with Colonel de la Rocque's

fascist Croix de-Feu. After escaping from a prisoner of war camp, he had a promising career for three years as a civil servant in Vichy, in which capacity he received the *Francisque* medal from Pétain in 1943. Ever the consummate opportunist, Mitterrand managed to switch sides before the Liberation, and, despite the Communist Party publicising his wartime role in the 1946 elections, managed to come out of it smelling of roses. (In his hagiographic 1982 biography, Denis MacShane – now serving as a loyal Blairite junior minister – manages to skate over Mitterrand's wartime career in 12-page chapter entitled 'Resistance leader'.[3])

But thanks to the pioneering efforts of a handful of writers and filmmakers and the activities of Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld, the trickle of literature had become a flood by the 1980s. The result, in spite of repeated obstructions from Mitterrand, who served as president from 1981 to 1995, was three high profile trials: those of SS Lt Klaus Barbie, 'the butcher of Lyons', in 1987; Paul Touvier, an officer in the hated *mélice* (militia) responsible for Jewish round-ups, in 1994; and Maurice Papon, a Vichy bureaucrat and budget minister as recently as 1981, from 1997-8.

Despite its title, *France and the Nazis* is not a formal history of France during the war. The definitive works in English remain those by Paxton and his co-author Michael Marrus,[4] supplemented by more recent books by Paul Webster[5] and Julian Jackson.[6]

Rearguard

What then does Adam Nossiter's book add? Paul Webster (who died in February) remarks in *Pétain's Crime* that '. . . trying to dissociate the wartime Head of State from the consequences of his abuse of power is a position now defended only by an obstinate and dwindling rearguard'.[7] *France and the Nazis* is an attempt to explore the psyche of this rearguard and its relationship to French history. The book is in three sections that reflect the author's attempts to uncover different facets of the wartime inheritance in Bordeaux, Vichy and Tulle.

In Bordeaux for the trial of 87-year old Maurice Papon, Nossiter finds a city that is either irritated by the past being raked up, in denial about the past, or suffering from amnesia. The idea that Bordeaux's Jews had somehow brought their fate upon themselves is pervasive among older more conservative interviewees, but paradoxically the largely mythical claim that the collaborating authorities had helped save Jews is in wide currency. Behind its elegant facades, the city's wealthy commercial and winegrowing elite are largely unrepentant; they don't see the point of excavating the past of a city which was mostly untouched by resistance. The history of the wartime years has been largely expunged from books and museums.

In contrast to the angry and irritated of Bordeaux, for whom the trial of Papon is too late and not worth it, for Nossiter the distance of the events fought over during the proceedings throws them into sharper relief: 'It had taken more than a half century to measure the crime, and its estimation was unfinished. Only now could the question of Papon's guilt or innocence have been raised. So the frequent complaint that one heard – that it was coming all too late – made no sense. It was *only* at this remove that the trial could have taken place at all.' (p.90)

At the beginning of July 1940, the fleeing French government headed for the spa town of Vichy. Given the scale of the debacle, the reasons for the choice of location were banal. France might have fallen, but her bureaucrats needed space and a degree of luxury. Vichy had 300 hotels, many of them of a high standard. It was quiet and conservative, had a resident population of only 25,000, and lacked an industrial working class. At the town's Grand Casino, 569 National Assembly deputies voted to hand power to Pétain; only 80 voted against.

Befitting its faded gentility, the author finds many for whom the wartime period is misunderstood by the outside world. Vichy has been unfairly treated by association with the regime. Yet in private, many express the view that the regime itself is also misunderstood. Pétain, for whom many have warm recollections, was only a patriot equivalent to De Gaulle. When he raises the subject of Vichy's complicity in the Holocaust, he finds that the regime's apologists frequently claim to have Jewish friends, or to have known someone who saved a Jew. He also tracks down a retired American diplomat who served in Vichy up to the United States' entry into the war – a period of ambiguous and indulgent relations between the two states.

The historical memories in Tulle, the small industrial capital of the Corrèze department, are the polar opposite of the bourgeois complacency of Vichy. Here on June 9, 1944, SS troops hanged 99 local men from balconies, lampposts and telephone poles in one of the main streets. It was one of the worst atrocities visited upon the French population under the occupation, but overshadowed by the better-known massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane, where the SS murdered 642 men, women and children on the day after the murders in Tulle.

These horrific events took place shortly after what seems to have been an adventurist action by a Communist Party-led Resistance group. On June 7, 1944, one day after D-Day, 400 Resistance fighters attacked the German garrison in Tulle, and briefly 'liberated' the town. But with no prospect of holding on to it, with the nearest military assistance hundreds of miles away, it seems to have been an ill thought-out – if brave – piece of flag flying. (At the time, it's worth noting that French Trotskyists, through their underground paper *La Verité*, were warning against ultra-left military tactics.)

When a German armoured column arrived on the scene, the fighters withdrew to the hills. Only two of the townspeople subsequently rounded up by the SS had any connections to the Resistance. Even though the CP controlled Tulle for much of the post-war period, and there is an annual commemoration each June, the feeling that the revenge of the SS could have been avoided lends a degree of ambiguity to its status in Resistance folklore.

France and the Nazis is an interesting departure from orthodox historical writing. Rather than reconstruct events, it is their refraction through memories – suppressed, distorted, falsified or unforgettable – that concerns the author. The value of this book lies not in a fresh interpretation of the wartime years, but in the light it sheds on contemporary France's uneasy and unresolved relationship to Vichy.

NOTES

[1] The illustrated text of the film was released in book form: Marcel Ophuls, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Paladin, 1975.
[2] Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, new edition Columbia, 2001
[3] Denis MacShane, *François Mitterrand: A Political Odyssey*, Quartet, 1982, pp.25–37.
[4] Robert O. Paxton, ibid., and Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, Schocken, 1983.
[5] Paul Webster, *Pétain's Crime*, Macmillan, 2001.
[6] Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944*, Oxford, 2003.
[7] Webster, op. cit., p.12.

WA

Still life

Girl with a Pearl Earring
Director Peter Webber
With Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth

Richard Price

Depicting artists has generally been a tricky business in the history of film-making. Too much mundane humanity seems to detract from the painting, while too many tortured genius clichés prevent the subject from interacting with lesser mortals. Peter Webber's debut feature film approaches the great Dutch interior painter, Johannes Vermeer, from a different perspective.

Adapted from Tracy Chevalier's best selling novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* uses the large gaps in what is known about the life of Vermeer (1632-75) to imagine a story that lies behind one of his most famous portraits. We enter Vermeer's somewhat harassed domestic world through the eyes of Griet, a 17-year-old girl sent by her Protestant parents, who have fallen on hard times, to work as a maid in the Catholic artist's household. It's hardly an auspicious moment, what with the family's finances on the rocks, the master of the house suffering painter's block, and his wife pregnant yet again.

Webber and his cinematographer, Eduardo Serra, depict 17th-century Delft brilliantly with photography whose brown and grey textures draw direct inspiration from Dutch art. The minute depiction of interior detail and the subdued colours illuminated by shards of light sustain the feeling of having actually entered a Vermeer painting.

Colin Firth's Vermeer, as befits a painter who completed only a few dozen works in his lifetime, isn't going to compromise his perfectionist principles just to pay off the creditors. The solution to his problems comes in the form of a commission for a group picture from his wealthy patron, Van Ruijven (Tom Wilkinson). The lecherous Van Ruijven, however, has his eyes on more than pictures, and it's soon apparent that he sees the servant girl as part of the bargain.

Navigating the perils of the Vermeer household is an arduous test for Griet. There's his imposing, scheming mother-in-law, his neurotic and jealous wife, and one of his daughters who delights in trying to get her sacked. If three rival centres of female power over her aren't enough, the male characters are in different ways also challenges to her establishing herself as a person in her own right. Van Ruijven anticipates that his regular visits to Vermeer's house will yield ample opportunities to possess Griet, whether willingly or against her will. Meanwhile, she hesitantly lets herself be courted by butcher's son, Peter.

As a servant, Griet is the only person in the household apart from Vermeer to have access to the painter's studio. Initially she is only called upon to keep it clean and keep everything in its appointed place. But her sensitivity to his painting is in contrast to the attitude of his family, who see it only as a means of fending off creditors. When Vermeer hatches the idea of painting a secret portrait of her, and lets her grind and mix his paints, the relationship takes on an unconsummated erotic charge. Things come to a head when the painter's wife demands to see the portrait in which Griet is modelling her pearl earring.

It is a film with remarkably little dialogue. Thoughts, fears and longings are conveyed by looks, expressions and body language, adding to the sense of repressed sexuality and stifled emotion. At 19, Scarlett Johansson, also currently starring in *Lost in Translation*, is already major talent. Her reticence and innocence under siege are the counterpoint to Colin Firth's smouldering introspection. Harassed by the intrusions of the outside world, he looks as if he is reprising Mr Darcy, and his side of the relationship with Johansson is not completely convincing.

But it's nevertheless a good first film for Peter Webber. It uses a lightly drawn feminist narrative to explore relations of power between men and women, privileged and poor, in a pre-industrial setting, and then decorates it exquisitely. **WA**

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