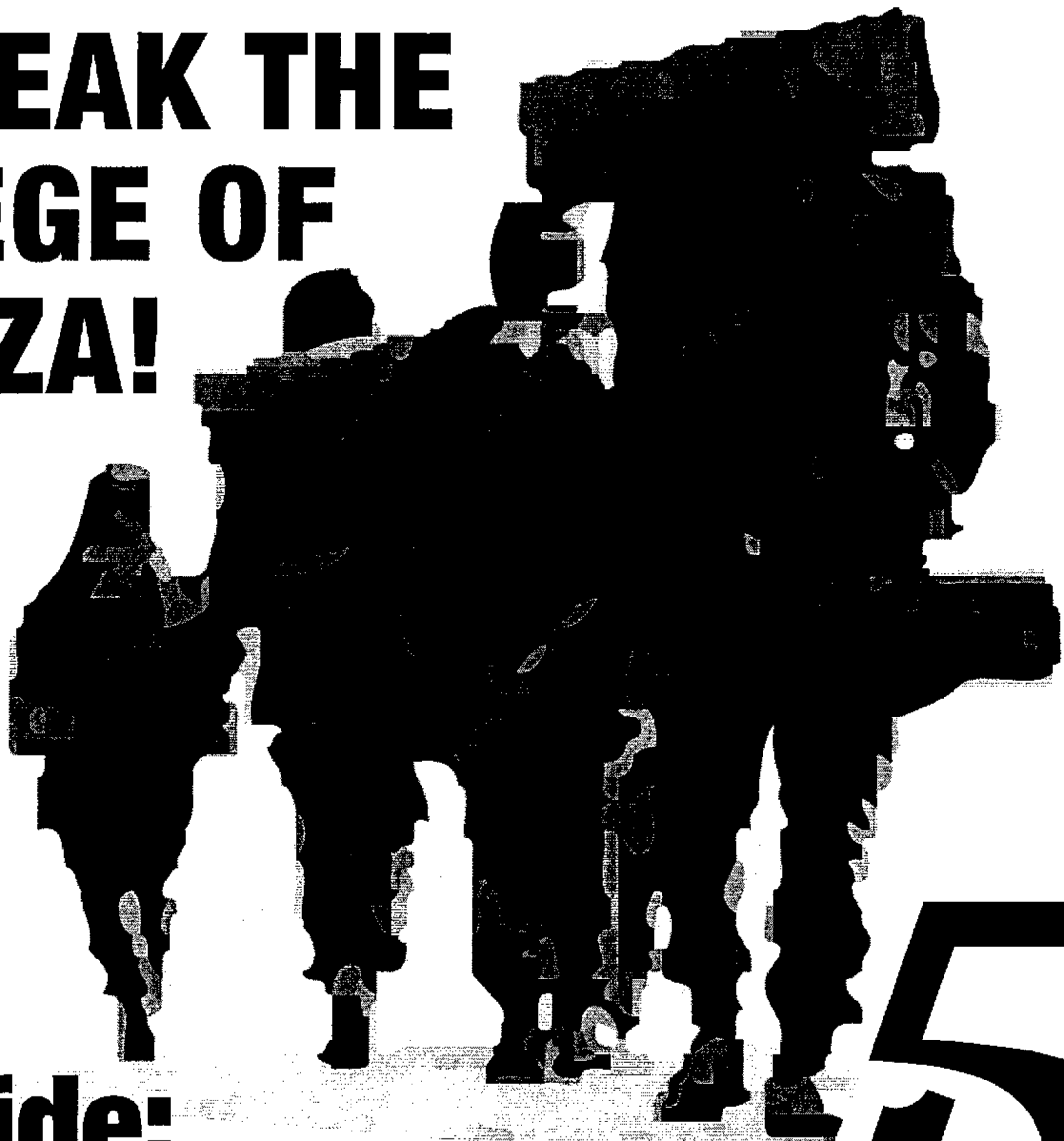


# Workers power

March 2008 ★ Price £1 / €1.50 Issue 323

Monthly magazine of the British section of the League for the Fifth International

## TROOPS OUT OF IRAQ & AFGHANISTAN NOW! BREAK THE SIEGE OF GAZA!



### Inside:

- War news from Afghanistan and Gaza
- Action against climate change
- Vietnam: when the USA lost the war
- Workers Power conference documents



League for the  
Fifth International

**EDITORIAL**

# Crisis threatens global poor

- **Food and fuel prices rise sharply across the world**
- **Risk of hunger and starvation in Africa, China, Russia**
- **Recession looms in USA and Britain**

By Richard Brenner

**I**t's been another terrible month for anyone who believes capitalism is the answer to the world's problems, and even worse for capitalism's victims. Prices for food and fuel shot up, threatening millions with starvation, while America's economy continued to stall, raising the threat of global recession.

## Inflation starvation

In the African state of Burkina Faso, food riots swept the cities in February, with a huge march on 28 February in the capital, Ouagadougou, against hikes of between 10 per cent and 65 per cent in food and fuel prices. One marcher said, "The choice is to demonstrate or to die of hunger. We have chosen to get our voice heard."

On just one day – 25 February – wheat prices rose by 25 per cent, their biggest rise ever. Kazakhstan, a major wheat exporter, has tried to cut exports because its own food inflation has reached 20 per cent. Russia and Argentina have done the same. The US, another major wheat producer, has seen prices hit a record high.

Food prices generally have risen 75 per cent over the last two years. Droughts caused by global warming have made things worse. China, Iraq and Turkey were all hoping to import wheat because their stocks are running out. Even the USA's stocks are expected to drop to their lowest level for 60 years.

In Indonesia in January, 10,000 demonstrated in Jakarta, after soya bean prices soared more than 50 per cent in a month and 125 per cent over the last year.

Wheat importers like Mauritania and Senegal have been especially badly hit. In Egypt, the second biggest wheat importer in the world, MP Mohamed Abdel-Alim claimed that a majority of limited-income Egyptian families are suffering, and that "even a simple fuul (fava bean) sandwich, the staple of the average Egyptian diet, has become too expensive for many to afford".

Forty-one per cent of Russians spend more than half their income on food, and 68 per cent have no savings. Electricity, gas and water prices went up 16 per cent in the freezing January temperatures. Sergei Polyakov, a worker at Kaliningrad's Balt Keramika brickworks, told Bloomberg news that his 74-year-old mother cannot afford to pay for both food and heating, even with a state pension after 35 years of work. "Everything is just getting more expensive, from food to everything else... I have to help her live." The social policy chief of the Russian Academy of Sciences added: "For many, the situation is much worse than the official figures show. The poor are hardest hit."

What about China? Consumer prices hit an 11-year high in January, with food and fuel price rises driven by soar-away economic growth, disease in the country's pig farms and the impact of the terrible snowstorms this winter. This is bad news for hundreds of millions of Chinese workers and peasants – especially in the interior, where wages remain low. And it's bad news for the world economy.

Dong Tao, an economist for Credit Suisse explains: "We are taking for granted that China will provide cheap products forever. But I think we are probably about to see the end of an era. China is exporting inflation in a big way. The rest of the world will feel that."

## Union leaders should demand an equivalent pay rise for every rise in prices, a freeze on food and fuel prices, and nationalisation of the banks and any company declaring job cuts

### Winter in America

They're certainly feeling it in the US, the biggest importer of Chinese products. Inflation for 2007 hit was the highest for 17 years, the US Labor Department reported. Energy prices rose 17.4 per cent last year, and food rose 4.9 per cent – the biggest increases since 1990.

More and more people are defaulting on their mortgages. Analysts from RealtyTrac said home repossessions rose 91 per cent to 45,327 in January, the sixth successive month with more than 200,000 foreclosure filings – the first step towards repossession. The fourth quarter total of 640,157 filings was the most since records began, and a terrifying 1 per cent of US households were in some stage of foreclosure during 2007.

And as people lose their homes, the banks that

lent them money are writing off billions. The "credit crunch" is spreading and getting deeper. Banks are lending less money to each other and loans to businesses have fallen off sharply. Consumer spending is down. Profits are falling.

As the US economy starts contracting, jobs will be in the firing line. US economic growth plunged from nearly 5 per cent in the third quarter of last year to just 0.6 per cent in the fourth quarter, with many analysts expecting the economy to contract in the first quarter of this year. New jobless claims rose to 373,000 in the last week in February, a surge of 19,000 over the previous week and much more than expected. Consumer confidence fell to its lowest level in five years.

### Home Guard

The UK looks set to follow the US. House prices fell again last month – the same process that kicked off the credit problems in America. The Council of Mortgage Lenders says the number of properties repossessed by lenders jumped by 21 per cent in 2007 to their highest figure since 1999. 27,100 homes were repossessed over the year, up from 22,400 in 2006 and more than three times the 2004 figure of 8,200.

To stave off recession, the Bank of England and its US equivalent, the Federal Reserve, have been cutting interest rates so that people and businesses can borrow money more cheaply. But this bubble of cheap credit is one of things that got us into this mess in the first place.

Now though, they have a problem. Every rate cut leads to more inflation, and a fall in the value of the US dollar. This makes US exports cheaper, but – if it goes on much further – could make other countries want to dump their massive holdings of dollars. This would lead to a global currency crisis, and sharper tensions between the great powers.

Right now one thing is certain. Capitalism is causing this problem; but the capitalists want the working class to pay the price.

We should refuse to accept a single pay cut, a single job loss, a single rise in prices for basics. The union leaders should demand an equivalent pay rise for every rise in prices, a freeze on food and fuel prices, and nationalisation of the banks and any company that declares job cuts. A massive tax on the super-rich and an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could be used to fund higher benefits, pay and pensions, and better services for all.

We should make the capitalists pay the cost of the crisis, by getting rid of their insane system, where there is more than enough for every mouth to be fed, but millions still face poverty, homelessness and hunger.



## Troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan ● Don't attack Iran ● End the siege of Gaza Demonstrate 15 March

Assemble 12 noon, Trafalgar Square, London  
Called by Stop the War, CND, British Muslim Initiative

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war. On 15 February 2003, up to two million people marched in London, over 20 million worldwide, in protest against the imminent invasion of Iraq.

We were right to doubt the excuse of weapons of mass destruction. We were right to predict life would be worse under US and British occupation. We were right to claim that the invasion was in order to control the Middle East and its massive oil reserves.

This year's demonstration comes when the Afghanistan war is beginning to unravel. Despite the brief respite in the news, caused by Prince Harry's short visit to the front, designed solely as a public relations exercise to boost morale in a flagging war, Britain and Nato are losing ground.

Iraq has been temporarily stabilised because of the enormous surge of US troops. But their presence is unsustainable, and the "pacification" has come at the expense of stirring up sectarian and ethnic hatreds.

Now Gordon Brown and George Bush have told their agent in the Middle East, Israel, that it starve, bomb and invade the Gaza Strip, in order to crush the Palestinian resistance.

The Stop the War demonstration on 15 March in London must therefore be more militant and urgent than ever, demanding: "Troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq now! Break the Siege of Gaza!"

15 February 2003, London

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### SHELTER IN A STORM

Staff at Shelter, the homeless charity, are striking on 5 March. Management is demanding that every worker puts in two and a half hours a week for free. Plus pay increases have been suspended and dozens have been made redundant. Most are losing £2,000 – £5,000.

One worker told *The Observer*: "I'm the main breadwinner in my household and am living in a one-bedroom flat with two children... it's going to be very difficult to pay the mortgage."

Hundreds have joined the Unite-T&G union in order to fight back.

We say: nationalise Shelter and the "voluntary" sector, which has grown as council and central government services have shrunk. The NGOs are no substitute for public services, run by workers and the community, and owned by society.

### HANDS OFF VENEZUELA!

Big oil is waging an economic war against Venezuela. A spate of partial nationalisations in 2006 meant that Western multinationals had to give up 60 per cent of their shares. BP, Statoilhydro ASA and Total agreed, but Exxon refused.

Now Exxon is claiming compensation from Venezuela's state-owned PDVSA. Dutch, British and US courts have frozen over \$12 billion worth of PDVSA's assets.

Exxon is not short of money; last year it made £20 billion profits. Venezuelan Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez called the action, "judicial terrorism". We'd say, imperialism.

Workers of the world should stand shoulder to shoulder with the Venezuelans' right to nationalise their natural wealth – without any compensation to the oil majors.

### SUPPORT AGENCY WORKERS BILL

Labour MP Andrew Miller's Temporary and Agency Workers Bill has passed its first stage in parliament by 147 votes to 11. It calls for Britain's 1.4 million temps to receive equal rights.

The CBI claims it would cost quarter of a million jobs. Tory shadow minister Alan Duncan called it "unnecessary and damaging".

TUC research, however, shows that agency workers get paid 80p for every pound earned by permanent staff, a quarter of all "temps" have been in post for more than a year but can be sacked instantly, and nearly half want a proper contract.

So, Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling, which side are you on?

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## UNIONS

# Teachers' pay: vote 'Yes' for strike, but more action needed

National Union of Teachers activist, **Bernie McAdam**, outlines arguments for a strike over pay this year – but warns it will take more than a one-day protest

Teachers are in the middle of a ballot for a national one-day strike over pay on 24 April. Teachers have had below inflation pay rises since 2005 and the current offer of 2.45 per cent, then 2.3 per cent for the following two years is well below the Retail Price Index figure of 4 per cent.

Teachers would be mad to accept a three-year deal with a likely recession on the horizon. Indeed, prices of food, petrol, domestic energy, mortgages and childcare, plus council tax bills are already shooting up. Young teachers, starting on a salary well below that of local government graduates, are in a particularly difficult position as they struggle to pay off student debts and get onto the housing ladder. Schools minister Ed Balls has offered us a pay cut at a time when the workload of teachers is spiralling out of control.

The NUT ballot is long overdue; we need to strike on 24 April with a thumping majority and a good turn out.

We also need to win! The 24th

should not be just a protest strike, it should be the launch of a rapidly escalating campaign of action to ensure a victory for our fight for £3,000 or 10 per cent, whichever is greater. One-day action by itself will not win our demands.

It is clear that NUT leaders do not have a strategy for winning this dispute. Their decision to rule out "discontinuous action" in the ballot proves that they do not want to see any escalation. Under the anti-union laws, there would have to be another ballot before further action could be taken: months of delays instead of escalating action.

Instead of defying the anti-union laws, general secretary Steve Sinnott is hiding behind them!

### What Next?

NUT Conference at Easter can put maximum pressure on the executive to hold a second ballot directly after 24 April in order to escalate the action as quickly as possible. Our leaders will stall and delay over action, as they did over the ballot. Rank and file members must urgently insist on a

strategy to win. Such a strategy needs to:

- Make the one-day strike a launching pad for more action; we need a rapid escalation of action culminating in an all out, indefinite strike.
- Organise democratically elected bodies to represent the strikers

in every area; this could provide a real basis for a Rank and File Movement and an alternative fighting leadership within the union.

- Draw in the active support of pupils and parents, who have been the backbone of many anti-privatisation campaigns.

## What we say

Across the public sector, the Labour government has declared war both on the workers who provide services and on those who use them. Brown and Darling are confident that the union leaders will side with them and will delay, divide and divert every attempt to defend pay, conditions and services. Left to themselves, that is exactly what they will do, as they did last year. But they can be stopped.

- Within every union, militants need to organise locally and nationally to mobilise their memberships to force leaders to take action or, if they will not, to take action themselves.
- Within workplaces, joint union action committees are needed to coordinate campaigning and prevent all attempts to divide and rule.
- Between the unions, rank and file organisation is necessary at both local and national level to maximise the impact of strikes and to counter any move towards separate deals.

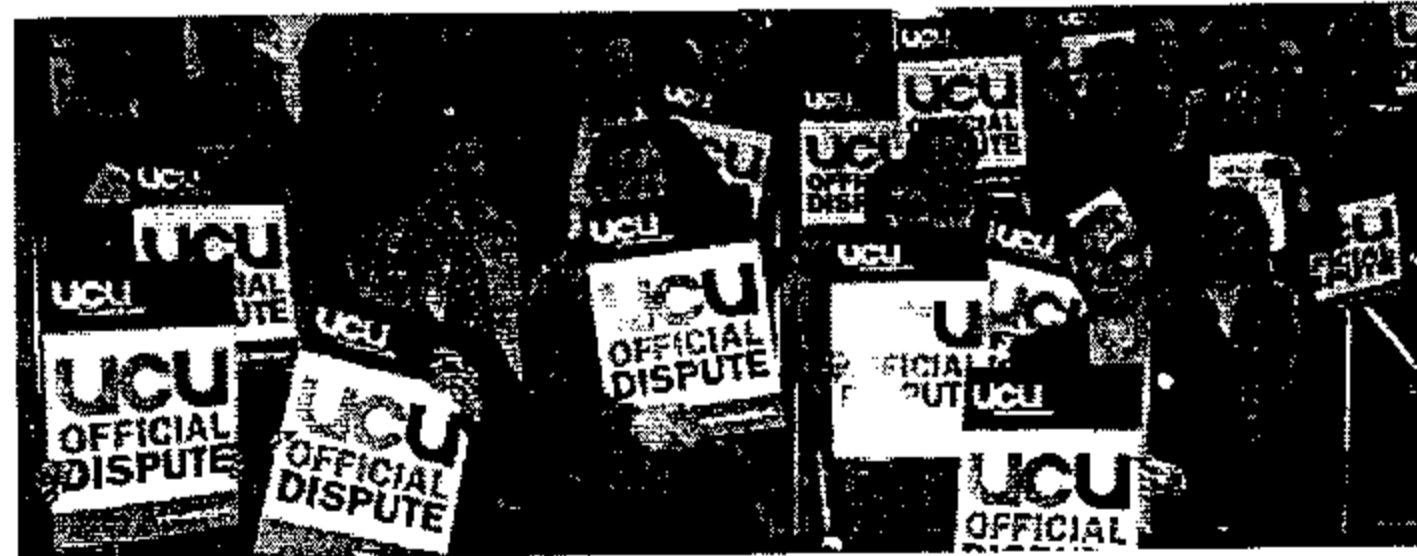
Union leaders may believe that preventing an all-out battle with Labour will improve their chances of winning some concessions on the government's overall strategy of privatising or withdrawing public services but, if so, they are dangerously mistaken. Any weakness over pay and jobs will only encourage further attacks and accelerate privatisation. But, equally, an effective campaign over pay can be the start of a determined offensive against the government's whole strategy.

## College lecturers: prepare for shut down

By a UCU activist

Lecturers in the University and Colleges Union begin balloting for strike action on 14 March. The ballot and the threat of strike action back up an annual pay claim, submitted alongside other unions with members in the further education sector, of 6 per cent or £1,500 whichever is the greater, a minimum hourly rate of £7.38 and a commitment to negotiations to establish common conditions of service nationally.

The decision to ballot for strike action was taken in the light of the appalling results of last year's claim. In October, union officials



recommended acceptance of a 2.55 per cent settlement, which had been accepted by other unions, despite the fact that, with inflation above 4 per cent, it represented an actual pay cut.

Although a special conference rejected that proposal and supported calls for action in support of a

deal which at least matched the inflation rate, with the other unions having settled, no action was taken and in a majority of colleges managements simply imposed local settlements. For many in the further education sector of the newly amalgamated union, this was not a promising beginning.

### Unity

One lesson is clear; a unified pay claim, submitted by all the unions in the sector, will only strengthen us against the employers if it leads to unified action. UCU's decision, pending the ballot, to call a first strike on 24 April, alongside the National Union of Teachers, is certainly a step in the right direction, but by no means a guarantee of an effective campaign.

Within the colleges, we need to coordinate action between all the unions involved and to prepare for escalating action, up to an indefinite closure of all colleges, until the full claim is met.

# Welfare warfare: fight cuts to benefits, jobs, pay

With a recession likely, Labour is trying to herd claimants into dead-end jobs and training schemes, while demoralising Job Centre staff with cuts and privatisation.

**Simon Hardy** calls for a united fightback

The Department of Work and Pensions plans to cut another 12,000 jobs, privatise up to £75 billion of employment service contracts, and close 200 offices. This is part of a callous and blatant attempt to force millions off benefits just before an economic downturn threatens to throw thousands out of work.

Labour jobs minister James Purnell said, "Our goals are ambitious: one million people off incapacity benefit, 300,000 more single parents at work, one million more older workers."

This is coupled with investment banker David Freud's reactionary agenda of getting two million sick people off incapacity benefit, regardless of their health. Instead, cheapskate bosses will get a £50,000 subsidy for every worker they take on an 18-month contract.

Caroline Flint, the aptly-named housing minister, said recently that all new council tenants will have to find paid work to secure their flat, and that this scheme could be rolled out to all existing tenants. What would happen to those who did not get jobs? Would they be chucked on the street?

Not to be outdone, Home Office minister Vernon Coaker floated the idea of withdrawing benefits from "drug addicts".

#### Class-wide response

These plans are based on Freud's 2007 report into welfare provision, which argued for a mixture of public, private and charity organisations to run the "welfare market". Contracts should go to the best bidder, mostly charities because they are cheap – over £2.6 billion has been spent on private contracts

already. The DWP would be marginalised and run down.

The Public and Commercial Services union is already in dispute with the DWP over an imposed three-year pay deal that amounts to just 1 per cent a year on average, despite inflation running at over 4%; nearly half of all civil service staff are receiving no pay increase this year.

On 17-18 March 80,000 DWP staff will strike against this real pay cut. Good, every other worker – at work or on benefits – should support them. However, the last strikes were three months ago, back in December. The government has shown that it can handle one or two day strikes every few months. The cuts and reforms still go through as planned.

The PCS has already failed to stop 30,000 jobs cuts across the

DWP over the last four years, and pay levels have sunk through the floor – despite the group leadership being dominated by the Socialist Party. The union needs a new strategy to win, one that links up the workers with the unemployed and incapacity claimants to expose this Labour government. Rank and file militants should demand a dramatic escalation of the action up to and including an all-out indefinite strike – not just over pay, but taking up the issues of privatisation and benefit cuts.

Claimants can play a crucial role on picket lines, on rallies and demos – but also organising sit-ins at threatened Job Centres, and visiting workplaces threatened with redundancies. What is happening to the welfare state is a class-wide issue. It deserves a class-wide response!

## Single status strike suspended

Birmingham council workers face losing thousands in pay cuts. Many are already low paid. Lots would lose bonuses or work longer hours. **Bernie McAdam** reports on their strike

The 20,000 strong strike on 5 February was a brilliant response to so-called "single status" plans to cut the pay of 5,000 employees, embodying the slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all!" A second strike, due on Tuesday 26 February, would have piled even more pressure on City Hall chiefs.

But union leaders suspended the action, as both sides agreed to hold intensive negotiations on developing a deal on a new pay and grading system. Unison regional secretary Valerie Broom stressed, "The action has only been suspended." Two weeks of detailed discussions

will now take place, with any new deal put to union organised consultation meetings on 12-14 March.

However, Broom "welcomes the opportunity to have meaningful negotiations". Socialist Worker even went as far as to say that "Council bosses have been forced into a significant climbdown... they have now been forced to the negotiating table."

But as a GMB steward told Workers Power, "The Council have offered us nothing but talks. We did not come out on strike to have talks." Absolutely right, Council workers were striking to stop their pay cuts. This is not up for negotiation.

The council has not given in. It is pursuing the same goals by a different tack, by haggling over how many pay cuts without the pressure of industrial action – just like Royal Mail got out of jail free in last year's postal strike. Secret talks simply facilitate union officials to sell-out.

#### Watch your leaders!

It is crucial that workers control the direction of these talks and hold their representatives to account. No pay cuts are acceptable – that's the bottom line. If this proves impossible, then restart the strikes.

Mass meetings of workers, not "consultations" must decide the

outcome. Rejection of likely compromises should be combined with calls for a new strategy committing workers to an all-out indefinite strike – a tactic being actively discussed in the GMB.

The council will not roll over on this issue. Indeed, they view the exercise as a softening up process for further privatisation.

The Labour government has refused to fund single status deals throughout the country. With a new national pay deal up for grabs on 1 April and unions demanding 6 per cent across the board, local government workers should campaign for a nationwide strike.

## ENVIRONMENT

# Climate action hots up!

By Luke Cooper

The government has now completed its consultation with the public over the new runway at Heathrow. The government hoped the campaign being waged in the media by the aviation industry and Heathrow owner, BAA, would see a surge of support for the runway. But in fact they have seen a tidal wave of opposition. So negative was the response that the government took the unusual step of not releasing any of the thousands of submissions they have received - until after they have made a decision in the summer.

Two pieces of direct action by campaigners have also amplified the pressure on the government. On 25 February activists from Greenpeace managed to breach security at Heathrow. They climbed onto the tail of a plane just before it was due to leave and unfurled a banner that read "climate emergency - no third runway". While, the next

day activists from Plane Stupid managed to scale Parliament and dropped banner from the roof that read 'BAA HQ' - a reference to the leaked documents that showed BAA wrote part of the unpublished consultation and that the government has already agreed in principle to a third runway.

Westminster Hall was also packed at a rally on 25 February organised by the Stop Heathrow Expansion campaign. On the airline Virgin's website, they even ran an online poll asking people to "support airport expansion" but despite giving an outright endorsement of the "yes" option, some 94% of people voted no before the poll was removed!

These actions - coming on top of the successful Climate Camp at Heathrow last summer - show the potential for the movement against Heathrow expansion. The issue demonstrates the lengths the government and big business go to

show their "Green" credentials only to expand the very industries responsible for global warming.

There is no rational, needs based argument for this expansion, but it is all about profit - or, in the language of BAA et al this translates as "maintaining Heathrow's 'competitiveness' against its other western European rivals".

Courageous as this weeks protests are, direct action by small groups of activists are not sufficient to win on these issues - we need to build a mass, militant direct action movement. Young people and students clearly have a massive role to play in building this movement - it is, after all, our future that is being frittered away by the decisions made by government today.

On 8th March the Red Alert! teach in will bring together activists from a range of groups, parties and campaigns discussing a whole series of issues connected to the climate crisis. It is an opportunity to

educate ourselves and plan further actions and campaigning - don't miss it.

## RED ALERT! Action needed on climate change!

A youth and student teach-in  
10:30-18:00

London School of Economics,  
20 Kingsway, Portugal St,  
London (near tube Holborn)

For more information see  
[www.climatealert.com](http://www.climatealert.com)

The Campaign against Climate Change and the No Third Runway Action Group have called a national demonstration at Heathrow Airport on 31 May. For more details go to [www.campaignccc.org](http://www.campaignccc.org)

## Workers climate change conference success

More than 250 trade unionists met last month to build a campaign against climate change. *Joy Macready* reports

In the face of Labour's lack of effective action, the trade union movement must understand the centrality that it will play in fighting climate change through developing working class struggles to halt the increase in the production of greenhouse gases and start reversing the damage that has already been done.

The Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Unionists conference opened with a long list of union leaders at the top table along with Labour MP Michael Meacher and Green Party MEP Caroline Lucas. Most of the speakers were noticeably to the left, making the gathering far more militant than last year's CACC conference, reflecting the activism and campaigns around the country.

The six workshops focused on: carbon trading and market mechanisms; greening the workplace; alternative energy, towards a zero carbon economy; building sustainable cities; towards sustainable transport; and global treaties,

Kyoto and beyond. The workshop discussions were good but there was a lack of proposals about how we were going to take the struggle

forward. Although an amendment was accepted from Workers Power calling for trade unions to mobilise their members for the

National Climate Change demonstration in December, the chair only allowed four resolutions to be motivated from the floor, without any debate or vote such as a motion calling for support in the rail workers' union, the RMT, in its fight for re-nationalisation of the rail.

After the TUC's annual conference, the steering committee should hold a recall conference and open the discussion up to debate actions and take motions.

The conference was a successful first step in the launch of a trade unionist wing of the Campaign against Climate Change.

The resolution passed (see below) lays out avenues that trade unionists should explore such as fringe meetings at all the union conferences to encourage grassroots union activists to take action.

Our message to the bosses should be, it is not a choice between a job and the environment - it is a choice between profit and the environment.

### CCCTU CONFERENCE RESOLUTION

Conference fully endorses the aims of the Campaign against Climate Change (CCC). We recognise that trade unions have a central role to play, both in developing just and equitable solutions to climate change and also in building a mass movement around the issue...As a first step, we urge all trade unions to:

- **Affiliate to the CCC** and encourage members to support and participate in its actions, particularly the National Climate March in December 2008.
- **Develop union policies on:**
  - 1 **Securing effective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions within each industry, workplace and local area, and across the economy as a whole**
  - 2 **Defending the interests of members during the transition to sustainable production.**

In pursuance of this aim, conference calls for the establishment of an open, national Campaign against Climate Change Trade Union Working Group. As a first step, this group will aim to organise CCC fringe meetings at as many national trade union conferences as possible.

More information at [www.campaignccc.org](http://www.campaignccc.org)

**FIGHTBACK**

# Fight government attack on migrant workers

**By Rebecca Anderson**

**H**ome Secretary Jacqui Smith and Immigration Minister Liam Byrne have unveiled a raft of new attacks on immigrants.

First, new Australian-style points system whereby only the most highly-skilled workers from countries outside the EU – those earning the equivalent of £40,000 – will be allowed to move to Britain. This will then be extended to lower-skilled workers, students and temporary workers and the number of points needed will be changed according to the demands of the labour market.

Second, the new English tests that immigrants face won't apply to those who have more than £1 million to invest in UK business – that money and the wealthy can

cross borders with ease but that those who desperately seek asylum and an income are judged not on their need but that of the bosses.

Both of these demonstrate the extent to which immigration controls are tailored to the demands of big business and how they disproportionately discriminate against working class migrants. Greater controls on poor migrants only serve to drive them into illegality where they will be preyed upon by the gangmasters, rip-off agencies and slum landlords. They will be paid less than the minimum wage, live in slum accommodation, while the government can use migrants as scapegoats for problems such as a lack of council housing, under-funding of the NHS and an over-stretched education system. These problems aren't caused by immigrants using these services, but by the government privatis-

ing them and spending public funds on bombing Iraq and building more nuclear weapons.

The third element of the attacks on immigrants is further restriction on the rights of non-EU citizens to marry UK citizens. The age restriction on this, at 18, already stands two years higher than the age at which two UK citizens can marry and the proposal is to raise it to 21.

This is being done under the guise of preventing forced marriages but is really just another racist immigration control that means that a person's legal rights in Britain depend absolutely on where they or their family were born – measures that attack poor, non-white communities.

Since coming to power New Labour has brought in bill after bill tightening up on asylum and immigration. It has done this pandering to the racist media such

as Murdoch's Sun and the Daily Mail and with full support from the Conservatives.

While there have been campaigns to organise migrant workers such as the London cleaners campaign, refugee journalists and Polish construction workers, the trade unions must adopt a national campaign to unionise, fight for better pay and conditions and repeal racist legislation which only serves to undermine and divide workers. To help build such a movement, come to the migrant workers' conference (see below).

**Trade Unions and Communities  
against Immigration Controls  
Conference**

**10:30–17:00 Saturday 29 March**

**SOAS, Malet St, London**

**Sponsored by Finsbury RMT**

**Speakers include John McDonnell**

# Defend abortion rights

**By Kam Kumar**

**W**omen's right to abortion is under threat again as the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill passes through the Commons this spring. Tory leader David Cameron declared that he will be supporting lowering the time limit for abortion to 20 or 21 weeks, depending on the final amendments put forward.

Currently the latest time in law a woman can have an abortion is 24 weeks, (unless there are serious medical risks to the woman). Anti-abortionists such as Nadine Norris MP argue that the time limit should be lowered because unborn babies were proven to survive outside of the womb after 20 weeks.

But leading medical organisations such as the British Medical Association say that only 11% of

babies born after 20 weeks survive and it does not support lowering the current limit. The BMA also calls for abortion in the first trimester to be available without the need for two doctors' signatures

The parliamentary Science and Technology Committee recently found that there were no scientific reasons for restricting existing time limits for abortion.

A poll last October found that 83% of respondents supported the current legislation.

Currently, only 2% of abortions are carried out after 20 weeks, and this is usually due to very exceptional circumstances such as late diagnosis, illness, NHS delays or drastic changes in circumstances that make it very difficult for a woman to go through with a pregnancy.

At the same time as the Bill passes through parliament, pro choice

groups and trade unions will organise a lobby of parliament in support of the existing legal time limit.

On International Women's day, 8 March, there will be a demonstration through Westminster and this year, because of the issue of abortion, women, trade unionists, medical professionals and other activists will be making a giant human chain spelling out "pro choice".

We should support these actions, call for regional demonstrations, hold public meetings in towns and cities to explain the facts about abortion and challenge the anti-abortionists and organise lobbies of MPs and ministers. The attack on the time limit must be defeated.

Furthermore we should argue for free abortion on demand (currently a third of abortions in the UK are paid for), free unrestricted access to contraception, and for the right of women to control their

bodies, not the state.

We must not rely on parliamentarians to defend women's rights.

Although pro choice MPs are seeking to propose amendments to improve access to abortion, such as removing the requirement for two doctors' signatures for permission, these measures would improve women's access to abortion but do not establish the unequivocal right of a woman to control her body.

For this we need a working class women's movement, fighting not only for the right to control reproduction but for equal pay for women workers, free childcare and crèche – factors that contribute to whether a woman can have a child or not.

The fight for free abortion on demand should also take up all aspects of women's oppression and link the struggle for women's liberation to the fight for socialism.

**PALESTINE**

# International Intifada must halt the Israeli 'holocaust' in Gaza

## Statement of the League for the Fifth International

**3 March 2008**

Once again the aggressive and expansionist Zionist state has launched bloody attacks on the besieged Palestinian population of Gaza. On March 3 Al Jazeera reported that Israeli incursions and air-launched missiles over the preceding five days left 'at least 116 Palestinians dead, including 22 children and 12 women'.

Israel's deputy defence minister, Matan Vilnai, speaking on Israel Army Radio on Friday 29 February, declared that the Palestinians: "are bringing upon themselves a greater shoah (holocaust) because we will use all our strength in every way we deem appropriate, whether in air strikes or on the ground."

At the beginning of the attacks, on Wednesday 27 February, an Israeli air strike destroyed the head office of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS), killing a six-month-old baby. The PMRS head office housed the main PMRS clinic and pharmacy in the Gaza Strip, it was a centre for persons with disabilities. All the medicinal supplies and most of the equipment were destroyed.

Already subject to an economic blockade which has brought mass unemployment, acute food and clean water shortages, power cuts, restriction of medical supplies, the destruction of hospitals and regular terror attacks on civilian houses by Israeli planes, Israel now threatens a full-scale invasion as punishment for the limited response of a few missiles hitting Sderot and Askalon.

In fact the random and untargeted rocket fire has killed only three Israelis in a year

Whereas the Israeli Occupation Forces have killed 182 Palestinians in Gaza since the start of 2008. This incredible "asymmetrical conflict" has nevertheless occasioned a remarkable racist outburst from the Zionists.

The Israeli use of the term Holocaust has shocked many in the Western media but it simply reveals the truth - the genocidal intentions of the Zionist regime and the total fraud of the Annapolis Peace Process.

Ehud Barak, the Israeli defence minister, revealed the political intentions of the Israeli attacks when he threatened "...we need to prepare for escalation, because a broad ground operation is real and tangible." He claimed the objective was to "weaken the Hamas rule ... in the right circumstances even bring it down."

In fact, this has been the central objective of the Zionist regime since Hamas won the Palestinian elections in 2006 - to reverse the democratic decision of the people.

The picture of Hamas as the aggressor is a plain lie. In fact, Hamas has repeatedly indicated that it would agree to a ceasefire if the IDF stopped targeting its institutions and militants with rocket and air attacks and entered into negotiations with it as the elected authority in Gaza, something the Israeli regime - backed by George Bush - absolutely refuses to do.

Yossi Beilin, former government minister and ex-leader of Meretz, a centre-left Israeli party, said that Hamas had at least twice made requests "via a third party" to agree a truce. A Haaretz-Dialog poll in the week of the Gaza onslaught showed that 64 per cent of Israelis were in favour of such an agreement to end the rocket fire, and secure the release of the Israeli corporal, Gilad Shalit, who was captured by Gaza militants in June 2006. Yet every move in this direction has been rejected out of hand.

Instead, the Zionist regime insists that their "precondition" is that Hamas must first "recognise the State of Israel, renounce all armed struggle against it and disarm its militants." That is to say, the precondition for ceasefire talks is total surrender in the struggle for Palestinian rights. This cynical call is of course supported both by George Bush and Condoleezza Rice and by Tony Blair, the special envoy of the so-called Contact Group - the forces supposed to be "mediating" between Israel and the Palestinians.

It does not take any act of imagination to foresee what the Palestinians would be offered by Israel under such total surrender conditions. Even less than the nothing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was offered at Annapolis.

In reality, Israeli is not offering a negotiated peace but the national annihilation of the Palestinian People. Vilnai's threat of a Holocaust exposes the genocidal intentions of Zionism. They quite simply want to make any sort of viable Palestinian state impossible. They want to create simply a series of open-air concentration camps - behind their steel and concrete walls - for a disarmed and displaced remnant of the Palestinians. The monstrosity fully compares with the horrors of Apartheid South Africa

Yet the Palestinians have shown that they are not ready to surrender. They did so in January when they pulled down the border fence with Egypt and for eleven days were able to get food

and other vital supplies. They showed this willingness again in the north of the Gaza Strip when they formed a human chain in a peaceful protest against the Israeli blockade. Israel immediately threatened to open fire if protesters tried to cross the border.

In fact, these mass actions - as well as the heroic resistance to the Israeli incursion of all the resistance fighters - show the way forward. They could be the start of a Third Intifada, this time a mass Intifada, an Intifada without borders, aimed at throwing back the Israelis in defeat from Gaza and the occupied West Bank - just as they were thrown back from South Lebanon.

The people of Gaza will need support from their Arab brothers and sisters in Lebanon, Jordan and, above all, in Egypt. The mass demonstrations, which greeted the pulling down of the Gaza-Egypt border shows this, can be achieved. Indeed, across the Arab and Muslim world, across the entire world that groans under the oppression of US and EU imperialism, mass forces should be mobilised on the streets against the governments which back Israel and the USA and their allies. The demand must go up to break all military and economic ties with the racist state attempting to inflict a Holocaust on the Palestinians

In the Imperialist Countries - in the belly of the beast that arms and finances the Zionist war machine - antiwar, labour movement and anti-imperialist militants must create a mass movement such as they built in 2003 when faced with the invasion of Iraq.

Around the world, in all countries, we can use the global day of action already planned for March 15 under the slogans Troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan! Don't attack Iran! and End the Siege of Gaza!

We need to place special emphasis on the latter slogan this year. We need to win the forces mobilised to take action to blockade the blockaders, to sever all economic and military ties with Israel, to impose workers' sanctions at the ports and airports, to provide aid in all forms, medical, food, to the Palestinian people, including arms to the Resistance.

**Down with the Zionist Holocaust!**

**Break the Siege of Gaza!**

**Down with the Apartheid Wall and the colonisation of the West Bank!**

**Victory to the Palestinian Resistance !**

**For an International Intifada to help free Palestine!**



## AFGHANISTAN

# Another unwinnable war

Afghanistan – the war that western liberals and the European Union supported – is becoming more indistinguishable from Iraq by the day, argues *Jo Cassidy*. The antiwar movement, here and in the US, needs to focus on making it as unpopular, and getting the invaders out

From the outset Afghanistan was posed as the “winnable war”. The invasion was underway within four weeks of 9/11 with little opposition in North America or Europe. But after seven years of bloody fighting – longer than World War II – opinion is now divided as to whether the quagmire in Afghanistan can in fact be resolved. Gordon Brown still insists Afghanistan is the “good war” in the Middle East. He told Parliament at the end of last year, “We are winning the battle in Afghanistan.”

However, in his optimism, he is swimming against a stream of reports predicting a bleak future for the country. The Afghanistan Study Group, a collection of US diplomats and military experts, says the country is showing signs of being a “failed state”. Reports from Oxfam and from the country’s Nato commander are similarly pessimistic.

The deepening crisis has led to divisions within the Nato countries. Canada has threatened to withdraw 2,500 troops from Kandahar, if other western countries don’t send more troops to support the occupation. This is aimed mainly at France and Germany, which have also been condemned by Robert Gates, US Defence Secretary, for not shouldering “their share of the fighting and the dying”. Nice turn of phrase: he certainly knows how to sell a war!

The Canadian government is under pressure to withdraw in the face of mounting resistance in Afghanistan, with 73 of its troops killed so far. Opposition to the war is up to 70 per cent in Quebec, and rising elsewhere. In Britain, 62 per cent want all 7,800 troops withdrawn within a year.

This lack of faith in the occupation forces, both amongst the general population in the West and the elite, is the result of the situation on the ground. The Taliban fighters have adopted the most brutal guerrilla tactics.

## Karzai’s regime

The US now has almost 50,000 troops in Afghanistan: twice as many as in 2004. However occu-



pation casualties are mounting steadily: from 58 in 2004 to 232 in 2007. Civilian deaths have increased 74 per cent in the last year, when 400 Afghan non-combatants were killed. Even US-installed puppet president Hamid Karzai, has accused the international forces of “careless operations”.

The territory controlled by Karzai’s government is shockingly low. Mike McConnell, America’s top intelligence official, has claimed that he runs about 30 per cent of the country, and the Taliban 10 per cent, with the remainder under tribal control.

One major problem facing the country is the rising drugs trade. Many farmers have turned to opium production in the destabilised post-invasion economy, making Afghanistan the heroin capital of the world. The export value of the country’s opium amounts to nearly half its GDP, and more than 12 per cent of Afghans are involved in opium poppy cultivation. The highest estimates suggest that 40 per cent of profits, amounting to tens of millions of pounds, go to fund the insurgency.

Ironically, one of the reasons for increased opium cultivation is that the US liberalised the market, making Western food imports far cheaper than Afghan grown produce.

The liberation of women was one of the initial aims of the invasion

stated by the US and British governments. This was simply a cover-up for their true imperialist aims of new markets and political domination. The lie that the invaders had the interests of Afghani women at heart is now being exposed.

Initial gains that were won for women after the invasion are being reversed, and there is spiralling rape and violence against women. Moreover, Sayed Pervez Kambaksh’s death sentence for downloading material on women’s liberation shows how empty the rhetoric about liberation really is.

The conflict in Afghanistan does not end at the border. In the Pashtun-dominated border regions there is little distinction between Afghans and Pakistanis. Many Afghans displaced in the 1980s and 1990s grew up in refugee camps in Pakistan and went to religious schools there. The fighting has therefore spread into neighbouring Pakistan, whose army has already suffered great losses.

The Pashtun tribes, for whom war has been a backdrop to everyday life for decades, already have a long experience of fighting the Soviets. Securing these areas is vital for the US in Afghanistan, as 75 per cent of all supplies are passed through Pakistan, but this is proving close to impossible.

The Taliban are gathering support and strength throughout the

region, and now have a presence in over half the country. Their policies are undoubtedly reactionary. Last month they produced a constitution, proposing executions in public, women being fully covered and having no right to education, and banning all light entertainment as anti-Islamic.

It would be wrong to suggest, as the western media often does, that there is a single insurgency movement called the Taliban. The resistance is in fact far more varied. Nevertheless, support for radical Islam is rising. It is the force in the region that has fought the occupiers most consistently.

The anti-war movement in the West must show solidarity with all forces fighting the occupation. Of course, we have the right – and internationalist duty – to criticise the Islamists’ aims and methods. But our anti-imperialism is rendered meaningless if we do not support those fighting imperialism on the ground in Afghanistan and across the Middle East.

It is the duty of anti-imperialists across the globe to turn Afghanistan into an unwinnable war for the imperialists, and so end the distinction between the “bad war” in Iraq and the “good war” in Afghanistan. Every time Western troops set foot in the Middle East in pursuit of profit they will act against the interests of the working class – in these coun-

## LONDON MAYOR

# Right wing go for wounded Livingstone

The race for London Mayor is hotting up. *Jeremy Dewar* calls on workers to vote for Labour's Ken Livingstone – but warns that they will have to fight him too

The notoriously right wing *Evening Standard* has led the charge against the current mayor and Labour candidate with headlines, such as "Livingstone allies paid thousands from the public purse" and "Ken Livingstone's astonishing and shocking drinking habits".

The paper's allegations against Livingstone's policing and equalities director, Lee Jasper, led Livingstone to suspend him and refer the case to the Met. Scotland Yard swiftly reported there was "no case to answer" but by this time – and this was the *Standard's* aim – the damage had been done.

By the end of last month, Boris Johnson, Conservative candidate in the May poll, was five points ahead, according to a YouGov survey, after the mayor's rating plummeted 6 per cent.

Not surprisingly, a broad coalition of Muslim, African Caribbean, lesbian and gay, and trade union forces have rallied behind Livingstone. Confronted by the prospect of a deeply racist, anti-working class and pro-war Tory mayor, they want to re-elect Livingstone as a means of defending their communities from racism that is on the rise on the outskirts of London, and securing minimum living standards for the working class.

And it is true he has carried through some measures the Tories never would.

His Living Wage Unit has implemented the union demand for a £7.20 an hour minimum wage within the Greater London Authority. Under his ruling that half of new homes should be "affordable" he has sheltered some working class families from the worst of house price inflation.

The congestion charge has cut London traffic – and car emissions – by 20 per cent, while buses have become more frequent and accessible. The Oyster Card has reduced fares for Londoners, while students under 18 travel for free and the unemployed half-price.

Most obviously, Livingstone has denounced the war and spoken up in defence of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Though much of this has been tokenistic, it has made racially oppressed people feel



Livingstone (left) has been targeted by the right wing press, which is rallying around reactionary Tory candidate, Boris Johnson (right)



welcome in an otherwise hostile Labour Britain.

In the blue corner stands Boris Johnson, a man who put the Hillsborough football stadium disaster down to drunken Liverpool fans and accused their city of wallowing in self-pity after it. A man who refers to African children as "piccaninnies" with "watermelon smiles" and would surely undo Livingstone's anti-racist reforms.

### Ken: a capitalist politician

For these reasons we, along with many militant workers who have stopped voting Labour in general or municipal elections, call on workers to vote for Livingstone and Labour in the Mayoral and GLA polls. But we warn in advance that Livingstone will continue to

carry out policies which pander to the City and therefore we have to organise to fight against him as well.

For example Livingstone defends Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, from calls to resign over the murder of Jean-Charles de Menezes at Stockwell tube station in July 2005, and the brutal shooting, arrest and later defamation of Mohammed Abdul Kahar and his brother Abdul Koyair at their Forest Gate home a year later.

He has privatised the East London Line and called on tube workers to cross picket lines. And he has paid his political advisers, like Lee Jasper and the shady Socialist Action clique, grotesque salaries upwards of £100,000.

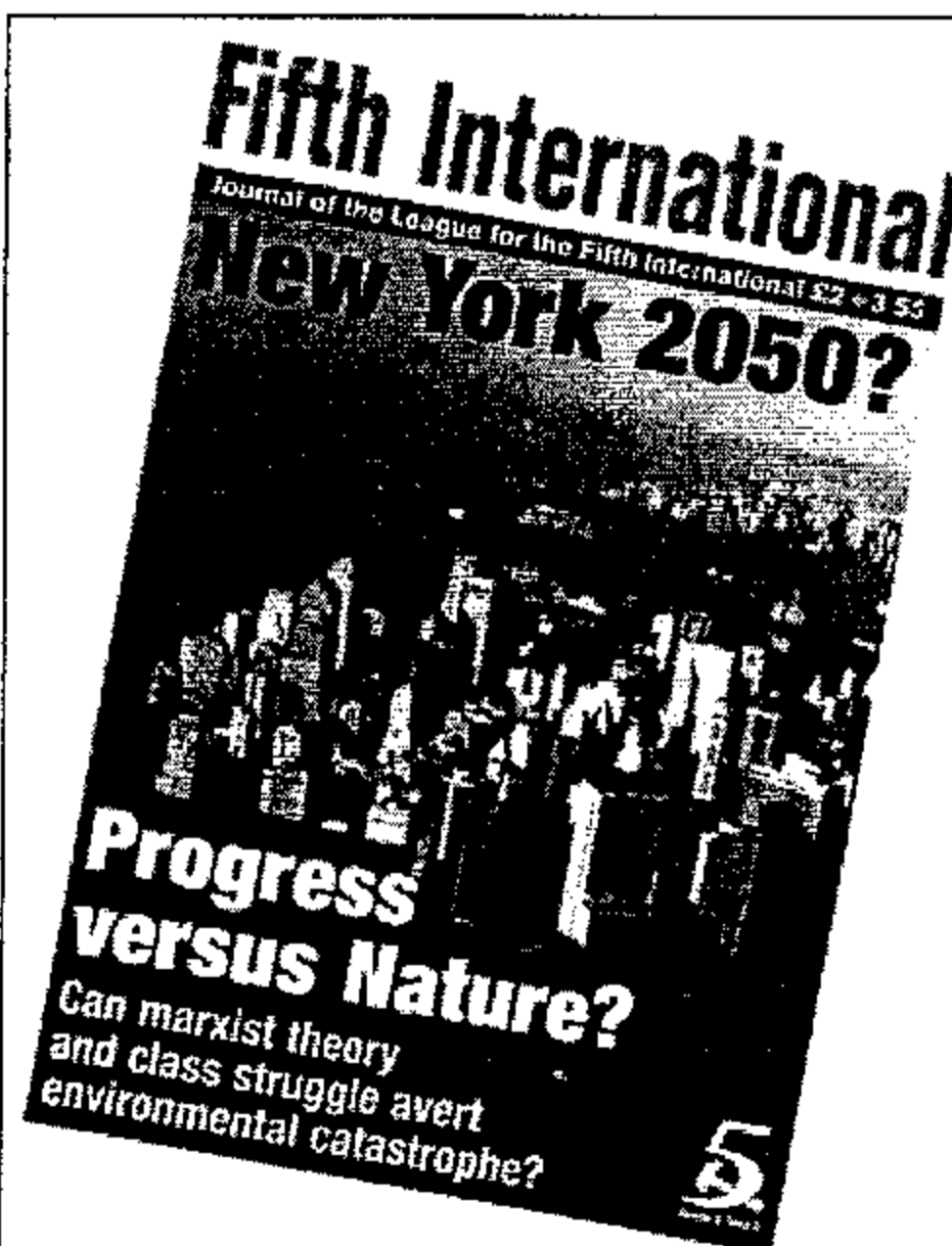
Our support for Livingstone in

no way endorses this rotten political record. On the contrary, we say to those that have illusions in Ken delivering for the working people, that he serves the capitalist system and its state. We will have to pile on the pressure from the other side to force him to deliver on his promises and take more radical steps. We call on Livingstone to:

- Oppose all privatisation on the tube
- Stop funding and backing the racist police
- Force real, massive cuts in carbon emissions
- Introduce swingeing taxes on the super-rich and the corporations
- Fund a massive programme of cheap public housing and transport

Of course, this would put Livingstone on another collision course with Gordon Brown and the Labour Party. Indeed, he only won his right to stand on a left Labour platform, because he broke with the party and stood against Labour in 2000.

That's why we maintain our call for a new workers party, based on a revolutionary programme aimed at the overthrow of the capitalist system itself and transition to a socialist planned economy. But in this instance, this can best be fought for through putting Livingstone back into office.



## OUT NOW!

The new issue of Fifth International, the League's English language journal, is now on sale. It focuses on the burning issue of climate change with two articles: one looking at Marxist theory and whether human development can be environmentally stable, the other at the latest scientific studies on global warming.

Also in the 60 page journal, we print a new article on China and whether its economy can be "decoupled" from the USA's, an obituary of Palestinian fighter, George Habash, and results and prospects for the French workers and youth in their struggle against Sarkozy.

Finally, we print exchanges between the League for the Fifth International and the Committee for the creation of a Party of Socialist Revolution in Venezuela, and book reviews ranging from China Miéville's *Between Equal Rights, a Marxist theory of international law* to Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion*.

To order your copy send a cheque for £3.20 to "League for the Fifth International", BCM 7750, London WC1N 3XX

**WORKERS POWER CONFERENCE**

# On the edge of a capitalist crisis – prepare for struggle!

As the USA enters its deepest recession for decades, almost all capitalist economists fear Britain will follow in its footsteps. While we can predict neither the full scale nor the precise tempo of the downturn, revolutionary socialists can forewarn of a new offensive from the bosses and help prepare the working class to resist. Workers Power, the British section of the League for the Fifth International, held its conference last month to plan our work in this turbulent time. In the following pages, we publish some of the documents that we discussed, amended and passed

**T**o summarise the situation we are in, we can say the following. The economy will slow down in 2008, and may even enter a technical recession (two consecutive quarters of negative growth), leading to a rise in unemployment, attacks on public sector jobs and wages, cuts in public services and benefits.

The Labour government will continue to languish behind the Tories in the polls, although it may avoid a drubbing in the May elections because neither the Tories nor Liberal Democrats have a groundswell behind them and the working class reformist leaders will continue to block the path to a new party.

The downturn will push another large section of the working class into poverty or precariously close to it, which will increase the pressure on the union leaders to mount resistance to the employers and the government.

However, the union activists remain insufficiently independent of the bureaucracy to make a general counter-offensive probable this year; the TUC lefts and the main far left organisations, which effectively shield them, will reflect rank and file discontent, while attempting to block it from adopting the necessary tactics to win and taking steps towards the formation of a rank and file movement capable of acting independently of the official union leaders.

The antiwar movement is unlikely to grow, as the possibility of an attack on Iran recedes, though the “war on terror” (setbacks in Iraq or Afghanistan, desta-

bilisation of Pakistan, terrorist attacks) could lead to spontaneous mobilisations

Of the other political issues that will raise the prospect of struggle throughout the year, the most important are:

- Climate change (nuclear power, government infrastructure projects, especially airport expansion, corporate polluters, floods and severe weather)
- Rising racism and the continued threat of fascism
- Attacks on women's rights, including in particular the attempt to thwart women getting equal pay by levelling pay down, cuts and marketisation of the NHS and schools, increasing women's' double burden, fresh attacks on abortion and reproductive rights and high levels of domestic violence and rape not brought to justice
- Devolution and the growth of Scottish and Welsh nationalism
- Global flashpoints raising the need for international solidarity, for example, Pakistan, Palestine, Kenya, Venezuela and Bolivia

In these conditions, the tasks of a small communist organisation are to explain the roots of the crisis to the fighting youth and militant workers, and agitate for a programme that links the needs of the daily struggle against capital and war to the fight for working class power, carefully focusing on and prioritising the national and international struggles facing the class as a whole, drawing a growing number of workers and youth into our organisation.

## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE BRITISH CLASS STRUGGLE

### Global capitalism: global meltdown?

The United States of America, the world's largest, most powerful economy and only superpower, is heading for recession. This will have enormous implications for every capitalist economy on the planet. And Britain will be hit harder than any other advanced country because of its close economic ties to the USA and its shared and growing dependence on debt and financial parasitism. While the exact scale and tempo of the US recession and its impact cannot be fore cast, 2008 will be a year of turmoil and shocks, even greater than the second half of 2007.

The credit crunch, resulting from the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market in summer 2007, has revealed the extent to which the US economy had been maintained on high-risk personal, corporate and banking debt. Everyone from poor working class families, whose homes have been repossessed, to Citigroup, the world's biggest bank that had to write off \$18 billion, has been caught up in it. As capitalists sought safe havens, the stock markets across the world collapsed; further volatility is inevitable.

It is now clear that this has had an effect on the real US economy. House prices, housing starts and mortgage applications have fallen; consumer confidence has tipped, causing a downturn in spending; most importantly, US manufacturing entered a technical recession in the last few days of 2007. Merrill Lynch declared Wall St and the US government to be "in denial" and that the recession "has arrived".

However, the escape route used in the previous downturn, cutting Federal Bank interest rates in order to cheapen borrowing and investment, would dangerously lead to inflation. Indeed, the tentative measures taken in this direction, which are likely to be pursued simply because it is the least bad option, have already shown signs of stagflation – slowing or negative growth combined with inflation, the scourge of the 1970s.

In addition, the counter-cyclical boon of cheap Chinese imports will diminish this year. Chinese wages – and inflation – are increasing; oil has reached \$100 a barrel, and this is fuelling inflation in other commodities. The price of gold – the last resort for capital in a serious recession – is rising rapidly.

# It's their system, but the bosses want us to pay!

The question facing British capitalism is whether the US crisis will lead to a slump here – rapidly rising unemployment and a sharp fall in living standards – or a "soft landing" a short, shallow recession, after which a new period of expansion begins relatively quickly, as in the last cyclical downturn of 2001. Will the poorest third of the working class that did not see any real benefits from the 11 years of "boom" be joined by the middle third being thrown into poverty or precariously close to it?

New year results for Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury confirm that the consumer boom, which was based on an expansion of credit or personal debt, and key to the UK avoiding serious recession in 2000-02, is under threat.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to have grown by 3 per cent in 2007, but to slow to 2 per cent or worse in 2008. Many commentators now expect Britain to suffer a significant recession this year with negative growth rates, a contraction of industrial output, services and retail. GDP growth was just 0.6% in December 2007 and with the credit crunch deepening low growth looks set to continue into 2008.

Sterling has peaked, and is "set to take a pounding" according to David Bloom of HSBC; this will boost exports by cheapening their price abroad, but aggravate inflationary trends. Britain's trade deficit remains high, running at £7 billion a month.

#### The return of inflation

The one instrument governments have traditionally used to combat recession is control of interest rates. The Bank of England cut its rate in February to 5.25 per cent, a reversal of recent policy. Its rates are still higher than the US Federal Reserve (4.5 per cent) and the European Central Bank (4 per cent) but the Bank of England – unlike the Federal Reserve or the European Central Bank – has an anti-inflationary bias built in to its charter, so it is inherently less sanguine about inflationary pressures than its US or EU counterparts.

However, there is no guarantee that such a strategy will work. If markets are contracting, then investment will not be a viable option, no matter how cheap the borrowing rate is. Furthermore, interest rates take 12-18 months to have their full effect, by which time the economy may already be in recession. Finally, lower interest rates will fuel inflationary pressures, which could threaten any recovery. In the worst-case scenario, the economy could experience stagflation.

Regardless of interest rates, there are other inflationary pressures, most importantly in the energy and food sectors. The retail price index puts inflation at 4 per cent, but the real rise in the cost of living is undoubtedly much higher. The example of Japan in the 1990s shows that interest rate cuts are not guaranteed to stimulate an economy out of recession and stagnation. Instead, real negative interest rates plunder the savings of the petit-bourgeoisie and deliver profits to banking capital at the savers' expense.

Record high oil prices will raise transport costs. npower raised electricity and gas prices by 12.7 per cent and 17.2 per cent respectively in January (on top of a 53 per cent rise in 2006), which The Economist and others point out will mean up to 27 per cent hikes for some households. EDF has now followed suit. Inflation in basic foodstuffs (cereals, rice, dairy products, meat) reached 5 per cent in October 2007 and will persist. Also the rise in Chinese inflation to 5.6 per cent and the strong pound will feed through into more expensive imports. While economists are divided as to what extent these factors will push overall inflation up, they will obviously hit working class standards of living.

Workers should not rely on the bosses' figures and demand their own trade union price watch committees to calculate the real rise in the cost of living, and their wages rise accordingly.

#### Poverty, debt and unemployment

The economic downturn of 2001-02 was offset in large part by cheapening credit, leading to historically high levels of corporate and personal debt. More than 9 million people (23 per cent of the adult population) have "unmanageable" credit card and mortgage bills, as the average household debt stands at £33,000 (over £8,000 excluding mortgages). Britain's aggregated personal debts now total £1.4 trillion.

While the house prices fell during the last quarter of 2007 and will probably fall by between 10 and 30 per cent in 2008-09, this will not necessarily lead to lower mortgages or more people being able to afford to buy houses. On the contrary, The Independent reports that 1.4 million households will come off fixed-rate deals and experience a serious hike in their mortgage bills. Also mortgage application refusals are rising, as lenders are wary of taking on "sub-prime" customers. Mortgage approvals fell by 40 per cent in 2007.

Meanwhile, falling house prices will leave many with diminishing assets, against which they will no longer be able to borrow. Home

## WORKERS POWER CONFERENCE

repossessions will continue to rise from 30,000 in 2007 to around 45,000 in 2008 (they reached 70,000 during the last housing slump in 1991). A Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors survey reported the worst outlook for the market since 1992.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that one in three (3.8 million) children in Britain live in poverty, a rise of 200,000 in the past three years. Given that Labour chose to focus on the fight against child poverty, as opposed to all people in poverty, this is a real indictment. The minimum wage – especially in London – is widely perceived to be so low that it actually encourages poverty wages. The same Rowntree report recommended raising public sector wages in order to take more children out of poverty.

In the past year, workers' living standards have, on average, fallen, as wages have risen at a lower rate than retail prices. Disposable incomes are also at their lowest level since 1997, according to uswitch.com. While the entrenched poverty of the bottom fifth of the population (or, approximately, the poorest third of the working class) has been written off by Labour (they don't vote and are not in fighting unions), an increasing number of workers are now looking poverty or the real possibility of poverty in the face.

The bourgeoisie's threat to Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling is: if you can't get us out of this mess by offloading the costs of the downturn onto the working class, we'll find someone (David Cameron and George Osborne) who can.

Officially there were 1.61 million unemployed (5.2 per cent) in January 2008. This will rise over the year, rather than fall, as it did in 2007. As well as the continuing decline in manufacturing jobs, the financial sector will also contract. A crisis in public sector finances will lead to a more rapid rate of job cuts there, too.

While the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development predicts the number out of work will rise modestly to 1.8 million (5.8 per cent), it reports that the jobs market is at its "worst for a decade", and the Institute of Directors said the economy was "entering the most uncertain economic period for 15 years". John Philpott of the CIPD said 2008 would be "easily the worst since the Labour Government came to power in 1997", that a downward trend in public sector employment over the last two years "has in turn been more than offset by rising numbers of private sector jobs. But 2008 will be the first year for a decade that the engine of job creation will be spluttering right across the economy."

However, the number of claimants is less than half the number of unemployed. This is the result of forcing the jobless off the books. Now the government will go for the 2.7 million people on incapacity benefit and the long-term unemployed. Those that refuse to go on "training" schemes will lose benefits, while employers will be subsidised by the taxpayer for offering such schemes, and be able to set their parameters. The training on offer is minimal; the scheme is a poorly disguised state subsidy for low-paid, unskilled work with no incentive for it to lead to permanent contracts. Tougher disability tests will also be introduced in October.

Now is the time to claim what is rightfully

ours. Our hard work created Gordon Brown's "longest boom" but the poor never saw the benefits. Raise the minimum wage to £9 and hour now!

Millions, with nowhere else to live, were forced to take out unsustainable mortgages. The government should nationalise and amalgamate all the mortgage lenders and fix repayments at 2007 levels, or convert them into rents, set at council house rates. No one should have their home repossessed.

Work or full pay for all! No one – council tenants, drug "addicts" – should lose benefits for refusing fake training or poverty wages! Any firm threatening redundancy should be nationalised

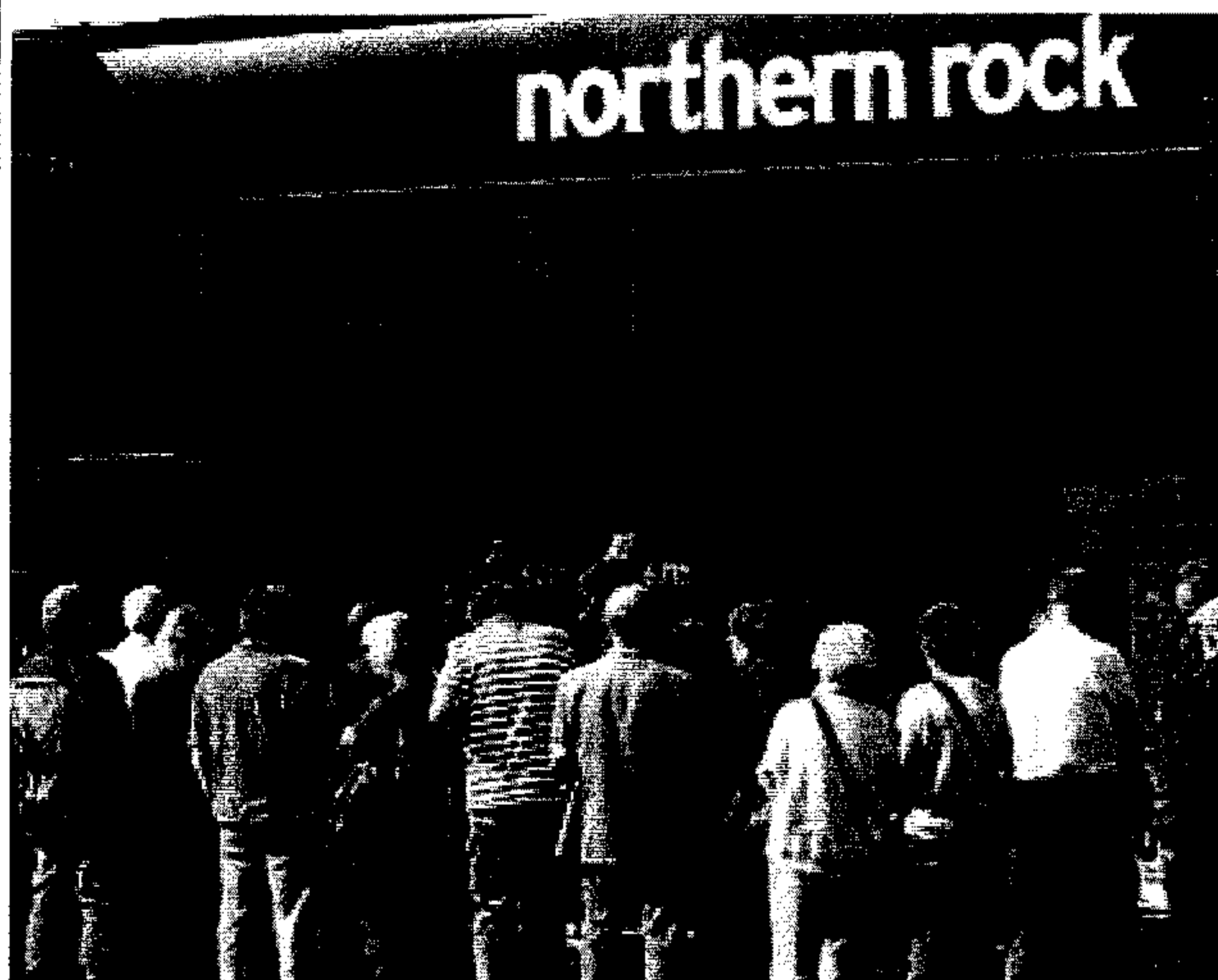
without compensation and placed under workers' control – by force of strikes and occupations where necessary. We say, cut the working week to 35 hours, not the jobs!

### The public sector

There will be enormous pressure on Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling to cut public spending. The slowdown is "certain to increasingly undermine VAT and corporate tax receipts" (Howard Archer, Global insights). Moreover, "the main effects of the credit crunch on City-related income tax and corporate profit revenues have yet to come through" (John Hawksworth, PwC).

...continued on page 14

## Rock falls, no heads roll



The collapse of Northern Rock has provoked a political crisis. A run on a British bank, something that had not occurred for 140 years, caused the government to intervene to prevent it collapsing and the "contagion" spreading. Chancellor Alistair Darling pumped billions into Northern Rock, but failed to find a buyer.

Should Labour and the Bank of England have let the Rock fall and serve as a warning? Should they have intervened earlier and more decisively to halt the run? Should they have waited till all market solutions had been tried (Tories) or nationalised it straight away (Liberal Democrats)? The prudence of the Treasury, and hence Gordon Brown, himself, is being called to account.

Labour has now nationalised Northern Rock, underwriting its losses with £55 billion of taxpayers' money. The Office of National Statistics has acted swiftly to shift the failed bank's whole £100 billion debt onto the government's balance sheet. In addition, the government is now

responsible for calling in bad debts, repossessing people's homes and the probable sacking of 3,000 workers in the Newcastle area. It has appointed Ron Saunders on £90,000 a month to oversee all this – and he is a "non-domicile" who doesn't have to pay taxes!

This news also came on the same day that Barclays announced £7 billion profits; why, many workers will ask, don't they nationalise that? It all goes to prove that nationalisation is not, in and of itself, a socialist measure.

Obviously, revolutionaries will point out these contradictions, make propaganda for socialism as a more rational system of production and distribution, and agitate for a working class solution to the economic crisis: for nationalisation of Northern Rock and the whole banking sector under working class control and with no compensation, and for the aggregation of their funds so that the unemployed and under-employed can be put to useful work on social projects, earning decent wages.

## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE BRITISH CLASS STRUGGLE

### It's their system, but the bosses want us to pay

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In other words, the government, which was already planning to drastically cut spending on welfare services this year, will have even less money to spend than it thought a year ago.

Added to this, the bourgeoisie believes that Gordon Brown has already overspent during the years of economic upswing. "The 2007 Budget looks to have been too expansionary" (Howard Davies, LSE). Public sector borrowing is forecast to reach £38 billion at the end of the current financial year (April 2008). To abide by its own "golden rule" (zero net borrowing over the business cycle, except for long-term investment), the Treasury will have to make serious cuts in the budget.

Raising taxes is both politically dangerous, as it will allow the Tories to pose as the real party of big business, and economically double-edged, as it will deter investment during a slowdown. So the working class will be the target: public services, public sector jobs and wages, welfare benefits.

The government's comprehensive spending review in October 2007 anticipated annual real-term increases of 4 per cent in the NHS budget (from £90 billion to £110 billion) and 2.8 per cent in education (around £78 billion) over the next three years. Not only will these rises be under pressure because of falling revenues and inflation, but the increases will be swallowed up by existing and projected PFI payments.

In 2006, the public sector paid £7.5 billion servicing PFI projects worth £53 billion. Not only that, but the projects only amounted to £8 billion of investment. The annual rate of return is approximately 15-20 per cent. Not only that, three PFI schools closed last year due to falling pupil numbers, but the local authority still has to make repayments. The scheme is proven to be more expensive than government direct spending and to transfer all the risk back to the public sector.

But the PFI snowball, whereby more projects come on stream, while existing ones still have 25-30 years to run, is set to roll on and accelerate. According to Allyson Pollock, the NHS spent £470 million in 2005-06 on 53 schemes, but will spend £2.3 billion a year by 2013 servicing 126 schemes. There are 350 schools in the first wave of the Building Schools for the Future renewal and refurbishment plan and 47 academies, all of which have to use PFI. The targets are for 3,500 schools to go through BSF and for 150 academies by 2009: £45 billion worth of PFI projects.

There will be many more local campaigns against these rip-off schemes, closures and cuts made in other services to afford them, and the inevitable financial and operational failures that have and will continue to accompany them.

All these schemes should be nationalised without compensation to the fat cats. Tax the corporations and the rich, and nationalise the banks to pay for schools, hospitals, homes and recreational facilities, built and designed under community control!

# Will the unions fight?

Trade union membership in Britain is still suffering from the destruction of manufacturing and the neoliberal assaults since the 1980s. Only about 29 per cent of workers are in a union: in the public sector just under 60 per cent, while in the private just under 17 per cent. This in itself is not a barrier to action as the strikes by French workers have showed (where union density is far lower), particularly in the public sector.

The union bureaucracy has pursued methods of overcoming this decline. The preferred strategy in the recent past had been to merge. The creation of bigger unions may appear to members to offer opportunities for greater action by removing some barriers to inter-union rivalry and promoting unity. However, the main driving force for mergers is to safeguard the bureaucracy's privileges and remove democratic structures.

While mergers may still occur, the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee joining with the Rail Maritime Transport union, the removal of unions' influence within the Labour Party and the failure to carry out consistent recruitment campaigns means that mergers are no longer a panacea for union woes.

The only sure way for unions to be stronger is to recruit members – especially the low paid and migrants – by fighting for better terms and conditions. This has been pursued to an extent by GMB, Unite-T&G and some of the smaller unions. But for the decline to be reversed, the unions must take national economic and political action that can challenge the bosses and their government. This is unlikely. However, we can expect the bureaucracy to be forced to take some action, although this will probably fall short of a national offensive.

#### Pressure mounts

The pressure on the union leaders to mount effective resistance to the bosses' attempts to offload the effects of the slowdown on the working class will be a major feature of 2008, whether or not the economy tips into recession. Indeed, this was already the case in 2007, which is why the number of strike days rose significantly last year to over one million.

The indefinite strike has made a limited return, as more workers have been prepared to go out and stay out (Glasgow social care, Manchester mental health, sections of postal workers), and strikes lasting more than one day. Some of which won quite spectacularly, although others went down to defeat because they were isolated and the bosses were able to sit them out. Their willingness to sacrifice was tremendous, though strikers have to spread the action and break the anti-union laws when necessary.

One thing is clear; failure to resist will not just be a missed opportunity, but will tip the balance of forces, in the workplace and society at large, further in favour of the bosses. To lose because of the union misleaders' sabotage, or worse still to lose without a fight would make the working class weaker in its coming battles, whoever eventually wins the next election.

This year, anger in the public sector will grow over job losses, wage restraint and cuts to services. Just because workers reluctantly accepted last year's cuts does not mean they will be prepared to do so again. Gordon Brown's announcement of another 2 per cent pay limit, and insistence on three-year settlements has provoked a lot of anger from the union leaders. Unison and the GMB immediately submitted 6 and 7 per cent pay claims. Jack Straw's imposition of a ban on the Prison Officers Association from taking any industrial action (i.e. it will be a criminal offence) was likewise seen as an aggressive warning of things to come.

The government, of course, is confident. It took the London underground off the pay battleground in February 2007 with a three-year deal worth 4 per cent in the first year and inflation-proof rises for 2008-09; then it took on and defeated the postal workers. It is banking on bureaucratic inter-union rivalry, poor rank and file organisation among local government workers, professionalism in other parts of the public services and a craven bureaucracy in the big three unions (Unite, Unison and GMB) to win through.

#### Widespread strikes possible

But it could be surprised. The call for co-ordinated strike action and local co-ordinating committees will have a resonance. But it will take a vanguard section of public sector workers to seize the initiative by breaking with the bureaucrats' strategy and rallying others behind it.

We saw a glimpse of what this would be like at the critical moment of the Communication Workers Union strike last year. The rolling wildcat moved like a wave of autonomous action down the UK. Its spread threatened not only the defeat of Royal Mail but of the union bureaucracy's hold over the workers and the continuing ideological hold of "obey the law" over the public sector workers facing pay restraint. This terrified the union leaders as much, if not more than it scared the bosses. They panicked, rushed into a deal as fast as they could.

This experience, despite ending in defeat, showed us something of vast importance: that in the course of even limited national action, the objective needs of the struggle can and will impel workers into self-activity without the union leaders' approval; that the struggle for a rank and

## WORKERS POWER CONFERENCE

file movement will win or lose on this terrain; and that even the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy today will stand four square against such a development.

In addition, private sector workers will face a squeeze on pay, and redundancies will mount. Moreover, the pro-Labour union leaders will be less inclined to hold back struggles in the private sector, where the government is not the immediate target. They need to be seen to lead (not sabotage) some struggles, in order to maintain the allegiance of workers. There could be more walk-outs and unofficial strikes, as the bosses spring attacks on their workforces as soon as they finally make up their minds to take their capital out of production.

On the other hand, however, we cannot simply chart a continuing upward curve of strike activity because of this. The CWU defeat could prove to be serious not only for the postal workers themselves, but across the public sector, where the militants rightly acknowledge the posties as a vanguard section.

Also if the downturn takes hold, reformist trade unionism could prove by and large ineffective, i.e. incapable of protecting jobs or defending wages and conditions. Anger can, under these circumstances and in the absence of a revolutionary intervention, turn into resignation.

For these reasons, we cannot predict a continuing upward curve of industrial struggles. But we can expect agitation over economic issues to resonate among a wider layer of workers. Recessionary pressures will push more workers, even some on good incomes, into desperation. We warn that the union leaders will limit their struggles: keeping them within the law and refusing to call for solidarity strike action, calling off strikes for "talks", making deals behind their backs, trading off jobs, wages and conditions, even sacrificing the jobs of trade union militants, as Tony Wood-

ley did at British Airways in 2005.

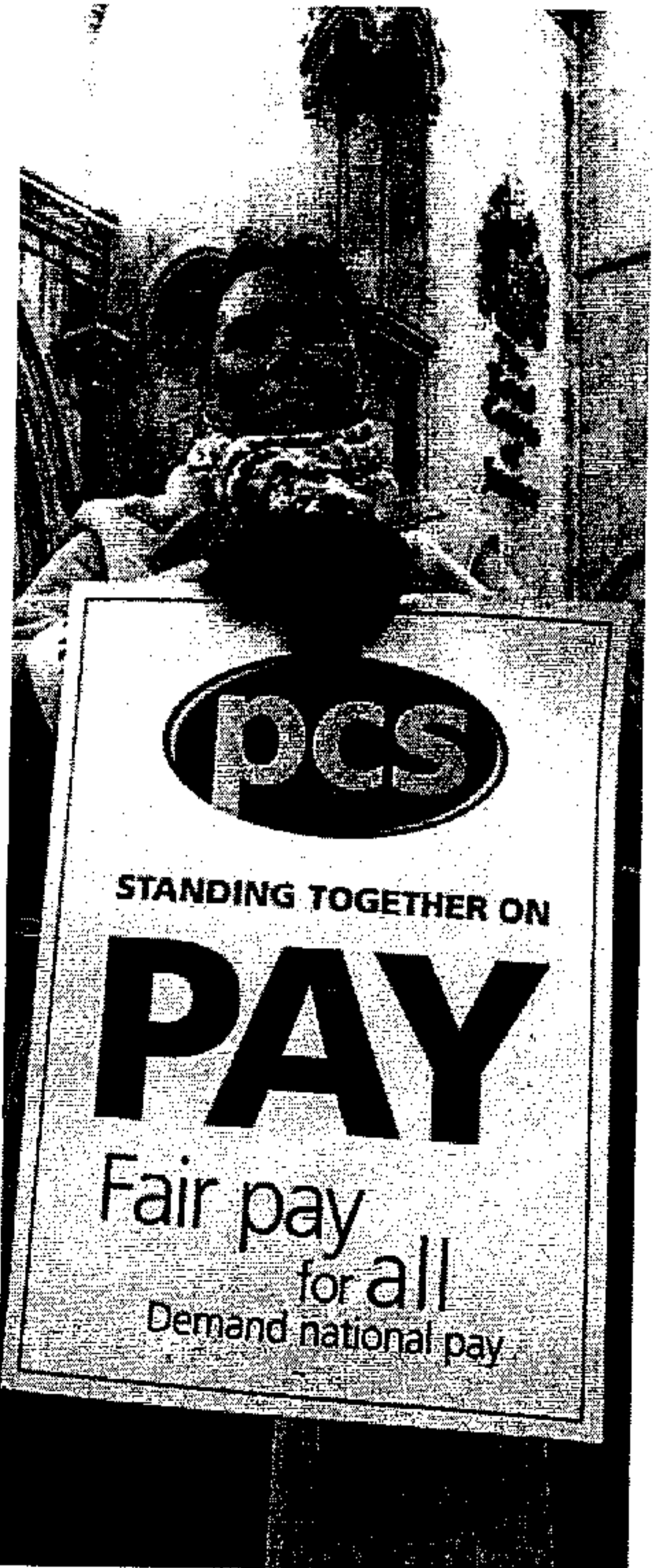
We will intervene quickly into workers' struggles as and when they occur. We will agitate for a fightback in the public sector, not least because this is where the unions are strongest.

- Rank and file control of strikes and negotiations through elected strike committees
- All-out indefinite strike action and occupations of workplaces threatened by closure
- Solidarity committees to organise collections and spread strikes where necessary
- Withdrawing funding from Labour during disputes
- Action committees where several strikes coincide
- A rank and file movement to oust the bureaucracy and transform the unions: workers in struggle

Workers will need all these tactics in various combinations. As we did in the CWU strike, we will put some tactics to the fore – not all will be equally important all of the time. We will focus on the task of the day, while explaining a strategy to win.

In these struggles, we believe frank criticism of the leaders' waverings or sell-outs is a vital duty. This is particularly important with regards to the TUC lefts. Mark Serwotka and Janice Goodrich have led the PCS to a series of defeats and pandered to the least conscious sections, instead of rallying the whole union behind a fighting leadership. Bob Crow refuses to call for political strike action to stop privatisation on London Underground or to win re-nationalisation.

Above all, we will fight for a new political leadership in the unions, one that will break from Labour and form a new working class combat party, based on a revolutionary action programme. We need this party, not only – not mainly – to stand in elections, important though that is, but to lead today's struggles.



## The union lefts?

Neither Organising For Fighting Unions nor the National Shop Stewards Network will act independently of the TUC lefts (Mark Serwotka, Bob Crow, Matt Wrack, Jeremy Dear, etc.) Because of this, they are a block to the formation of a rank and file movement.

The Socialist Workers Party will resist any attempt to set OFFU on such a course. Both it and the NSSN are little more than a series of one-off rallies. Convergence of the two organisations would be an obvious step forward, yet the leaders of these cross-union initiatives have no interest in uniting them.

Of the two, the NSSN is looser, and could see rank and file initiatives emerge from within its ranks, like we saw at the tail-end of the postal strike. However, it is controlled by the Socialist Party and the Rail Maritime Transport union bureaucracy. It could not be transformed into a rank and file movement without a struggle against its current leaders.

The various left groupings in the unions – PCS

Left Unity, Socialist Teachers Alliance, Unison United Left, *Post Worker* – are also blocks to such a rank and file movement. They put winning union positions above organising the members for struggle. *Post Worker* did not publish a single issue during an entire, five-month national strike!

The Alliance for Workers Liberty is at least prepared to criticise the TUC lefts, though in practice they only counterpose a more left variant of the same strategy. In the postal strike the AWL openly criticised Dave Ward and Billy Hayes for their betrayal, but they promoted "their" friendly left wing bureaucrat, Pete Keanleyside – who then turned his coat and backed the sell-out!

In the PCS, the AWL supported a left split from Serwotka's Left Unity bloc, but Independent Left has failed to call for a rank and file movement, for the right to instantly recall and replace officials, or for strike action without and against the officials, where necessary – the bare bones of a communist strategy in the unions.

However, none of this makes the need for a rank and file movement less urgent. On the con-



Bob Crow

trary. But it does mean that it will be newly radicalised workers and mass strikes that will provide the basis for such a movement – not left critics, who have accommodated to various parts of the bureaucracy.

## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE BRITISH CLASS STRUGGLE

# Labour's strategy: hug the Tories, hit the workers

**G**ordon Brown's fall from grace has seen the Tories surge ahead in the polls. However, while yet another wave of voters are turning away from Labour, including now a section of the petit-bourgeoisie returning to the Tories after the long years of Blairism and economic expansion, the majority of disillusioned workers are not yet flocking to the Tories.

Therefore 2008 will see intense political competition between the bourgeois parties, as a struggling Brown government fights it out with a Tory party that has turned the corner, but whose future growth will be rocky due to the contradictions of the Cameron leadership, not least with sections of its own party. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats have stabilised under Nick Clegg, and will attack Labour from the "left" on issues such as the environment and poverty.

In the context of an economic slowdown, this competition and public debate will intensify and turn nastier. All this points to a year of politicisation and debate in the working class and social movements, regardless of the sectional defeats or climbdowns of 2007.

Labour has been behind the Tories in the polls for 12-18 months, except for a three-month honeymoon when Brown took over. The decision not to hold a snap election in October 2007, and the onset of the economic downturn soon after mean that Labour will not now go to the electorate before May 2009, and maybe not until June 2010.

### Who can serve the bosses best?

Labour strategists know that the Tories will maintain their lead in 2008, but they believe that they can still gain re-election if the government can prove it knows how to handle the economy in a recessionary phase.

If Labour can, on the one hand, target spending on infrastructure projects, boosting investment, and maintain low taxes on capital (or even lower them) and, on the other hand, ensure that the working class pays for the downturn with lower wages, the unemployed being forced out of benefits and into low-wage jobs or training schemes, and cuts in public services, it could regain the initiative and force the Tories onto the defensive. After all, what would David Cameron's team do that's different?

This strategy could work. Why? First, the Tories, despite their lead, are still shy of the percentage of votes they need to win, because the unfair first-past-the-post electoral system is currently weighted in Labour's favour.

Second, the Lib Dems have to target the Tories if they are to win their key marginals, and they are likely this year to regroup and be a stronger force behind Nick Clegg's leadership. Clegg is on the pro-neoliberal "Orange Book" wing of the Lib Dems, and used his first policy speech of the



year to advocate private sector control over schools and hospital treatments, and to rule out any tax rises.

Third, the bourgeoisie is not yet convinced about the Tories' team. True, they put the skids under Gordon Brown in the autumn: they wanted to see if post-Blair Labour would grant more favours to the unions. Those fears could diminish, depending on how Brown tackles the slowdown. Meanwhile, the Tories do not have strength in depth. After all, look at Boris Johnson, their candidate for London Mayor.

Finally, the Tories' appeal has its own limits. On the NHS and education, they demand more devolution, fewer national targets and standards, more independence from LEA control. It favours removing unemployment benefit after a set period, or if training or jobs are turned down. Union-bashing is not a burning necessity. Green taxes tinker around the edge of the problem and in any case are not popular. Labour is already focusing on the "winnable" war in Afghanistan and drawing down troops in Iraq, so there is no advantage for them, there either. In other words, the Tories have no real alternative vision that could produce a groundswell, like Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair did in 1979 and 1997 respectively.

In this context, Labour is not likely to precipitate any move to break the union link. Further moves to gain serious bourgeois backing are blocked because of the Abrahams fiasco; any attempt to divert taxpayers' money towards political funding of parties would be deeply unpopu-

lar during a recession; Labour will lean on the union leaders to help them discipline the workers; and of course Labour is heavily in the red.

### Corruption rampant

Indeed, all the parties are bankrupt – financially and politically. That's why Labour in particular and British bourgeois politics in general are mired in endemic corruption. Following the Scotland Yard investigation that plagued Tony Blair's last months in Downing Street (inconclusive, but damning in terms of the culture of cover-up it reported), and the furore over businessman David Abrahams' secret and proxy donations, Peter Hain is the latest Labour leader to be caught taking undeclared money and in danger of prosecution. Labour's only defence is to point to Tory backhanders and to blame the system, whereby MPs have to fill in registers.

These scandals will rumble on and multiply, because bourgeois democracy has been "hollowed out": fewer activists join and campaign for the main parties; fewer vote, or have votes that count; so the price of chasing votes has rocketed. It appears that even Respect, under the SWP's leadership, took money from a Dubai company involved in PFI deals, and channelled it towards Organising for Fighting Unions, before returning it.

Workers and youth are rightly disgusted by such sleaze. We call for a new workers party, funded entirely through workers' subs, democratically agreed union affiliation fees and political benefit events.



# WORKERS POWER CONFERENCE

## The far left in crisis and the question of a new workers' party



The far left has been through a period of great opportunities. During ten years in government Labour has lost 200,000 members and five million voters. In 2003-04 the mass rebellion against the “war on terror” was of truly historic proportions. In the same period an “awkward squad” of union leaders were elected promising to stand up to Labour.

Despite this, the far left has stagnated and declined. The “awkward squad” has moved rightwards and sold out key struggles, with each – except Mark Serwotka – making it clear that, to different degrees, they are not in favour of an immediate alternative to Labour. Not one of them has lifted a single finger to put their union behind the call for one.

Nevertheless, last autumn various figures among the Labour left and *Morning Star* discussed the question of a break with Labour. This followed Gordon Brown’s serious attacks on Labour Party democracy, which went as far as withdrawing the right of unions and constituencies to put proposals to conference, and also as the split in Respect came into the public domain.

### Open letter

We published an open letter at this time, arguing that the split in Respect was an opportunity for a new party. But as the split in Respect unravelled, and Brown ruled out an early election, these forces pulled back. The Labour Representation Committee announced its meaningless “united front for socialism”, which, concretely simply meant the old Labour lefts (John McDonnell et al) would continue to work with forces outside the party. *Morning Star’s* editor John Haylett summed up their retreat:

“Will [the five million voters who have deserted Labour] flock to a new left-of-Labour party, either one already constituted or currently on

the drawing board? There is little evidence for this... the failure of both SSP and Respect to maintain their unity in face of internal divisions does not inspire confidence in any project as yet to replace Labour as the mass electoral vehicle of the labour movement.” (*Morning Star*, 31/12/2007)

We were correct in assessing the objective and subjective possibilities in September and October. Besides the continuing Communications Workers Union strike and the possibility of united action by public sector unions, another major opportunity opened for a new workers party. This was presented by the Rail Maritime Transport union’s decision (since reversed) to stand candidates in the London elections, the *Morning Star’s* declaration that the Labour Party conference was devoid of democracy (Rob Griffiths – the Final Crisis is Near), the large scale disillusion with Labour expressed on the picket lines by CWU militants, and last but not least the smash-up of the Respect, an obstacle to a class-based break from Labour.

This could have led to standing explicitly working class candidates or even laid the foundations of a new working class party. In short, there was a powerful objective basis for all these forces to unite in a call for a conference to debate the basis for a new party.

However, this enormous potential was not realised. Unsurprisingly, the left reformist and “revolutionary” (in fact, centrist: revolutionary in words, reformist in deeds) forces once again totally missed the opportunity, passing back the initiative to the moth-eaten forces of the crypto-Labourite wing of Stalinism and the historically weak forces of the Labour left.

This whole fiasco did not show the objective strength of Labour loyal reformism; rather it showed the pusillanimity of the “union lefts”, like Crow and Serwotka, and was a self-inflicted defeat by the two largest far left, i.e. centrist

organisations, the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party. The former were crippled by the collapse of their populist adventure with the imams, Muslim businessmen and George Galloway, the latter by their slow motion left reformist Campaign for a New Workers Party.

In short this was once again an example of where the crisis of leadership frustrates the willingness of the rank and file and the vanguard to fight. The same phenomenon on the industrial terrain (the CWU defeat plucked from the jaws of victory) plus the SWP’s unprincipled brawl with Galloway undoubtedly demoralised and disoriented those who were looking for a new political initiative in September.

While the immediate prospect of an initiative to rally the vanguard militants in the unions around a new workers party has been off the agenda since November, and may well continue to be so for a few months longer, Labour’s attacks on the public sector, its unloading of the effects of the oncoming crisis on the working class in terms of cuts and unemployment will open up once again the contradiction between the worker militants and the Labour Party, possibly as early as the union conference season and almost certainly by the TUC and Labour conferences.

Therefore our call for a new workers party retains all its relevance until the next general election – unless working class fighters flood back into Labour, because of defeats and betrayals by the union leaders, combined with a fear of a more openly right wing Tory government. However, we do need to stress the revolutionary content needed for a new working class party and its programme.

### SWP: biggest crisis since 1970s

The split in Respect has thrown the SWP into its biggest crisis since the faction fights of the 1970s. It emerged into the 21st century at the forefront of new anticapitalist ...continued on page 18

## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE BRITISH CLASS STRUGGLE

### The far left in crisis and the question of a new workers' party

... continued from page 17

and antiwar movements and with 8,000-10,000 members, but today its active membership probably numbers around a thousand at most. The split in Respect has left it wounded.

It appeared to temporarily overcome the crisis at its recent conference, only to be hit by further scandal in Tower Hamlets. One of their four remaining councillors, Ahmed Hussain, defected from the SWP (not just Respect) to the Tories: a tremendous blow to the SWP, right in Respect's heartland. This will further demoralise the SWP's ranks, and intensify the internal debate in the party. The major crunch is likely to come when its inactive members start cancelling their regular payments to the party, thereby precipitating a financial crisis that could see the backbone of the party – the army of full-timers – heading for the door.

In the unions the SWP encouraged its members to stand for the highest positions. It won a number of seats on executive committees and even, with Jane Loftus, the presidency of the Communication Workers Union. It has already had a high profile defection among its members on the PCS NEC, when Martin John preferred Mark Serwotka's line on pensions to the SWP's. It has only retained Loftus' loyalty by allowing her to accommodate shamefully to Billy Hayes and Dave Ward. This year could see further embarrassments for the SWP inside the unions.

In Scotland, it joined the Scottish Socialist Party, which enjoyed electoral success on a left reformist programme and media attention. The SWP became the biggest cheerleaders for the charismatic Tommy Sheridan; however, a leaked SWP memo revealed that it is ready to jettison Sheridan, just as it ditched Galloway last year, if Sheridan, Rosemary Byrne et al are, as seems quite possible, found guilty of perjury.

In the antiwar movement, SWP leaders refused to embarrass their allies among the union bureaucracy, and demand they call strike action to stop the 2003 invasion of Iraq, then joined in denouncing and booting off the steering group Workers Power representative, Kuldeep Bajwa, for publicly denouncing the Iraqi Communist Party's role in collaborating with the US/UK imperialist administration. Indeed, the mass anti-war movement was an enormous test of its politics, a test it completely failed, as it adopted the maxim "unity at all costs".

What united all these high profile projects was an uncritical alliance with reformist leaders, trading on their supposed connection with the masses by trading in their own principles. The SWP leaders never mentioned a word of criticism of George Galloway or Salma Yacoob inside Respect – until they decided to go for a split. Not surprisingly, this led some of their members to remain loyal to the previous tactic, rather than go with the party. The policy of the "united front of a special type" was formally new but the tailism – adapting to the existing ideas of the movement, rather than giving a revolutionary lead – was familiar from initiatives like the Anti-Nazi League.

There could be a right wing split from the

SWP led by those that think the leadership should have made more concessions to Galloway and have been "sectarian". But more likely, the SWP will continue their slow decline focusing on propaganda meetings and keeping the anti-war movement ticking over.

The real test will be whether they can survive the inevitable drubbing Lindsey German will receive in the London Mayoral elections. The defection of Hussain makes this campaign all the more tenuous, demanding an enormous amount of energy and finances. If German is humiliated, then it will further demoralise the ranks and massively increase the pressure on the leadership.

The Respect split has disproved the SWP's opportunist arguments, that a new workers party tactic would block the potential to organise a political project out of the anti-war movement, and that it was necessary instead to adopt a cross-class populist alliance with the Muslim petit-bourgeoisie (with some not-so-small capitalists in tow) in order to make quick electoral gains. In fact its three years of growth has been catastrophically reversed with the split – how could the SWP's wing of Respect, shorn of Galloway, trade union officials and Muslim community leaders, possibly be worse off than it is now if it had instead started out with a principled new workers party tactic?

#### CNWP: suffocated by Socialist Party

The Socialist Party, and their "alternative" to Respect, the Campaign for a New Workers Party, adopts essentially the same tailist method. As the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy – the "awkward squad" – moved rightwards, the centrists tailed them.

On the question of the fight for a new party they always had the utopian view that it could be formed following a backroom deal with these left union leaders. They never saw the fight for a new party as a struggle closely connected with the need for rank and file organisation in the unions and a militant fightback. The reformist programme they advanced as its basis reflected this approach; they never saw the need to fight openly for a revolutionary programme. For these centrists, it is always "too soon" for revolutionary politics.

The CNWP has stagnated under the dead hand of the Socialist Party. A signatory campaign (with over 3,000 signed up) has not been translated into independent activists or CNWP branches. The 2007 conference was no larger than the 2006 conference and was predominantly SP, which voted through a left reformist mini-programme, with the aim of sealing off any debate about revolution, while paving the way for the formation of a small party, in reality a propaganda group, which would prove no more seductive to real reformist leaders, nor more stable than the SSP.

While SP members in the CWU did get a new workers party resolution tabled at the 2007 CWU conference, in the PCS where the SP is strongest and part of the leadership, they have not pushed the CNWP in order to avoid alienating bureaucratic allies (especially Serwotka) and losing support. Indeed, the SP rejected our open letter – or indeed any public approach – to the reformist left at the November steering committee meet-

ing of the CNWP for fear of putting Bob Crow and co. on the spot.

This tailist method has remained the norm for the CNWP in the unions. The CNWP has won no organised forces other than the Walsall Democratic Labour Party (with one councillor) and fragments from the Socialist Alliance. To hide its opportunism, while still claiming to be "Marxist" and "revolutionary" in front of leftwing audiences, the SP uses the signatories as an alibi for their reformist practice in the CNWP. Their aim for the CNWP is to build in the long term a mass reformist party which would allow them to reactivate the failed Militant strategy of entering it permanently as its "Marxist" (in reality centrist) wing.

But this project looks some way off. The SP has failed to win supporters in the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy to the project of a new party beyond Mark Serwotka, who is also "riding" the SWP (he is a member of Respect), and the PCS and TUC left bureaucracy. Hence, his support for John McDonnell to appease the Labourites, and blocking of the PCS fund from being used to affiliate to any party to appease the syndicalists. He is, in short, a classic left Bonaparte.

Meanwhile, their opportunism in the unions holds back and obstructs the rank and file developing as an independent opposition to the bureaucracy, which looks increasingly like a precondition for the formation of a new workers' party. The Socialist Party promised to make a breakthrough two years ago, but they have since stagnated. They remain wounded by the damage to party morale from the support they gave to the sell-out on pensions in 2005.

#### Still time for a break from Labour

For *Workers Power*, the new workers party slogan is neither timeless nor strategic. It is always related to a specific conjuncture, in which workers are losing their illusions in Labour and revolutionaries could unite with these forces around the need for a working class alternative. Unlike the centrist left, we always argued that any new party should not repeat the mistake of the past, and should therefore be founded on a revolutionary programme from the start.

Now we face the likelihood of a recession, and while predicting its political fallout is difficult, there is no doubt that the party question will continually arise, while the obstacle to its solution – the crisis of leadership – still remains.

The coming slowdown will see the rise of the Conservative Party and increased arguments to "vote Labour to keep out the Tories"; at the same time it will drive forward massive attacks on workers, first and foremost by a Brown government desperate to prove its "electability" to the capitalists. This will repeatedly push workers into opposition, if not struggle, against the government and capitalism. So the question of a working class alternative to Labour will remain a live question for the most politically aware workers, the vanguard.

Therefore, in the coming period *Workers Power* will ceaselessly stress the need for a new working class political party in our agitation and be open to any serious initiatives taken on the question, while making clear such a party needs to be based on a revolutionary transitional programme.

## BOLIVIA

# Take the land and the power

Two referenda in May will decide whether Evo Morales' government will go on – or be defeated by the neoliberal right, writes *Keith Spencer*

On 4 May, Bolivians will go to the polls to vote on the new constitution and land reforms. Those voting "Yes" will be the indigenous peoples, the peasants, the poor and the workers; those voting "No" will be the rich landowners and businessmen, fascist gangs, such as the Santa Cruz Youth Union, and supporters of the previous discredited neoliberal governments.

The referenda will take place with the country on the brink of breaking in two. Already rich landowners and businessmen – the oligarchs – of the states of Santa Cruz, Pando, Tarija and Beni, which between account for two-thirds of the country's economy, are organising their own referenda to decide on near-total autonomy – de facto secession. In this they have the encouragement of the US ambassador Philip Goldberg – who oversaw the break up of Yugoslavia.

The right are in fact demanding that Morales abandons the policies on which he was elected: nationalisation of the hydrocarbon (oil and gas) wealth of the country; its use, as Hugo Chávez has done in Venezuela, to improve the desperately impoverished conditions of the majority of Bolivians; and major land redistribution to the indigenous rural population.

But in the face of the threat to secede, Morales and the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) government have spent the past two months trying come to a compromise solution with these people.

Unsurprisingly the oligarchs just took this as a sign of weakness and organised a boycott of the constitutional and land reform referenda, instead making further moves for their own referendum on autonomy. One of their supporters, landowner Ronald Larsen, even ordered shots to be fired at the deputy minister for land and the head of the National Institute for Agrarian Reform at the end of February.

## Right wing opposition

The oligarchs oppose the new constitution because, in however limited a way, it hands electoral

power and some of their property to the indigenous and working class masses they have excluded for centuries. They oppose land reform because the bill promises to limit the number of holdings to between 5,000 and 10,000 hectares (i.e. the large ranches owned by the likes of Ronald Larsen) and hand nearly two million acres (about 800,000 hectares) of unused or illegally occupied land to indigenous communities and peasants, particularly the Guarani people, who have been held in conditions of near slavery on the big ranches.

This threatens the economic power of the oligarchs. The United National Programme for Development estimates that just 100 families own 25 million hectares of the best land – about a quarter of the whole country.

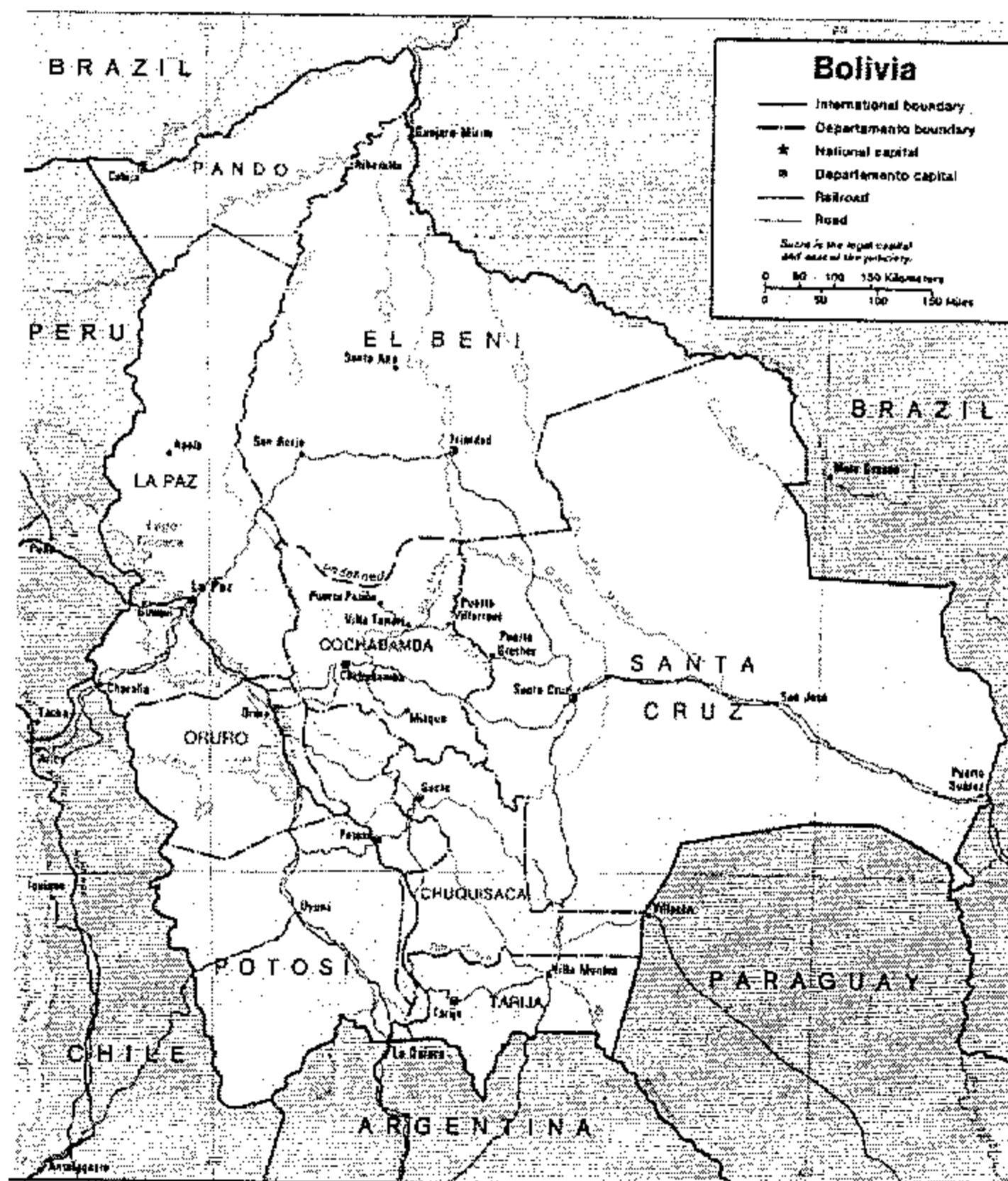
The right particularly loathes the new pension law that would give 700,000 Bolivians over the age of 60 a pension of \$26 a month. Morales and the MAS have made important concessions by introducing individual contributions. But even this wasn't enough for the racist white oligarchs, who still complain that "their money" is going to the "indians".

Already one opposition leader, Oscar Ortiz, has complained about the "MAS dictatorship" to European Union and Latin American ambassadors. This is preparing the way for international support for a coup, or the break-up of the country.

## Morales attacks the left

While Morales was negotiating with the right wing, he was also attacking the left. He denounced the Revolutionary Workers Party (POR), Bolivia's oldest Trotskyist organisation, as the "best instrument for imperialism and the oligarchs" because it dared to criticise the government's conciliation with the right.

He went on the offensive against the Bolivian miners' union, the FSTMB, saying that the idea that it should play a leading role in the Confederation of Bolivian Workers (COB) was wrong because the cocoa growers were more militant. This was both an attack on the COB,



The right wing want to form breakaway state with the mineral rich Media Luna states to the east – Pando, El Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija

which has sponsored a new pensions bill in the National Assembly, criticising the compromises made by the MAS, and also an attack on the Pulacayo Thesis (1946) the founding programme of the COB, drafted by Trotskyists, which recognises the leading role of the working class, calls for arming the workers, a workers' government and the overthrow of capitalism in a permanent revolution.

Morales, like Chávez in Venezuela, is slandering the left to prove to sections of the "patriotic" bourgeoisie that he can govern in the interests of national unity. While he carries out important measures such as land reform, he and the MAS government vacillate and stop short, preferring to build what vice president Garcia Linares openly calls "Andean capitalism".

## What is to be done?

Workers and Peasants must mobilise the biggest "Yes" vote in the referendums and organise the defence of polling stations, especially in the southern states. They must arm themselves to defend their meetings and demonstrations.

Peasants and workers' unions in

the state of Santa Cruz are planning a month of protests in March. But if the oligarchs are willing to shoot at government ministers they will do the same to the masses, unless they are armed. They must therefore demand weapons from Morales and, in any case, take them from the police and army arsenals.

Workers, peasants and indigenous peoples must organise councils of delegates in every town and city and in the countryside where they do not already exist. Such councils should occupy the land and enterprises of the Ronald Larsens right away.

Any attempt to secede must be met by a general strike, by winning over the armed forces, by occupying the main cities and towns of the seceding states.

It is time that the COB, the unions and militant community organisations pass on from resolutions calling for a "political instrument", and take concrete steps to build a revolutionary workers' party that will lead the masses to power.

For more on Bolivia go to <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?analysis-by-region> and click on "Latin America", then "Bolivia"

## MIDDLE EAST

# Strikes in Egypt open cracks in the regime

By Simon Hardy

Since 2006, there has been a dramatic resurgence of the workers' movement in Egypt, the largest Arab country with a population of over 80 million and where industrial workers account for 17 per cent of the whole workforce. President Hosni Mubarak has held the country in an iron grip since 1981, using emergency laws to ban opposition parties and independent unions. Egypt is a key US ally in the region, second only to Israel in the support it receives. Since 1979, US economic and military aid has totalled \$60 billion.

Since the first multi-candidate presidential elections in 2005, which Mubarak won with 88 per cent of the vote, there has been something of a relaxation of the dictatorship and various opposition forces have emerged. These include a democratic movement, involving leftists and Islamists, called Kifaya, ("Enough") with an offshoot called Youth for Change. In fact, youth and students have been in the forefront of a series of protests in the universities and on the streets that have been vigorously repressed by the police. Their leaders have been imprisoned for months and mistreated, if not tortured, but the resistance to Mubarak keeps breaking out afresh.

The other location for resistance has been in the factories and other workplaces. Egypt's unions remain state controlled and strikes and workers' protests are usually harshly suppressed. However, strikes involving tens of thousands of workers have rocked Egypt recently. They began with the strike and occupation of the Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company by over 20,000 workers in December 2006. Police intervention brought thousands of other workers out in solidarity, some staging mock funerals for the boss of the factory. The strike was victorious and was followed by action in other industries: railways, car plants, construction sites, bakeries, food processing factories



"Kifaya" - Enough!

and rubbish collection.

Another huge strike in the private sector took place at the Kafr el-Dawwar Textile Company early in 2007 involving over 10,000 workers. The Misr Helwan factory went on strike again in September 2007, employing the same tactics as before, mass strike, occupation and staying out until they won. The second strike was even more militant, according to Middle East Report Online: "Workers established a security force to protect the factory premises, and threatened to occupy the company's administrative headquarters as well".

Importantly, women have been at the forefront of many strikes. In the textile industry, they make up 75% of the workforce in some factories, are particularly badly paid and suffer from discrimination by managers and supervisors. The strikes that have been led by women have been particularly militant. In the Misr Helwan strike, the women came out first and demonstrated outside the factory, shouting: "Where are the men? Here are the women!" When the management tried to negotiate a compromise deal, one onlooker described the response, "The

women almost tore apart every representative from the management who came to negotiate."

In February, the day before the National Council for Wages met, 10,000 textile workers from Ghazl el-Mahalla demonstrated, demanding that the national minimum monthly wage be raised. The Central Security Forces attempted to prevent the demonstration, but were defeated by the workers, raising slogans like "Down Down Hosni Mubarak!"; "They are eating chicken and pigeons, while we are sick of eating beans!" and "You, who are ruling us from Abdeen, your rule is shit!"

Egypt is a state with only a facade of democracy: the state is notorious for arresting oppositionists and torturing detained suspects. When George W Bush visited in January, he praised Egypt's "vibrant civil society". The day after his visit, protests against cuts in government subsidies were banned and protesters were rounded up in the centre of Cairo. Bush was right about the vibrancy, but he forgot to add that, at any one time, hundreds of the activists who make it vibrant are in prison without charge or on some bogus accusation.

The Economist reports that Egypt has a GDP growth of 7.1%, and claims that this should provide "steady but unspectacular" changes to the economy. However, with inflation running at 12.3%, the population of the country suffers from terrible poverty, high unemployment and a growing gap between rich and poor. The scale of Mubarak's election victory in 2005 was only possible because the main opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood, was not allowed to stand.

In fact, it is the state's obsession with the Muslim Brotherhood that has allowed the workers' movement to revive, according to socialists in Egypt. The Brotherhood is a large and well-organised force that was founded in the 1920s as a resistance movement against British occupation. Whilst many on the left carry out joint protests and actions with them against the government, the strike wave has thrown up the inevitable contradiction that exists between the cross-class Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders are rich or come from the middle classes, and the bulk of poor, working class Muslims. One strike, in particular, pitted 250 workers against a boss who was a member of the Broth-

## PAKISTAN

erhood. In such situations, it has been less than enthusiastic as an organisation about the strike wave, but some of its members have been involved in strikes and attempts to organise independent unions.

The current strike wave is a major political development amongst the working class. Already militants from across the country have met to discuss how to break the power of the government-run General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions that has members and spies in every plant. There are examples of collusion between state unions and management to sack militants and break industrial actions. Now, even the BBC reports that workers are discussing how to build independent trade unions in Egypt, something that they certainly need and that could become a powerful political instrument for the working class.

Towards the end of 2007, the strikes spread to the public sector, with over 50,000 real estate tax collectors on strike. They were out for 11 days and won significant concessions from the state over pay and bonuses. By November, thousands were on strike with 33,000 threatening to take action. According to government figures, 647,133,637 days were lost through industrial action last year. In 2008, the doctors have begun to protest against their working conditions and pay. One was quoted as saying "I was working 12-hour shifts, which left no time for outside work in private clinics. My wage - LE 180 per month - didn't even cover transport costs. Wages are so low they're a joke. A new graduate doctor receives LE 150 per month, meaning that he's torn between working with dedication and integrity, and trying to survive financially".

The task now is to continue and deepen the action, appealing for active international solidarity from other workers and socialists. Workers need not just independent trade unions but also a political party to struggle for power against Mubarak, whose regime, by all accounts, is growing weaker. A socialist party with a revolutionary programme for power, based on the most militant workers and young people, can act as a new leadership in the working class and begin to re-forge the political landscape in Egypt. Egypt is the proletarian heartland of the Middle East, if workers there can build a powerful socialist movement, it will act as a beacon of hope for the impoverished millions across this politically crucial region.

# Will the winning parties force Musharraf out?

Last month's elections in Pakistan delivered a crushing blow to president Musharraf. But, asks *Raza Ali*, will the PPP and PML-N have the courage to force the dictator from office?

**T**he victory of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), in parliamentary elections was a severe blow for President Pervez Musharraf and a demonstration of the strength of feeling against him. A L5I supporter in Pakistan reports on the election, looks to the future, and asks will the PPP impeach Musharraf?

The whole situation in the country is now more than ever marked by the war on terror. It has been truly terrible for Pakistan. The war in the border regions continues, while terrorist attacks threaten the cities. The country is also now gripped by the beginnings of a severe economic crisis, as food and fuel prices rise dramatically. The people are angry and want a change - even if there were only the bourgeois PPP and PML-N parties to vote for. The turn out was not high because people were scared about violence. On the streets, the Army was a further intimidating factor because it remains fully behind Musharraf.

The two main parties will now try to form a coalition to establish a national government. However, even if they do come to an agreement, they will not represent a radical break from the policies of the previous government. They are both in favour of the war on terror (although the PML-N less openly so) and tied to the imperialists in the West. Indeed, Benazir Bhutto had several high level meetings with leaders in Washington and London before her return as they primed her for carrying out their dirty work in

Pakistan. They also have fundamentally the same neo liberal economic policies. This means they have no way to solve the economic crisis except by attacking the working class and reducing their living standards. It is only a matter of time before they begin to struggle against the left and progressive movements.

Many progressive forces, including supporters of the League, called for a boycott of the elections. Clearly, it was not possible for revolutionaries to vote for these capitalist parties. But, in addition, these elections were held in the shadow of the state of emergency, which Musharraf used to stabilise his personal power and to purge the judiciary of any forces that questioned him. Rather than corrupt, sham elections while this military bonapartist was still in power, we said, "Down with Musharraf! For an immediate constituent assembly!"

In all the enormous revolutionary crises of the last year - the last of which was the five days of riots following Bhutto's assassination - the PPP, in particular, have sought to derail the mass movement into compromise with Musharraf and the military. Now, the PPP face an enormous test. They have said they will form a government with the PML-N and not with Musharraf's supporters in parliament. However, they are now playing down calls for the reinstatement of the judiciary, and for the repeal of the constitutional changes that Musharraf brought in during the state of emergency to centralise power in his own hands.

The real issue now, whatever the constitution says, is that Musharraf's party PML-Q, was resoundingly defeated. The voters rejected Musharraf and he must go. It is vital that all progressive, working class and leftist forces in Pakistan now demand that PPP and PML-N use their parliamentary majority to force him from office. The PPP, in particular, are reluctant to do this, knowing that a constitutional crisis could quickly develop into a revolutionary crisis that would challenge the very stability of bourgeois class rule.

One of the few left groups that participated in the elections was the Class Struggle group (part of the International Marxist Tendency). They stood three candidates as PPP candidates, including Manzoor Ahmed who was previously an MP. All three candidates lost the vote, and Ahmed lost his seat in parliament. They maintained their misleading analysis, which is increasingly exposed by events in Pakistan, that the PPP are a working class party with a programme for socialism. In truth, the PPP is a party of the landowners, small traders and capitalists. It is true that it is supported by many poor peasants and some workers, but only because there is no real working class party.

Supporters of the League in Pakistan continue to make strides forward. Despite being a very new group, we are already becoming a national organisation. We will continue to campaign amongst the working class and progressive movements for a new working class party, won to a revolutionary socialist programme.

**THE VIETNAM WAR**

# Vietnam: where the

## 1968: the year the world caught fire

**T**his is the first in a series of articles about 1968. This year has gone down in history as one of the “mad years” – like 1848, 1919, 1936. In such years, conservatives of all political colours believe that some terrible infection takes hold, as a result of which unconnected issues and grievances spark off one another, producing a series of explosions. A second feature of such “mad years” is that they seem to fail to achieve what they promised – they are not years of successful revolutions, like 1789 or 1917. As such they are jeered and mocked by relieved reactionaries and patronising liberals. 1968 is no exception.

At its root, 1968 was the key year of the war in Vietnam. The strains and pressures this put on the world economy led to the end of the “long boom” and a decade of sharp crises. It witnessed the rapid growth of a mass antiwar movement. It was the year that the US Civil Rights Movement turned into “Black Power”, triggered by the assassination of Martin Luther King. This rising of the oppressed – those denied equal rights, jobs and wages – inspired women to demand their rights as well. It was the year of hundreds of student occupations, of barricade fighting in Paris, which turned into a 10 million strong general strike.

These events helped put the prospect of revolution on the agenda again, even in the imperialist heartlands. With the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, despite its brutal suppression by Soviet tanks, it brought the ferment of “socialist democracy” to Eastern Europe.

The inspiration of '68, embodied in a generation of young militants, was to be felt right through the 1970s, boosting a radical youth culture, a combative rank and file workers' movement, and a militant Black movement. It revived old, and launched new national liberation struggles. It created a “second wave” of the women's movement, and a new movement for lesbian and gay liberation. It privileged “direct action” – sit-ins, demonstrations, riots and barricades – over elections.

Of course none of these developments emerged out of nothing but '68 was a year of enormous interaction and lesson learning, a year when the post-war capitalist boom was already beginning to falter, and the cold war all but disintegrating. Above all, it was a year of internationalism, when the response to militant struggles in different parts of the world was: “We can do that here... and we will!”

In this first article of the series Dave Stockton looks at the event that started it all, the Vietnam war. The most bloody colonial war of the twentieth century saw some 1.4 million military personnel killed, though only 6 per cent were members of the United States armed forces, while estimates of civilian deaths range from two million to five million.

**V**ietnam had already waged one war for its independence, against the French colonialists between 1946 and 1954. As the Second World War ended and the Japanese surrendered, in August a mass movement erupted in the cities and countryside of Vietnam. This was initiated in large part by a peasant based guerrilla movement – the Vietminh, led by the Vietnamese Communist Party. But in the cities and mining districts, it was spearheaded by significant Trotskyist-led forces, who organised popular committees and workers' militias.

Together these forces helped seize control of the country from the disintegrating Vichy French colonial administration and Japanese occupation forces, as the war in Asia ended. But a British expeditionary force under General Gracey was preparing to occupy the country and hand it back to its French colonial masters.

Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) were, in these years, still operating a strategic bloc, a popular front, not only with the Vietnamese capitalists and landowners (and therefore defending their ownership of the fields and factories) but also with the “democratic imperialists”, i.e. the British, the Americans and General De Gaulle's “Free French”. The leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), Ho Chi Minh, believed he could negotiate independence from the French. If this meant allowing British and French forces back into Vietnam this was an unpleasant but temporary necessity. Their policy was, while trying to hold on to their governmental power, to negotiate with General Gracey and the British forces, which they allowed to occupy the cities without opposition. The French colonialists soon arrived, and to no one's surprise except the Vietnamese Stalinists, promptly kicked them out of government restoring colonialism. Only after the deep freeze in relations between the Kremlin and the White House, which set in in 1946, turning into the Cold War in 1947, did Ho Chi Minh and the VCP return to armed resistance to the French.

The Trotskyists strongly criticised the welcoming of General Gracey. But, Stalinists as they were, Ho and the VCP had no intention of tolerating any criticism from within the anti-colonial movement. In September and October Vietminh firing squads liquidated, hundreds of Vietnamese Trotskyists. They were sacrificed on the altar of class collaboration in an act of treason to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist cause.

The Stalinists' reactionary utopian project – a democratic capitalist repub-

lic with the Stalinists in power – failed, just as it failed in Europe and elsewhere in Asia. Only in countries where the Stalinists already had total military power and where the hostility of the imperialists forced them to liquidate capitalism was the result a bureaucratically ruled workers state.

But in Vietnam the CP had to take up the armed struggle even to survive. This turned into the First Indochinese war (1946-54) and then into the Vietnam war (1960-75). The results were millions of deaths and untold suffering; a direct result of handing back power to the imperialist in 1945. This crime of Vietnamese Stalinism and its Chinese and Russian backers needs to be remembered, even whilst recognising the incredible heroism of the militants of the VCP in these wars.

The Indochinese War broke out in December 1946, culminating in the humiliating defeat of the French expeditionary force at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, where nearly 12,000 French paratroopers surrendered. This was a catastrophic defeat for French colonialism; their casualties in the war totalled 94,581 dead, 78,127 wounded, with 40,000 taken prisoner. But victory for the Vietnamese too came at a terrible price. They lost over 300,000, with half a million wounded.

Worse still, they were robbed of much of the fruits of victory at the Geneva Peace Conference. The Communist-led Viet Minh forces were militarily well able to take control of the whole of Vietnam. But the Soviet and Chinese put heavy pressure on their delegation to be satisfied with only the northern half of the country and the northern city Hanoi. The country was duly divided at the 17th parallel and a fiercely anti-Communist regime, under Ngo Dinh Diem, established itself in South Vietnam with American support, violating the Geneva agreement, which promised elections within two years.

Ho Chi Minh and the VCP loyally restrained themselves from taking any military action, even withdrawing many VCP cadres from the South. For five years Diem conducted a ferocious witch-hunt, which drove Communist and Buddhist nationalist oppositionists out of the cities. The Communists formed the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NLF), involving other nationalist forces, and finally launched a guerrilla war with the aggressive Diem regime in 1959-60.

Their forces grew by leaps and bounds in the rural areas, where they fought the rich landlords and moneylenders tied to the Diem regime, which viciously exploit-

## 1968 – THE YEAR THE WORLD CAUGHT FIRE

# US lost its first war



ed the peasants. By 1963 Diem's forces were already shaky. There was a Buddhist rebellion against his pro-Catholic policies, and the dictator was considering some sort of peace overtures to the NLF, even floating the idea of neutrality for the South, i.e. taking it out of the anti-communist alliance the US was busily constructing in South East Asia.

### United States fears 'domino' effect

The CIA and the Pentagon's response was, with a powerful clique of South Vietnamese generals, to engineer a coup against Diem (though without notifying the Catholic president John F Kennedy). This led to a rapid deterioration of the situation, with two further coups against Vietnamese puppet leaders, when they in turn tried to open secret negotiations with the Communists. Eventually Air Vice-Marshal Ky provided a subservient regime as the numbers of US troops, as opposed to advisers, increased. By 1964 there were

200,000. Meanwhile the numbers of NLF guerrillas rose from 5,000 in 1959, 100,000 in 1964.

The decision to send large numbers of US troops to South Vietnam was taken not by President Lyndon Baines Johnson ("LBJ"), but by his supposedly more liberal predecessor, Kennedy. He, like other US presidents, regularly talked about a domino effect whereby country after country in the Third World might "go communist", following the lead of China (1949), North Korea (1951), North Vietnam (1954) and, most recently, Cuba (1959).

For Kennedy, Cuba was the big bugbear – a state going Communist right in the USA's Latin American "backyard." He launched the Bay of Pigs invasion on 19 April 1961, using 1,500 CIA-trained Cuban exiles, hoping to depose Fidel Castro. Within 24 hours they had all surrendered, and a humbled Kennedy had to negotiate the release of the survivors.

In August 1961, in the wake of the

East German regime building the Berlin Wall to stem the flow of its citizens, especially professionals and skilled workers, towards the booming West, Kennedy launched a new ideological assault on communism. In October 1962, discovering that the USSR had stationed long range missiles in Cuba, 90 miles from the US, Kennedy threatened to take the world to nuclear war. The Russians eventually agreed to remove the missiles, if Kennedy guarantee the US would abandon all attempts to invade Cuba, and remove its missile bases from Turkey.

When the US Administration turned its eyes towards Asia, here too it could imagine the Reds were on the march, especially since it saw any sort of anti-American nationalism as tantamount to communism. If the South Vietnamese domino were allowed to fall then Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand... the whole of South East Asia would crumble. From 1954 onwards, the US tried to build a South East Asian alliance on

the model of NATO, called SEATO, an action that prompted the formation of the Bandung Conference, which later became the Non-Aligned Movement.

But the USA regarded attempts at neutrality in the Cold War as little better than disguised support for Russia and China. Hence, throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, the CIA engineered or supported a whole series of right-wing military coups in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and even Europe (Greece). Most horrific was the 1965 Indonesian massacre of between 500,000 and 1 million Communists and their supporters. Thus for the US ruling class the Vietnamese domino could not be allowed to fall. In large measure, the US imperialists fell into a trap of their own making

In January 1965, following a bogus North Vietnamese attack on US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin, the air attacks on North Vietnam started. Between March 1965 and November

## VIETNAM WAR

1968, operation "Rolling Thunder" deluged the north with a million tons of missiles, rockets and bombs.

The Americans, then as now, imagined that their enormous superiority in air power and weaponry was bound to tell and quickly at that. US ground forces too began to pour. In 1961-62, the Kennedy administration authorised the use of chemicals to destroy rice crops. Where NLF guerrillas were active, corporations like Dow Chemical and Monsanto developed virulently toxic herbicides and defoliants, most infamously Agent Orange, which involved dioxin in its manufacture.

About 12 million gallons (45 million litres) of it were sprayed over South-East Asia during the war. In some areas of southern Vietnam, 40 years on dioxin levels remain at over 100 times the accepted international standard. In 2006, the Vietnamese government estimated that there are over 4 million victims of dioxin poisoning in Vietnam. Effects included various types of cancer and genetic defects. The United States government, despite being forced to compensate US veterans (very miserably), still denies "any conclusive scientific links" between these victims and the use of Agent Orange.

General William Westmoreland, US commander in chief in Vietnam, was typical of his class and generation, a racist through and through. He developed his so called attrition strategy – to kill the maximum number of guerrilla fighters, and civilians in their supportive milieu. To those who objected to the savagery of his "kill ratios" he famously observed: "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient." For this reason the US placed great emphasis on statistical indicators of progress, like "kill ratios" and "body counts," numbers of villages "pacified", all of which was fed to a gullible media and Congress.

### The Tet Offensive

By the end of 1967 Westmoreland was commanding 485,000 troops in Vietnam. He famously told the National Press Club in Washington: "We have reached a point when the end begins to come into view," though he added modestly, that "mopping up the enemy" might take another two years. *The Washington Post* headlined his speech: "War's end in view – Westmoreland." When *Time Magazine* asked whether the NLF might try anything, the feisty general replied, "I hope they try something, because we are looking for a fight." They did indeed but the outcome was not what he expected.

In 1968, 30 January was New Year's Day in the Vietnamese; it was also the first day of the Tet offensive. Much of the



Napalm, a gasoline gel, was widely used in Vietnam. It sticks to flesh and is usually fatal. Kim Phúc, the young girl pictured above, survived and became a peace activist. She recalls: "Napalm is the most terrible pain you can imagine. Water boils at 100 degrees. Napalm generates temperatures of 800 to 1,200 degrees."

large-scale mobilisation by NLF forces was carried out under cover of people returning to their homes for the celebrations. Indeed the initial explosions of the offensive were mistaken for fireworks. The NLF carried out a diversion, attacking the huge US airforce base at Khe Sanh. President Johnson and Westmoreland were obsessed with defending it. "I don't want any damn Dinbinphoo!" yelled LBJ down the phone. Yet this was not the real target. A year before, the VCP had decided on a general offensive to be combined with a mass uprising in the cities of the South. This had met strong resistance in discussions from General Giap the VCP's veteran strategist. He was opposed to a major change of strategy for the NLF guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars, from small-scale mobile war to a fullscale offensive to take the South's cities. He was over-ruled.

In more than 100 cities and towns, surprise attacks, like the one that broke into the compound of the US Embassy in Saigon, were followed up by waves of supporting troops. The most ferocious battle was fought in Hue in central Vietnam. There the NLF's red and blue flag with its yellow star flew over the old citadel for three weeks. In Saigon too, a thousand NLF troops held a major part of the city for a similar period against a combined force of more than 11,000 US and South Vietnamese troops. But the urban uprising that the VCP had been expecting did not occur, and this eventually doomed the offensive. The reason was straightforward enough. The VCP had drawn nearly all its cadres into the rural guerrilla struggle. It had ceased to be (if it ever was) a party of the working class in the cities and the mines.

Once the assault on the cities was repelled the Americans took a terrible revenge on the civilian population in the

areas they thought supported the "Vietcong". The village of Ben Tre in Kien Hoa Province was wiped from the face of the earth, occasioning the infamous excuse given at a press conference, "We had to destroy the town to save it." In another filmed incident South Vietnam's police chief summarily shot an NLF fighter in the head. But the most horrific incident took place in a village called My Lai in March 1968, when an American patrol, led by Lieutenant William Calley, massacred more than 300 unarmed men, women, and children in ditches.

By the end, some 37,000 guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars had been killed. Casualties included most of the NLF's best fighters, political officers and underground organisers. Militarily speaking, Tet was a terrible defeat for them. Their objectives had not been met and their finest forces decimated.

Yet for the Americans it was a victory that began the complete unravelling of their "empire" in South East Asia. American casualties in the fighting in 1968 – 14,592 killed and 35,000 seriously wounded – were less than half those of the NLF, but of the 543,000 American troops in Vietnam that year only 14 per cent, i.e. 80,000, were combat troops. This is a staggeringly high percentage of seriously injured and killed, when compared with the other wars the US has been involved in. It rapidly and disastrously affected morale amongst the troops and thus constituted a turning point in the war.

In short, the Tet Offensive constituted an almost classic Pyrrhic victory – a victory won at irreplaceable cost to the victor, but where the vanquished can more easily resume the combat. For the Americans, it was one that fatally undermined the capacity of the victors to carry the war to a successful conclusion. To this effect on its ground troops



# 1968 – THE YEAR THE WORLD CAUGHT FIRE

must be added the enormous effect that the Tet fighting had around the world – particularly in the USA itself. The propaganda about winning the war, mopping up, etc. was blown away by the pictures on millions of TV screens, vouched for by veteran journalists like Walter Cronkite, anchorman for CBS news. The effect this had on the antiwar movement will be the subject of a future article in the series, but it is noteworthy that this was not the intention of the VCP leadership. The North Vietnamese General Tran Do later recalled:

“In all honesty, we didn’t achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and this was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention – but it turned out to be a fortunate result.”

Many statistics confirm the shattering effect of the 1968 fighting on the morale of US troops. Desertions increased fourfold within a year. In 1969, an entire company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade simply sat down on the battlefield and refused to move; a rifle company of the crack 1st Air Cavalry Division – right in front of CBS cameras – simply refused to advance. Over the next year, this same division saw 35 further combat refusals. By 1970, the Army had 65,643 deserters, roughly the equivalent of four infantry divisions. To this must be added “fraggings”, the killing of disciplinarian and gung-ho officers, using fragmentation grenades. Congressional hearings held in 1973 estimated that roughly 3 per cent of officer and NCO deaths in Vietnam between 1961 and 1972 were a result of fraggings.

Marine Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr, a veteran commander with over 27 years experience, and later a historian of the Marine Corps, wrote at this time:

“Our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near-mutinous. Conditions [exist] among American forces in Vietnam that have only been exceeded in this century by...the collapse of the Tsarist armies in 1916 and 1917.” *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 June 1971

## Consequences

1968 – the Tet Offensive, in particular – was a turning point in the entire Vietnam war, or American War as the Vietnamese naturally call it. This American war lasted 10 years (1963-73), when US forces were the core of the anti-NLF combatants. Between 1964 and 1972 the war cost US \$133 billion – or \$5.1 billion a month

## Comparisons

Vietnam revealed on April 4 1995 that the true civilian death toll of the ‘American War’ were 2,000,000 in the North, and 2,000,000 in the South. Their own Military casualties were 1.1 million killed and 600,000 wounded. These represent a good 12-13% of the entire population.

The total casualties of the US and its allies were: US forces, 58,217 killed; South Vietnamese Army, 250,000 killed.

To measure the scale of human destruction for Vietnam, we should look at what the casualty level would have been if the US had suffered a proportionate death toll. Out of a population of 220 million during the Vietnam war, 28 million would have died.

US planes dropped over 8 million tons of explosives, three times the tonnage dropped by all sides in World War II – 640 times the power of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

at present-day values. The rocketing costs helped bring to a grinding halt the welfare reforms carried out by the Johnson administration (hyped as the Great Society) – partly to stabilise the inner cities, wracked by rioting and the Black rebellion of the mid-to-late 1960s.

The Vietnam war enormously accelerated inflation in the US, and the country began running a trade deficit for the first time in the twentieth century. This put the dollar under enormous pressure as the world reserve currency – “as good as gold” because of the huge deposits of the precious metal in Fort Knox. The Federal Reserve issued dollars in increasing excess of these reserves, dropping from a ratio of 55 per cent to 22 per cent in 1970 alone. In August 1971 America was finally forced off the Gold Standard and the whole Bretton Woods post-war international monetary order was soon abandoned, adding to the stormy recessions of the 1970s and early 1980, when the “long boom” definitively ended, and with it the low levels of the class struggle in the imperialist heartlands. Here too then the effects of the Vietnam war were epoch changing.

The political effects were immediate. As a direct result of media revelations of the scale of the Tet fighting and its casualties, President Johnson’s popularity collapsed so totally he was obliged to announce he would not run for reelection that November. The Democratic Party – revealing its imperialist nature – chose a pro-war candidate, Hubert Humphrey, while the Republicans’ cynical candidate, Richard Nixon, claimed he had a plan to end the war and bring “our boys” back home. Of course, once in office, he tried all he could to shore up the US empire in the region.

The result of the collapse of the morale of US ground troops led Nixon to attempt to plug the gap with his policy of “Vietnamisation,” direct ancestor of today’s “Afghanisation”. This meant pushing

South Vietnamese troops into the front line and switching to even more massive bombing, which spread to Laos and Cambodia in a vain but bloody attempt to cut the enemy’s supply lines. In effect, from 1968 the White House and the Pentagon were looking for ways to get the bulk of US forces out of Vietnam itself without losing the war. The long protracted Paris peace negotiations which lasted, on and off, from May 1968 to 1973 ended with the complete withdrawal of US forces.

Nixon and his Machiavellian Secretary of State Henry Kissinger also took advantage of the 1969-79 border clashes between Soviet and Chinese troops and friction between China and Vietnam (which included the Chinese impeding the transit of munitions and other war materiel to Vietnam from Russia) to achieve a major strategic turn – a de facto alliance with China against Russia. Again US strategic weakness, revealed by the collapse in Vietnam, had a double effect in terms of world politics.

In the short to medium term, it massively raised the prestige of Stalinism in the Third World and led to a series of victories for national liberation struggles, pro-Soviet military coups or outright revolutions: Pakistan (1969), Bangladesh (1971), Portugal (1974), Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia (1974), Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam (1975), Afghanistan (1978), Iran, Grenada, Nicaragua, and Zimbabwe (1979). It led to the tactical retreat by the USA between known as “détente”, which lasted roughly from 1969 to 1979.

In the longer term this in turn led to Reagan’s counter-offensive in the 1980s, which Stalinism proved unable to resist, the consequences of which we are still living with today – neoliberalism and the world order of the single superpower.

Thus the economic and military effects of the Vietnam War, which reached a tipping point in the year 1968, set new trends going, which massively affected the class struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. Vietnam helped raise the level of this struggle around the globe – even in those countries where the reformist leaders had no sympathy with the NLF, and actively supported the US war effort. Indeed, it took until the new millennium for the US to shake off the Vietnam Syndrome and undertake another major foreign ground war.

Vietnam was the first war the US lost but it will not be the last. The US is repeating its 1960s errors and bringing down upon itself similar consequences, for all the many circumstantial differences. This should alert us to the enormous possibilities which a defeat for imperialism can open up in the years ahead. This time we must not squander them, as the 68 generation all too often frittered away those given them by the heroic Vietnamese fighters.

## RUSSIAN ELECTIONS

# Rubber-stamping Putin's successor

The outcome of presidential elections in Russia was completely predictable once Vladimir Putin had named Dmitry Medvedev his successor. *Andy Yorke* reviews the Putin years, and argues that the foundations of the new "Strong Russia" are neither solid nor stable



Vladimir Putin tells new president, Dmitri Medvedev, his lines

Vladimir Putin's goal, when he was elected president in 2000, was to strengthen the Russian state and create stability after the cowboy capitalism of the 1990s ended in economic collapse. He struck lucky.

First he brought a bloody conclusion to the Chechen war - then after 2001 he managed to rebrand it as part of George Bush's global "war on terror". The world economy bounced back from the recession of 2000-01 on the back of credit expansion and a huge military spending spree in the USA, and the Chinese boom after it entered the World Trade Organisation (2001).

### Concentration of economic power...

Economic expansion, including rocketing Chinese demand, drove the price of oil from \$40 a barrel in 2000 to over \$100 today. With Russia the world's second largest exporter of oil, Putin was able to expand the economy with a flood of petrodollars, at the same time re-nationalising key oil and infrastructure companies so that the state derived a huge income from, and could control these crucial sources of wealth.

In the 1990s the natural resources and state industries had fallen into the hands of a small circle of billionaires, like media tycoon Boris Berezovsky and oil magnates Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Roman Abramovich. While some of the capitalists were very close to the Kremlin, the central state experienced enormous difficulties trying to get their corporations to pay anything like the taxes needed to maintain a strong state.

Not only were the Russian people desperately poor as a result of the hyperinflation and mass unemployment that came with restored

capitalism, but also the Russian federal state was near bankruptcy. Powerful elected governors in the provinces kept much of what tax revenue there was. Putin's project was to change all this by taming and then milking the tycoons, and making sure he appointed the governors.

In the early years of Putin's presidency some big bourgeois, or oligarchs as they are known, like Berezovsky and Khordakovsky, made the mistake of trying to use their billions to finance media critical of the president, and to form a "democratic opposition". Berezovsky was forced to flee to London in 2001.

In 2003 the tax authorities bankrupted Khordakovsky's oil company Yukos for failing to pay taxes, sold it to the state-owned company Rosneft, then merged it with state-owned Gazprom, forming the largest oil and natural gas company in the world.

### ... and political might

The economic concentration of power went hand in hand with increasing the executive's power at the expense of the Russian parliament, called the Duma. Putin defeated the governors, who packed the seats of the Russian parliament's upper chamber, by making them subject to presidential appointment rather than popular election.

He imposed national party lists for Duma elections to eliminate the possibility of independents being voted in. Since 2001 most independent TV stations and newspapers have been shut down or bought up by the state, so that now more than 90 per cent of Russia's media assets are in the hands of the state.

For the 2 December 2007 Duma elections,

many parties were deregistered while those on the ballot faced a new rule, where they had to win 7 per cent of the vote or get no seats, giving Putin's United Russia party a 64.3 per cent majority.

Western commentators admit that the social stability, economic growth, and increased assertiveness against the USA made Putin popular, while the various Liberal parties, such as the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko (Apple), supporting the US and European Union are fatally compromised by their leaders' (Yegor Gaidar and Grigory Yavlinsky's) involvement in 1990's "shock therapy" and responsibility for handing over the economy to the billionaire oligarchs. But if United Russia and Medvedev would win in a straight contest, why all the skulduggery?

### Working class resistance

The top 10 per cent of Russians earned 10 times as much as the bottom 10 per cent in 2001. By 2007 that figure has risen to 16.3 times as much. Russia is second only to the US for the number of billionaires it has.

Now this same oil wealth has begun to drive inflation into the double digits, squeezing the poor further, while corporate and state debt is rocketing in the context of a looming global economic slowdown that will hit Russia at some point. Russian workers are on a short fuse, and inflation could be the spark that ignites it.

While oil wealth has fuelled the growth of the Russian economy, and with it a new middle class, who pack the new shopping malls of St Petersburg and Moscow, the much-vaunted "trickle down effect" has not reached the working class, the city poor and the farmers.

It is the working class that has recently shown that a growing awareness of the economic, social and political injustices of Putin's order. In 2005 the attempt to "monetise" social benefits, in one swoop enacting huge cuts to welfare payments and pensions, provoked a series of demonstrations and protests.

On 14 December 2007 a three-week-long strike at the Ford car plant in St. Petersburg ended in a partial victory. It was the longest strike since 1991. The fact that the workers actually won a wage rise, and the state did not dare intervene points to a potential renewal of the labour movement in Russia.

Yet only if the workers build not just new unions and mass campaigns in defence of their welfare and rights, but a new political party, one committed to overthrowing the mafia capitalism that has bled Russia since 1991, will they end the austerity and oppression they have suffered under decades of Stalinism and capitalism alike.

# WHAT WE STAND FOR

**Workers Power is a revolutionary communist organisation. We fight to:**

- Abolish capitalism and create a world without exploitation, class divisions and oppression
- Break the resistance of the exploiters by the force of millions acting together in a social revolution smashing the repressive capitalist state
- Place power in the hands of councils of delegates from the working class, the peasantry, the poor - elected and recallable by the masses
- Transform large-scale production and distribution, at present in the hands of a tiny elite, into a socially owned economy, democratically planned
- Plan the use of humanity's labour, materials and technology to eradicate social inequality and poverty.

This is communism - a society without classes and without state repression. To achieve this, the working class must take power from the capitalists.

We fight imperialism: the handful of great capitalist powers and their corporations, who exploit billions and crush all states and peoples, who resist them. We support resistance to their blockades, sanctions, invasions and occupations by countries like Venezuela, Iraq or Iran. We demand an end to the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Zionist occupation of Palestine. We support unconditionally the armed resistance.

We fight racism and national oppres-

sion. We defend refugees and asylum seekers from the racist actions of the media, the state and the fascists. We oppose all immigration controls. When racists physically threaten refugees and immigrants, we take physical action to defend them. We fight for no platform for fascism.

We fight for women's liberation: from physical and mental abuse, domestic drudgery, sexual exploitation and discrimination at work. We fight for free abortion and contraception on demand. We fight for an end to all discrimination against lesbians and gay men and against their harassment by the state, religious bodies and reactionaries.

We fight youth oppression in the family and society: for their sexual freedom, for an end to super-exploitation, for the right to vote at sixteen, for free, universal education with a living grant.

We fight bureaucracy in the unions. All union officers must be elected, recallable, and removable at short notice, and earn the average pay of the members they claim to represent. Rank and file trade unionists must organise to dissolve the bureaucracy. We fight for nationalisation without compensation and under workers control.

We fight reformism: the policy of Labour, Socialist, Social-Democratic and the misnamed Communist parties. Capitalism cannot be reformed through peaceful parliamentary means; it must be overthrown by force. Though

these parties still have roots in the working class, politically they defend capitalism. We fight for the unions to break from Labour and form for a new workers party. We fight for such a party to adopt a revolutionary programme and a Leninist combat form of organization.

We fight Stalinism. The so-called communist states were a dictatorship over the working class by a privileged bureaucratic elite, based on the expropriation of the capitalists. Those Stalinist states that survive - Cuba and North Korea - must, therefore, be defended against imperialist blockade and attack. But a socialist political revolution is the only way to prevent their eventual collapse.

We reject the policies of class collaboration: "popular fronts" or a "democratic stage", which oblige the working class to renounce the fight for power today. We reject the theory of "socialism in one country". Only Trotsky's strategy of permanent revolution can bring victory in the age of imperialism and globalisation. Only a global revolution can consign capitalism to history.

With the internationalist and communist goal in our sights, proceeding along the road of the class struggle, we propose the unity of all revolutionary forces in a new Fifth International.

**That is what Workers Power is fighting for. If you share these goals - join us.**

## CONTACT

Workers Power is the British Section of the League for the Fifth International

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## Activists' diary

**Saturday 8 March**

**Red Alert: action needed on climate change**

**Teach-in for students and youth**

**10:30 - 18:00**

**London School of Economics, Portugal St, London (nearest tube: Holborn)**

For more information see [www.climateredalert.com](http://www.climateredalert.com)

**Saturday 8 March**

**Million Women Rise**

**International Women's Day**

**12:00 march from Hyde Park, London**

**15:00 rally in Trafalgar Square**

**Sunday 9 March**

**Revolution conference**

**11:00 - 16:30**

**London School of Economics, Portugal St, London (nearest tube: Holborn)**

For more information see [www.worldrevolution.org.uk](http://www.worldrevolution.org.uk)

**Wednesday 12 March**

**Workers Power meeting - The Vietnam War**

**19:30: Indian YMCA, Fitzroy Square, London**

**Saturday 15 March**

**Stop the War/CND/BMI demonstration**

**12:00 Trafalgar Square, London**

**Monday - Tuesday 17 - 18 March**

**Department of Works and Pensions strike**

**Picket lines at Job Centres and other offices**

**Friday - Tuesday 21 - 25 March**

**NUT annual conference**

**Manchester**

**Saturday 29 March**

**Trade Unionists and Communities against**

**Immigration Controls Conference**

**10.30 - 17:00 SOAS, Malet St, London**

**Tuesday - Thursday 1 - 3 April**

**National Union of Students Conference**

**Winter Gardens, Blackpool**

## Kosova and the right of nations to self-determination

By Martin Suchanek

On 17 February the parliament of Kosova declared the province an independent state. The declaration was immediately recognised by the US and the leading European Union powers, Germany, Britain, France and Italy. They claimed they were simply recognising the Kosovars' right to self-determination. What attitude should communists take towards the secession of national minorities from larger states? Surely, some Marxists have argued, the slogan of "workers of all countries unite" means we should be in favour of the breaking down of borders that separate the global working class, not setting up of new ones.

With cynical friends of "self-determination" like the USA, Britain, Germany and France the right to secede does not need more enemies. The imperialists had no problem encouraging the break up of Yugoslavia, leading as it did to a series of bloody wars and ethnic cleansing, so long as it increased their influence in the region. If this can only be achieved by invasion and occupation, as in Afghanistan a few years later, these "Great Powers" ignore the principle.

Unsurprisingly the declaration of independence was rejected by the by the Serbian government, i.e. the state from which Kosova was breaking. The Serbs claim Kosova as the heart of Serbia, despite having only a small minority Serbian population. The response of Russia, China, Spain, Romania, Cyprus and Greece, which also objected, is not just indignation at the supposed violation of international law by the "unilateral declaration". A real motive for most of them was to give no precedent to the oppressed national minorities imprisoned within their own borders.

### National oppression

Communists recognise that the oppression of one nationality by another is one of the most stubborn barriers to international working class unity, the prerequisite for the socialist transformation of society.

Albanian speakers have been a majority in Kosova for centuries. Indeed, it seems certain that Serbs were never a majority of its population. The importance of Kosovo to Serbs was that the modern Serbian nation built into its mythology the supposed sacrifice for Christendom of the Serbian King, defeated by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan at the battle of the Blackbirds Field in 1389. Historians have pointed out that the armies

involved were not national ones but feudal coalitions. Thus Serbs fought for the Sultan and Albanians for the Serbian King. But in any case the claim that this gives the Serbs the right to rule the Albanians of Kosova is a right no democrat let alone a socialist should recognise.

It was the denial of democratic rights to the Kosovars, the attempted suppression of their language and culture, and finally the brutal attempt to expel over a million of the ethnic Albanian population by Serbian state and paramilitary forces in 1999 that finally led Kosovars to demand complete independence from Serbia.

This expressed will to be rid of cruel national oppression is why we recognise the right

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**Only by recognising the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including secession, can we undermine capitalist nationalism and strengthen working class internationalism**

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to self-determination of the Kosovars, including their right to form their own state. So too we recognise the right of the Serbian minority in northern Kosova to secede and join Serbia if they so wish.

Only by opposing all violations of national rights, supporting the right to learn and use one's own language, struggling for equal rights in education and at work, equal rights of citizenship, can we expect to win support for the socialist transformation of society.

The Serbian workers and peasants, like any other nation in the Balkans, have nothing to gain from opposing the right to self-determination of the Kosovars. Indeed, they have only to lose from this. Firstly, it drives the Albanian workers and peasants into the hands of the bourgeois and petit bourgeois Kosovar nationalists and their Western imperialist masters. Moreover, secondly, it ties the Serbian working class itself to their "own" rulers – the Serbian capitalists and their Russ-

ian imperialist backer.

However the declaration of independence by Hashim Thaçi's government is a fraudulent one – not because the great majority of Kosovars do not want this, but rather because they have not actually got it. In fact what has been issued is a declaration of dependence on the European Union.

Sovereignty is effectively handed to the EU, backed by 20,000 Nato troops, with an EU High Commissioner in the country, who can veto and overrule all decisions of the government and parliament. The free market is enshrined as the economic foundation of the country, and all remaining state owned companies are placed under control of an EU run privatisation agency. The European Central Bank will run economic policy and its currency will be the euro.

In short, the Kosovar nationalists of the ruling parties have sold their country to the imperialists of the EU and the United States.

This proves once again that, in small countries like Kosova, capitalist politicians and their business backers are tied by a thousand strings to imperialism. Only the working class has the interest and ability to fully break the chains of national oppression in semi-colonies like this.

The way to freedom for the Kosovar people, social as well national, lies in the struggle against EU and Nato occupation. Just as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the working class must fight for the expulsion of all these armed forces, installations and advisers. It necessitates, too, the abolition of the standing army, trained by and loyal to imperialism, and its replacement by an armed workers and poor peasants' militia.

This road must lead to a final struggle for a workers and peasants' government in Kosova based on workers' councils, which will expropriate the capitalists, institute workers' control, and a plan to rebuild and reorganise the economy. Such a workers' state would immediately call for a voluntary socialist federation of the Balkans, as the only way to overcome national antagonisms and the imperialist dominance of the region.

The working class is an international class – a class with no motherland. The communist programme is not for the creation of ever more nation states, or the breaking up of large "multi-national" states into their national constituent parts, as long as their peoples wish to remain within them. But only by recognising the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including secession, can we undermine capitalist nationalism and