

Under Blair's May 7 rigged referendum Londoners will not have the option of voting for an assembly without a mayor, or any say in the powers of the new London assembly. The Ad-Hoc Steering Committee of the London Socialist Alliance has called a meeting of supporters to decide its position on the referendum.

7pm Tuesday April 7

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For democracy

New Labour's proposals for a dictatorial London mayor and a weak Greater London Assembly, announced in the House of Commons by John Prescott on March 25, are a travesty of democracy. They are also an integral component part of Tony Blair's programme of reforming the United Kingdom constitution from above.

There is, of course, a complex and dynamic interrelationship between reform from above and discontent below. Undoubtedly, though, the crucial factor behind Blair's programme has been the fact that popular identification with the UK state has been gradually slipping away since at least the late 1960s.

During the Thatcher years slippage became a slide. The Iron Lady defeated the 'enemy within', curbed union power, abolished the GLC and launched a neo-liberal offensive against the post World War II social settlement. There was a high price to pay however. Millions - in particular militant trade unionists and nonconformist youth, migrants and homosexuals, the unemployed and semi-employed, Scots and poll tax refuseniks - were thoroughly alienated. And not merely with the Tory government but to a considerable extent from the monarchical state itself.

That explains why Blair does not simply want to change the way we are ruled. He is determined to rewin popular identification with and acceptance of the state. The UK is therefore to be rebranded 'cool Britannia' and the constitution 'democratised' along the most undemocratic lines.

Scotland and Wales have already been chalked up as successes by the Blairites. The September 11 1997 referendum gave the government an overwhelming majority in Scotland and a week later a wafer thin one in Wales. By the year 2000 Edinburgh will have its parliament and Cardiff its assembly.

There are however many other planks to the programme. The House of Lords, some form of proportional representation for European and Westminster elections, the Church of England, the single currency, the extended royal family, the English regions and Northern Ireland are all "elements" in a wide "modernisation project" (*The Times* March 10 1998). Obviously so too is London.

The May 7 referendum in London is designed to gain a mandate for the Blairite version of local government. Other cities will in due course be given the London treatment, ie a dictatorial mayor and powerless councils. As the last leader of the GLC rightly notes: "If an executive mayor is introduced in London, it will become a blueprint for similar reforms in local government nationally" (K Livingstone 'London into the new millennium'). In other words in the name of extending local

democracy Blair is actually rolling it back even further. That is why Livingstone could not be more wrong when, with typical cynicism, he claims that the government's proposals are "part of a process of bringing accountability back into public life" (*ibid*).

Strangely there are some on the left who want to believe that the government has no plan for 'modernisation'. That the whole thing is an invention, not least by the Communist Party of Great Britain and its supposedly gullible polemicists. Perhaps the most determinedly blind is Alan McCombes, the *de facto* leader of Scottish Militant Labour (a semi-detached arm of Peter Taaffe's Socialist Party). McCombes ridicules the mere suggestion that there is an evolving programme "to reform and modernise the union." According to our friend the idea is "hopelessly wide of the mark". The only force for change McCombes deigns to recognise is "rising national discontent in Scotland" (A McCombes *Scottish independence and the struggle for socialism* p6).

Of course, comrade McCombes and the SML leadership have a factional interest in not seeing the bigger all-Britain picture. A completely one-sided and exclusively Scottish vision serves admirably to transform SML into the leftwing of the SNP and thus into a purely nationalist organisation. But this sorry turn and its accompanying ideology of parochialism hardly provides the working class movement, either in Scotland or Britain as a whole, with the political ammunition needed to meet the challenge of Blairism.

The same goes for those who respond to Blair's constitutional programme piece by piece rather than in its entirety. On the defeatist basis that something must be better than nothing such an approach takes its advocates directly into the New Labour camp (virtually the entire spectrum of the left - SWP, SLP, SML, Socialist Party, CPB - backed Blair in Scotland and Wales and urged a 'yes'). The situation cries out for a comprehensive alternative to Blair. A programme of far reaching democratic change from below. That is what the CPGB is committed to and why we opposed Blair's Edinburgh parliament sop in Scotland. It is also why we communists are campaigning against his proposals for London.

No one denies that London is in urgent need of democracy. Since Thatcher abolished the GLC in 1986, Londoners have been governed by some 60 shadowy quangos, 32 ineffective and squabbling boroughs and the City of London Corporation - behind which lie the narrow interests of the banks, insurance companies and the stock exchange. For London as a whole and its M25 environs there has been no elected body to coordinate

housing, health, transport, environmental protection, education or other vital matters. Moreover neither the boroughs nor the quangos have fought for the people. They have been dominated by cabals of Labour and Tory politicians who, when not serving themselves, have carried through expenditure cuts ordered by the treasury. As a result services in London have deteriorated to the point of breakdown.

Blair says his GLA and a London mayor provides the answer. It is a blatant lie.

Blair's London mayor will have executive control over a £3.3 million budget, and running Transport for London and the London Development Agency. The mayor will also make appointments to the Metropolitan Police Authority and the Fire Emergency Planning Authority.

The 25-strong assembly will in contrast be powerless. It can question the mayor at a monthly question time. It can look at issues it considers "important" for Londoners. It can "agree or suggest changes" to the mayor's overall budget and "agree proposals for raising revenue" (Department of the Environment *A mayor and assembly for London?*). Yet only with a highly improbable two-thirds majority can the assembly reject the mayor's budget. To say that the mayor will operate "almost free from control" by the assembly is no exaggeration (*Evening Standard* March 26 1998). He or she will therefore be an elected dictator.

Nevertheless it must be emphasised that the mayor will be all-powerful mainly when it comes to telling the people of London what *cannot* be afforded. Except for taxing drivers entering and parking in London the mayor is to have no source of revenue apart from government grants. Inevitably they are subject to strict limits and curbs. He or she will also therefore be a puppet.

For example the mayor cannot even switch resources between the police and transport (the two account for 95% of expenditure). Put another way, Whitehall not the mayor will decide how much is spent on core services. To all intents and purposes the mayor is to be, says Simon Jenkins, a "Whitehall agency" (*ibid*). Like every other 'reform' of local government since the 1960s it will surely not take long before general disillusionment sets in with the GLA and similar metropolitan authorities and another round of reorganisation becomes necessary.

Due to the 'something must be better than nothing' tailism by most of the left there is no mass movement in London which is committed to anything higher. That does not mean communists and socialists should meekly or even 'critically' accept Blair's GLA. The very fact that the government is

conducting a mass propaganda campaign in preparation for May 7 has revived vague, and it has to be said rather fond, collective memories of the GLC under Livingstone. This amounts to inchoate feelings of dissatisfaction about what is on offer. With conscious intervention, this can surely be given definite form and political direction.

The May 7 referendum is take-it or leave-it. In other words a classic catch 22. To vote 'yes' is to vote against democracy. To vote 'no' is to vote against democracy. Blair's referendum is designed not to present and test a range of options but deliver the government its 'yes' result. Those on the left who stand for the maximum democracy under capitalism have no official opportunity to put their proposals forward and test their support.

What should communists, socialists and other democrats do? None of us has any truck with the present status quo. But Blair's proposals hardly represent a genuine democratic advance.

For some the whole thing presents a dilemma. The Socialist Party, at the time of writing, is still to announce its position. Indeed comrade Taaffe's organisation appears to be politically paralysed in the face of Blair's programme of reform. So much so that Paula Mitchell, its representative at the last meeting of the London Socialist Alliance on March 21, actually tried to prevent a discussion contribution on the referendum being circulated in the Ad-Hoc Committee's next mailing. The paper by comrade John Bridge - representative of the CPGB - argues that there should be a boycott. Comrade Mitchell's justification for stifling debate was twofold. First, comrade Bridge had the temerity to describe SML's Alan McCombes as "foolish". Second, the Socialist Party was in general against boycotts and had anyway no position yet on the May 7 referendum. Thankfully comrade Mitchell retreated. Even better, the Ad-Hoc Committee of the LSA agreed to call a special meeting of its supporters to debate the whole issue.

The Tories seem to have learned from their trouncing on September 11 in Scotland. Their attitude towards the London referendum is probably going to be a 'critical' yes, ie the same as the pro-Labour left. The main concern of the two big parties of the bourgeoisie - New Labour and the Conservatives - is winning the coveted position of London mayor and stopping rouge candidates, ie Livingstone in the case of Labour.

While it is unlikely that there will be a serious 'no' campaign, under present circumstances a 'no' call from the left might be seen as support for the present system. That is why the best tactic is a boycott. The raw material for an effective boycott campaign undoubtedly exists. Both the CPGB

and the Socialist Labour Party in London are for it. There is a good chance that the Socialist Alliances in London will take the same stance. If that happens no effort should be spared to form a united, or at the very least, a coordinated campaign. Others too must be approached, not least organisations such as the London Pensioners Association, the Direct Action Network, the Greater London Association of Trades Councils, etc.

Our boycott of the May 7 referendum should not confine itself to expressing moral outrage against the rigged nature of the referendum. It is vital to highlight what we stand for, ie the democratic alternative to Blair's GLA and his reformed constitutional monarchy.

A democratic London Assembly must be able to raise its own revenue. We communists are for a local income tax - tax the rich, no tax on the working class. The undemocratic City of London Corporation must be abolished. The London Assembly must have responsibility throughout the capital for transport, planning, economic development and policing (the CPGB is for the abolition of the corrupt metropolitan police and its replacement by an armed popular militia). All elections, including those to a GLA, should be on the basis of proportional representation. Those elected must be recallable. The leader of the authority should reflect and be chosen by the majority of elected representatives. Unlike Labourites, Lib Dems and Tories our candidates must pledge themselves not to live like fat cats. Labour wants their mayor paid an annual salary of £90,000. Certainly any communist elected would only take the average skilled workers' wage - the surplus being donated to the movement.

Democratic local government is only possible in the context of a complete transformation of the constitution. Where Blair proposes to reform the constitutional monarchy system the boycott campaign should fight for the end of all hereditary privileges and undemocratic practices. That means the abolition not only of the House of Lords but the monarchy itself. There must be a federal republic. Let us replace the unity of crowns with the free unity of peoples. Scotland and Wales can then really have the right to self-determination - the right to determine their own relationship with the rest of Britain. They should have the democratic right to separate. They should also have the democratic right to voluntarily unite with the people of England.

■ Boycott Blair's May 7 rigged referendum!

■ For a democratic London Assembly!

■ For a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales! ●

Jack Conrad

Party notes

Grasping at straws

I had to smile when I read the latest piece from Richard Brenner of Workers Power (see p7). Richard roundly castigates the “carefree philistine” Don Preston for “failing completely to get to grips with the subject” of WP’s line change on the overthrow of capitalism in Eastern Europe in the period 1948-51 (‘Admission of failure’ *Weekly Worker* March 5).

But this is simply trying to engage with the article comrade Brenner wishes Preston had written. In his piece, comrade Preston explicitly focuses on the way WP arrived at their new public theoretical formulation, not its content. This is the “subject” that Preston chooses. Thus, it is extremely instructive that comrade Brenner brands this “agnosticism”. Clearly, for this comrade, schooled as he has been in the sectarian world of British Trotskyism, democratic centralism is a technical question, a set of appropriate organisational operating procedures as distinct from political content..

For us, democratic centralism is a political *process* through which an organisation wins and then defends unity around a revolutionary programme. Without an open, living engagement with the most advanced ideas in the movement, how can anything approximating to scientific truth be arrived at? Unless comrade Brenner believes that all advanced thinking on the nature of the USSR is the preserve of a tiny number of people fortuitously within WP, he tacitly admits the unscientific nature of WP’s method.

Comrade Brenner has an answer to this, of course. Essentially, he suggests that this conspiratorial approach to theoretical development is something forced on Workers Power by objective conditions. WP - like the rest of us - are “still fighting to develop and defend its programme” (when won’t it be, I wonder). In a more authoritative article in the January-June issue of *Trotskyist International* - WP’s theoretical journal - Dave Stockton draws out the logic of this understanding:

“The working out of the overall perspective, strategy and key tactics of that programme is, necessarily, the task of a small nucleus of political cadres. A new programme, a new party, cannot be born and find its way in the world except in struggle against pre-existing parties or movements and their ideas and their programmes. Such an original nucleus must, therefore, develop the maximum homogeneity in order to see its ideas triumph” (pp45-46).

Picking up on an idea that I originally suggested to him, Brenner characterises the contemporary left scene as being composed of “factions without a party” which are - by definition - characterised by higher degrees of political homogeneity. By itself, this tells us nothing. Indeed, when Brenner clumsily tries to illustrate his point with an example from the history of the Bolshevik faction, he tends to prove our point not his own.

He cites the exclusion of some “ultra-leftists” of the Bolshevik faction, blandly characterising the issue that led to their expulsion as “whether to boycott the duma” or not. Yet Lenin was clear that this question posed *the continued existence of the party itself*, not the neat regimentation of the political views of his particular faction. He fought tooth and nail to exclude from his faction those he characterised as left *liquidators*, and he demanded that the Mensheviks expel their right *liquidators*.

The concrete issue we are discussing here is designated by WP to be “an important but narrow circumscribed theoretical difference”, the exploration of which led “all sides [to realise] that ... they are bound together in complete agreement on the programmatic tasks facing the working class ...” (*Trotskyist International* p43). Comrade Brenner himself reiterates that “difference in the debate was very specific”. By drawing the particular parallel with Bolshevik history, is he suggesting that the future survival of WP rested on the outcome of this particular debate (as it did with Lenin’s struggle against the left and right liquidators)? He would be foolish to try.

The approach of comrade Brenner and his co-thinkers in the arid deserts of Trotskyism discredits Marxism in the eyes of advanced workers. Theoretical disputes and development on questions large and small are treated as matters of conspiracy. My comrade Don Preston is quite correct to therefore mock the “complete agreement” of WP. The question of the nature of USSR state, the character of the post World War II overturns in Eastern Europe are considered - erroneously - by this group to be ‘programmatic’ questions.

Yet, in Workers Power (January 1997) Colin Lloyd told us that a stipulation of membership of a communist organisation is that you “agree” with its programme - a foolish, anti-Leninist position it has never repudiated in print. Clearly, there is now a minority in WP who stand by the old position - or do they now all “agree”?

One last point. Comrade Brenner clearly has been bruised by past characterisation of WP as a passive - not a fighting - propaganda group. Frankly, the comrades’ list of the ‘exciting’ arenas of WP intervention - readers will remember this included “young people ... discussing the environment” (*Workers Power* February 1998) - only tended to reinforce the impression.

He now - rather childishly - tells us that *we* are the passive ones and this is inevitable given our approach to democratic centralism. “Without applying democratic centralism in this manner [ie the conspiratorial manner of WP - MF], a fighting propaganda group today would become merely a talking shop”. Like us, comrade?

Regular readers who have followed the intervention of our two organisations around the Socialist Labour Party project will recognise Richard’s method here. It’s called grasping at straws ●

Mark Fischer
national organiser

No support

I note in the *Weekly Worker* (March 26) and in *The Workers’ Morning Star* that the CPGB supports the strike and calls for the reinstatement of John Haylett.

Were this simply a trade union issue, I would be prepared to go along with you. Yet, as you yourselves state, the strikers are “limiting their arguments to the industrial relations question ... and blocking their ears to the political conflict of which their dispute is only the manifestation”.

There is the rub. The *Star*, despite its legal separation from the CPB has been the political expression of the Communist Party, or in this case, the majority of the shareholders of the Peoples Press Printing Society. The political line of the paper and its editorship have to reflect this. The right to hire and fire the editor in the case of a newspaper of a political organisation of the labour movement must be based on a decision of that political organisation, acting through its properly constituted channels.

Rosser and Hicks may well have violated their powers in sacking Haylett, but the strike is not an industrial dispute, but a political campaign waged by a tendency in the CPB. The question of salaries and working conditions is neither here nor there for two reasons.

Firstly, political full-timers who work for labour movement organisations do not do it for the money or working conditions. The decision to become a political full-timer is a commitment based on dedication to the organisation. Quite a lot of time and effort is donated free by members of such organisations. Or perhaps paper sellers earn a commission? The same arguments apply to full-time journalists.

Secondly, while it would be the ideal situation if union rates applied, this is not always possible. Political organisations do not operate according to the laws of the market place, they carry hardly any paid advertising and have no major investors behind them. The political success or failure of such organisations is a reflection of their policies and activities in the class struggle. The present CPB is an organisation which has signally failed in this respect. The poor salaries and working conditions of its full-time staff are a reflection of the fact that it continues to produce a daily paper without having its previously guaranteed sales in eastern Europe.

Thus it is somewhat opportunistic to portray the *Star* dispute as though it were simply another industrial relations issue. Indeed, it seems to me that to take sides in this dispute is incorrect. If the ‘broad labour movement’ wanted to have a newspaper, it would be perfectly possible to set one up. It is not as though the *Star* is endowed with unique resources and talent.

As a political tendency the CPB has the right to publish a newspaper reflecting their political line. The fact that they have divorced the management of the paper from the political leadership of the CPB is their problem. It may have created an opening for a range of political forces (including yourselves) to take over the *Star*, but that does not negate the right of the CPB to have a newspaper promoting the line they decide.

For my part I am hostile to both wings of the CPB, which I regard as an organisation which has proven to have been incapable of breaking decisively from Stalinism. I am not prepared to support either side. This contrasts with your opportunist latching onto the dispute and advertisement in *The Workers’ Morning Star*. This is merely to tail-end a political faction in the CPB.

Finally, I find your comments on Socialist Action ill-informed and slanderous. In the first place. You are developing an irritating Spart-like habit of referring to organisations by their leaders - eg, *Peter Taaffe’s* Socialist Party, *Tariq Ali’s* International Marxist Group, etc. This habit should be curtailed immediately as

it is thoroughly petty bourgeois.

Tariq Ali was an increasingly marginal figure in the IMG by the early 1980s. I have little contact with the SA people, but to describe them as a “sect manoeuvring deep in the Labour Party” is a distortion. In fact they have an open publication. They also campaign in the NUS and anti-racist movements. In addition, they have worked closely with the Socialist Campaign Group and in *Morning Star* forums.

My criticisms of SA are that their policies are soft on Stalinism and left social democracy and that they downplay the need to build an independent revolutionary organisation. They often appear to be the closest thing to Pabloites operating on the British left today. However, to describe these comrades as “political leeches” is, frankly, plumbing the depths of verbal abuse.

John Laurence
Harrow

Sold out

With regards to the letter of Andrew McGarity in the *Weekly Worker* (March 19), expressing his support for the *Morning Star*.

I feel his soft socialist tendency has confused his sense of reality. He should remember that capitalism is our enemy and that is why we do not support the CPB, as they have obviously sold out. I am afraid their current problems are self-inflicted. Their continued support for the Labour Party and kiss-arse approach to the unions make them a weak and feeble party. Their supporters should choose between either joining the Labour Party or working with true communists in the CPGB.

A daily paper is a way forward but if its views are liberal like the *Morning Star* we might just as well read *The Guardian* or *The Mirror*. Communist unification is essential but it must keep to its scientific Marxist basis. It is our right to fight for change through revolution and not by the ballot box - CPB take note.

Ray Hancock
Maidenhead

Nearly extinct

In its polemic with the *Weekly Worker* the League for a Revolutionary Communist International is not doing itself any favours with its arrogance. If it wants to gain some credibility it has to recognise that it has undergone radical political changes and that these are creating important organisational problems.

Brenner boasts about the LRCI’s growing youth membership. In fact, the largest LRCI youth group was in Austria, until it split in 1994 - creating the Marxist Group which has since published more than ten books. During the early 1990s, the LRCI’s Austrian section - the Ast - was the largest far left group in that country. In 1994 half of Ast’s Vienna branch broke away. In Salzburg the branch almost disappeared. Today all of the founding Ast members are out of the LRCI or its broader leadership. Many Austrian comrades who served on the International Executive Committee have left their leading positions or the organisation.

The German group lost all its members in Frankfurt and the Rhine, which used to be its centre. Today it survives on the basis of ‘imported’ comrades. The situation in the British Isles is no better. The Irish Workers Group is nearly extinct and has lost most of its cadres.

Since the foundation of the LRCI in 1989, Workers Power lost four or five members for each new recruit gained. It has nobody in Scotland or the Six Counties. It is shrinking to the point where it is almost entirely an English group.

The LRCI was launched in 1989 as a product of the integration of European groups around Workers Power and the Peruvian and Bolivian comrades who had strong traditions in leading workers’ strikes and mass actions. Today all of



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed.

the Latin American comrades have left or been expelled. These comrades who proposed the name to the LRCI did not have the right to appeal against exclusion from the LRCI.

In New Zealand, the small Workers Power group that remains after the 1995 split has only produced three or four papers a year, including their youth bulletin. LRCI publications are becoming less frequent. *Permanent Revolution* has gone. *Trotskyist International*, which used to appear three times a year, is now being published bi-yearly. Most of it is written by a single person who uses different pseudonyms. *Trotskyist Bulletin*, which used to be published every six months, has had only two issues in three years. The Spanish language journal has also ceased to appear.

Instead of trying to deny this reality, the LRCI comrades should recognise their retreat, try honest self-criticism and be open-minded in discussions with other currents.

Fred Gorman
Austria

Combating defeat

On March 7 the first editorial discussions on the proposed *Cutting Edge* magazine took place in Conway Hall. The meeting had been widely advertised throughout the left. The attendance itself did contain a reasonable cross-section which included tenants representatives, unaligned anarchists, militant anti-fascists, etc.

At the end of the four hour meeting, while there was agreement on the general thrust of the proposal, it was concluded that a further effort should be made to broaden the base. It was felt that the broader the participation in *Cutting Edge* at an editorial level, the greater its appeal, and the less likely of it being still-born as a result of sectarianism.

The caution is not unwarranted. With *Cutting Edge* still in the womb, genuine confusion mixed with malicious speculation is already rife in certain circles. Dismissing the declared objectives, Open Polemic launched a slashing attack on the entire project and in particular Red Action’s support for it. On a similar vein some have added to the confusion by assuming it has something to do with the International Working Class Association.

According to *Open Polemic*, “addressing the contemporary problems of the working class” or even attempting “to provide progressive working class thinking with a strategically and theoretical cutting edge” is certainly counter-productive if not counterrevolutionary. Have you ever heard such errant nonsense? OP argues that the working class “offers a home to all sorts of bourgeois prejudices, sectional one-sidedness and outright bigotry”. Of course when the far right dominates the politics of many countries in Europe it would be hard to argue otherwise. But in contrast to this “stultifying backwardness” of the mass of the working class, the most advanced sections internationally still “shines as a beacon for all humanity”.

Nothing wrong with socialism then. Or indeed, Soviet communism. It is the working class that has got to change. And until they come to their senses they should be ignored.

Cutting Edge is the product of profound and ignominious defeat. But the defeat is not restricted to the sponsors but is, as the *Weekly Worker* has acknowledged, a political defeat currently being endured by the working class as a whole.

J Reilly
North London

From The Call, paper of the
British Socialist Party,
March 28 1918

Scottish notes

The deportation of Russians - at least those who are particularly active on behalf of the workers - is not exactly an unheard of thing in this land of hope and many other habits.

Folk with good memories will be able to recall the dark days when a certain Peter Petrov and a certain George Chicherin were parcelled up and addressed to Russia. More recently a similar operation was performed on a Bolshevik named Kamenev. Everybody will remember the wholesale consignment of Russians from this country in September last.

Comrade Shammes of the Glasgow Jewish branch of the BSP, and secretary to John Maclean, the Russian consul, has been selected by the authorities, and it is not altogether impossible that another special parcel may be addressed to Russia.

Shammes was arrested at the office of the Russian consulate on Friday morning and subsequently taken to Barlinnie [prison]. Up to the time of writing it is not known what special charges are made or what will be done with our comrade. It is understood however that clause 12 of the Defence of the Realm Act did not fit in with the activities of the Russian consul's secretary, and this enforced absence from his friends of the socialist movement is the immediate result. Clause 12 of the DORA is undoubtedly a frightening business, but looming behind all is the red menacing claws of capitalism itself

The advocates of socialist unity will be pleased to learn that at a meeting of the Gorbals LRC on March 19 the only nominee put forward for the constituency was comrade John Maclean. One is glad to note that the threatened clash between the ILP and the representative of revolutionary socialism will not come to pass. When the election does take place, the present misrepresentation of the workers, George M Barnes, will, if the field continues clear for Maclean, narrow down the fight to a straight issue between revolutionary socialism and that jumbled confusion of Christian idealism and Labour imperialism, which finds stammering expression in George Barnes ●

'Caledun'

1918

Russian Revolution
this week 80 years ago

New scramble for Africa

Imperialism's new world order remains unchallenged. Ever since the ignoble collapse of the 'socialist bloc' - which supposedly inaugurated the final defeat of communism, if not the end of history itself - the United States feels free to spread its wings. It now greedily eyes up regions and areas once thought of as out of bounds, or at least not really worth the candle.

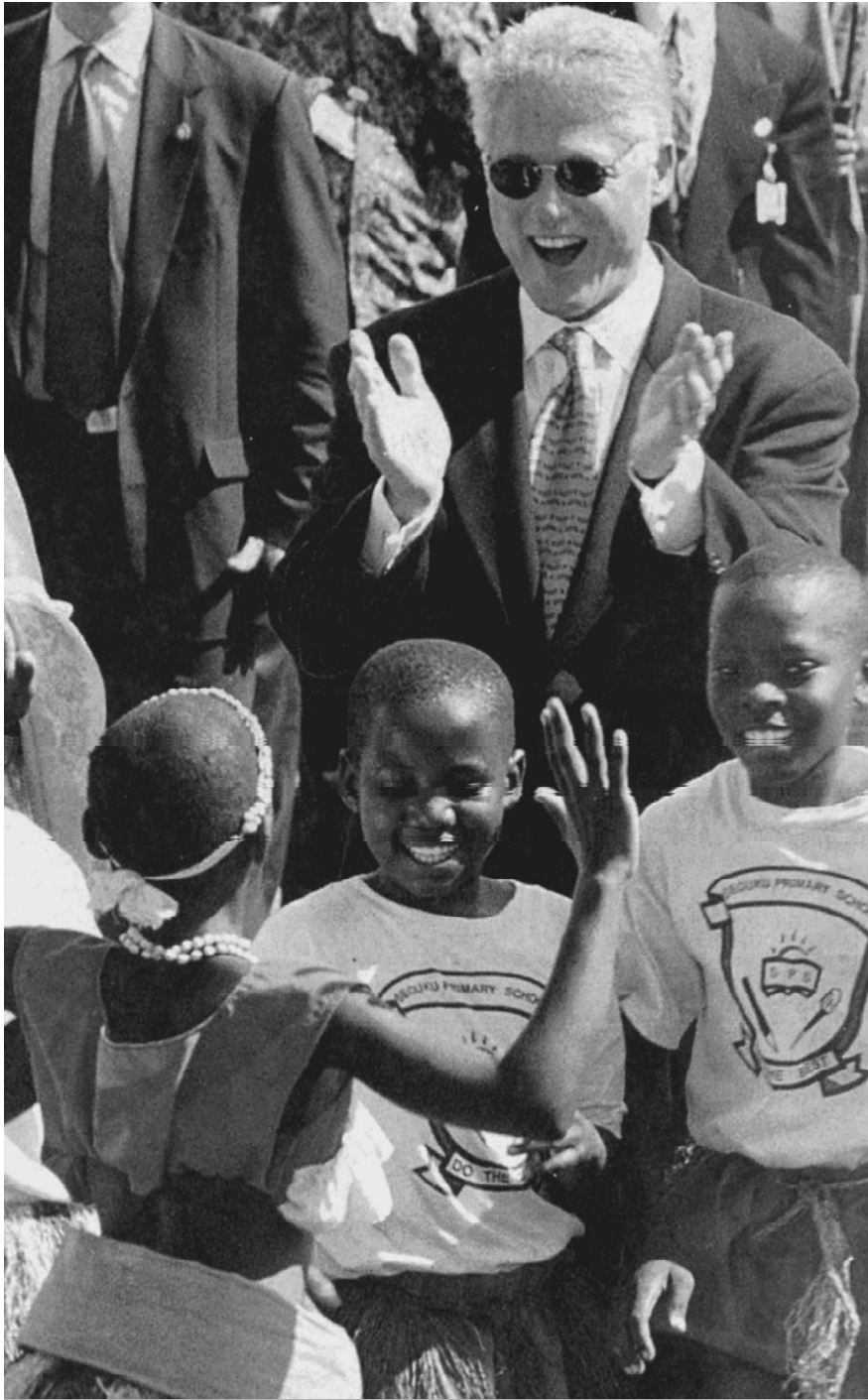
Africa was one such place. Previously, western imperialism had seen Africa as - essentially - a socio-political-economic basket case. From the perspective of capital, this was an eminently rational and logical stance. Africa presented itself as a vast continent of writhing, chronic instability - endlessly prone to conflict, civil wars, military coups, etc. This hardly made Africa an attractive prospect for the bulk of capitalist investors and speculators. For the strategic planners sitting round the boardroom table, it made sense to put Africa right at the bottom of the list - if it appeared at all.

Confronted by backwardness (mass illiteracy, absence of infrastructure, endemic poverty and ill-health, etc) and politico-military turmoil, capitalists balked at the sheer expense which would have been involved in righting such a mess. How would it be possible to make profits under these circumstances? Such an unfavourable environment only allowed space for a few 'get rich quick' speculators and robbers. The conditions for *real* capitalist exploitation were simply not there.

Some leftist - and black nationalist/pan-African - analyses attempt to portray the continent simply as a *victim* of rapacious capitalist development and investment, the implication being that if the world left Africa alone it would be able to prosper. At best, this is a very limited and one-sided approach. In many respects, Africa is marred by backwardness precisely *because* capitalism has stayed clear of it - left it to rot. For the most part, imperialism was relatively content to let Africa be pushed to the world's margins.

Of course, imperialism's cold war with the 'socialist bloc' help to occlude the real relationship between imperialism and Africa. In Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, etc, the cold war got quite hot during the 1970s and 80s. For government officials and military planners in the Pentagon, Africa was viewed merely as a proxy battlefield in its struggle against 'global communism'. This period saw imperialism indiscriminately back military regimes and dictators purely on the basis of their anti-communist credentials. Thus we saw the 1965 CIA-supported and funded coup of Mobutu in the Congo. The best efforts of Che Guevara and his then comrade-in-arm, Laurent Kabila, proved unable to dislodge this monstrous tyrant.

But not anymore. Clinton's high-profile trip to sub-Saharan Africa - which included visits to Rwanda, Uganda and South Africa - is an indicator of the new *strategic* approach taken by the United States towards Africa. This massive continent is now being readied - very slowly, cautiously and gradually - for the global capitalist system of *production*. 'Time to enter the club and get to learn the rules', is the new imperialist message. Naturally, one of the first rules in this 'post-Soviet' world is a familiarity with democratic niceties and the 'rule of law'. Kleptocracies like Mobutu's regime had - and have - to go for 'real' or 'normal' capitalism to emerge and develop.



US imperialism sees profit in Africa's development

In Uganda, a suitably contrite Clinton confessed to the sins of past imperialist policies. Visiting a dirt poor primary school, he stated: "A cold war rivalry with the Soviet Union has led the US to deal with African countries based on their superpower allegiances rather than how they stood in the struggle for their own people's aspirations to live up to the fullest of their god-given abilities". He added: "And, of course, going back to the time before we were even a nation, European-Americans received the fruits of the slave trade, and we were wrong in that as well".

South Africa is fundamental to the new turn. As commented on before in the *Weekly Worker*, US imperialism sees the new, democratic South Africa as a bridgehead into the continent as a whole. This was made clear during the Kabila-led insurgency against Mobutu. US imperialism switched sides and backed Kabila. Mandela acted as go-between effectively on behalf of the US which needed to get the war over and see a smooth transition. The US administration wanted Kabila to play the part of the new face of Africa - clean, uncorrupt, untainted by cronyism and gangsterism - and friendly to the US. Mandela was only too willing to assist in the search for democratic and

civilian government.

At the very least imperialism now seeks *stability*. Hence Clinton's warm words for the regime of Yoweri Museveni in Uganda - a country scarred by brutal civil war, where political parties are still banned.

With this trip, Clinton became the first US president to visit South Africa. Addressing a joint sitting of parliament in Cape Town, he said that the US needed and was determined to build a strong South Africa. Terrible conflicts continue to tear the continent, warned Clinton: "But democracy is gaining strength, business is growing, peace is making progress. We are seeing what deputy president Thabo Mbeki has called an African renaissance".

Clinton also linked the fight against slavery in North America with that of the anti-apartheid struggle. Photo-shots of Clinton with Mandela on Robben Island also look good on the front page of US newspapers - especially with 'Monicagate' and 'post-Monicagate' still hanging over him.

But, for all that, Clinton's intentions towards Africa are in one respect sincere. He wants Africa fully integrated into the new world order ●

Paul Greenaway

action

■ Party wills

The CPGB now has forms available for you to include the Party and the struggle for communism in your will. Write for details.

■ Brent Socialist Alliance

To get involved contact BSA, Galaxy News Box 100, 37 Walm Lane, NW2 4QU. Tel: 0181-451 0616.

■ Lewisham Socialist Alliance

Election meeting. Friday April 17 - 7.30pm, Calabash Centre, George Lane, SE13. All socialist and community campaign candidates have been invited.

■ Lambeth Socialist Alliance

Election rally. Sunday April 26 - 4pm, The Brix, St Matthews Peace Gardens, Brixton Hill, SW2 0181-671 8036 for details.

■ Scottish Socialist Alliance

To get involved, contact PO Box 980, Glasgow G14 9QQ or ring 0141-552 6773.

■ Hillingdon hospital workers fight on

The Hillingdon strikers in west London, deserted by Unison, still need your support. Send donations urgently, payable to Hillingdon Strikers Support Campaign, c/o 27 Townsend Way, Northwood, Middlesex UB8 1JD.

■ Support Magnet workers

To support the 350 sacked Magnet workers and for more information contact the strike committee on 01325-282389.

■ Irish political prisoners campaign

Downing Street picket - first Sunday of every month, 12 noon to 1.30pm. Release the prisoners! For more details contact: Fuascailt, PO Box 3923, London NW5 1RA. Tel: 0181-985 8250 or 0956-919 871.

■ Diarmuid O'Neill

The Justice For Diarmuid O'Neill Campaign is demanding a public enquiry into his murder by state forces. Contact BCM Box D O'Neill, London WCIN 3XX.

Morning Star strike

No case to answer

On Wednesday April 1 the independent tribunal to hear the appeal of sacked *Morning Star* editor John Haylett's met for the first and last time amidst signs that management was throwing in the towel. Their chosen representative on the tribunal, Lloyd Wilkinson of the Cooperative Union, proved "not available" throughout the week since he was nominated, and management told Acas to supply whoever they liked to fill his seat. Clearly they were not putting up a fight.

The non-availability of management's nominee could be just another example of Rosser's 'gross industrial incompetence,' but it is hard to believe he was not contacted before being named. However, I have heard that Lloyd Wilkinson has a reputation for fairness and good judgement, and it seems much more likely he has told the management majority they were in the wrong and he would not want to sully his reputation by appearing on their side.

Predictably, the tribunal was unanimous that Haylett had "no case to answer," after which the NUJ called on management to end its "vindictive" campaign. The decision is not binding and Acas talks resumed on April 2.

Whether the management committee officers delegated to handle the dispute will accept the tribunal's view and reinstate Haylett remains to be seen. If not, we shall have to examine the viability of the strikers' plan to take the matter before PPPS shareholders.

■ Rossers's empty threat

Production of *The Workers' Morning Star*, the weekly tabloid published by the journalists striking since February 25 in defence of John Haylett, was delayed on March 26 by legal threats from the management's solicitors. The striker's tabloid was supposedly "passing itself off" as the *Morning Star*.

This charge brings to mind the launch of the *Daily Star* and Tony Chater's silly challenge in the courts on the grounds that it might be mistaken for the *Morning Star*. Only by "a moron in a hurry," was the judge's curt reply to the then editor, which seems equally true in the present case.

The *Morning Star* has for years been printed daily by the Socialist Workers Party's East End Offset. A form of collaboration of which neither side is proud. *Socialist Worker* never boasts of the practical assistance it gives the 'Stalinists', nor the *Star* that it is being printed by 'Trots'. Indeed, this was never a form of solidarity or left unity, as can be seen by the SWP's refusal to print the strikers' *TWMS*. Curiously East End Offset was able to print the *Morning Star* every day right up to February 25, but when asked to print an eight page weekly tabloid for the strikers - and it has been asked several times - it "did not have space." What communications passed between the *Star* management and the SWP, one can only guess at.

The NUJ printed the first two, A4 size, issues of the *TWMS*. No3, the first tabloid, was printed by Newsfax - incidentally, a firm which we are told does not recognise unions, although it employs some union members. The strikers quite rightly did not make this an issue, but were concerned to get

the paper out quickly and at a reasonable cost. *Star* management's threats successfully scared off Newsfax, who decided not to print No4. Fortunately an alternative printer was found at short notice and it eventually went ahead.

A second threat of "defamation" was aimed directly at the strikers. But as no concrete example was cited, this seems to be so much hot air. However, the strikers are now being very careful what they write. For example, this week 'Ardleigh's Diary' will be replaced by 'Kingsland Diary'.

This is not the first time this management has threatened to use the bosses' courts and laws to settle a dispute within the working class movement. Nor the first time they bottled out. Rosser and Chater tried it on just before the 1992 general election. This was an attempt to halt publication of the CPGB Provisional Central Committee's *Daily Worker*, which it had relaunched for the election campaign and as a pointer to the future. We were threatened with an injunction which could have led to imprisonment. We published anyway.

To emphasise our point of view, a team of *Daily Worker* supporters occupied the *Morning Star* offices at Ardleigh Road for a couple of hours. This protest action was used to legitimise a management committee decision, still in force to this day, banning the CPGB and the *Weekly Worker* from the columns of the *Morning Star* - something we hope can be reversed in the near future. *Weekly Worker* readers will be pleased to learn that no such ban exists in the *TWMS*, which carried a solidarity message to the strikers from the Provisional Central Committee on March 28. A *Weekly Worker* advertisement has been placed this week.

■ Sectarrians unite!

Bob Pitt, editor of the discussion journal *What Next?*, has made an ass of himself in his letter to the *TWMS* (March 28) by taking sides against the strikers. "If the sectarian drivel that fills the pages of *The Workers' Morning Star* is an indication of the political line that the *Star* will adopt if your side wins, such an outcome would be a disaster for a broad-based labour movement daily", he writes.

True, *Morning Star* journalists, some of whom are in New Labour and some in the so-called Communist Party of Britain, tend to display a sectarian attitude towards anyone who is to their left or does not believe New Labour and the British parliament are the route to human liberation. But this is not the criterion by which we distinguish between the management committee majority and the striking journalists, nor between the waning Hicks-Rosser faction and the ascendant Griffiths-Haylett-Maybin faction in the CPB leadership. Unfortunately both sides share the same 'broad labour movement' Labourite sectarianism as Bob Pitt himself.

Comrade Pitt should explain what he means by "sectarian". His own sectarianism appears to consist in putting the political criterion of loyalty to Blair's New Labour Party before solidarity with workers on strike. As the SLP's Simon Harvey commented last week, "in comrade Pitt's world, life outside the Labour Party is akin to death" (*Weekly Worker* March 26). Yet Blair is in the process of de-Labourising Labour, of transforming



John Haylett - 'revolutionary' reformist

Labour from a "bourgeois workers' party" (Lenin's description) into something quite different. This is causing stresses and strains to the whole of the pro-Labour left, including both leadership factions in the CPB, with their programmatic allegiance to Labour as the vehicle for socialism. In this Leninist sense, both CPB factions write sectarian (Labourite) drivel.

Comrade Pitt's Labourite dogma prevents him from seeing the real, living difference between a bureaucratic management proclaiming "management's right to manage" and striking journalists defending their rights as workers; and, within the CPB, between a bureaucratic clique which has been ruling the roost and has just been overthrown, and the rebellious victims of bureaucratic abuse who have just succeeded in ousting their former persecutors. On the face of it, the politics are the same: both sides appear wedded to the *British road to socialism* programme. But those having to struggle for their rights are the ones most open to learning the lessons of openness and democracy. Bureaucratic abuse flourishes in secret, behind closed doors, where differences of opinion are illegitimate, where certain points of view are 'out of order'.

The parliamentary road to socialism is a programme which generates the curtailment of open discussion. It calls forth bureaucratic centralism and blind loyalty, not democratic centralism and conscious discipline. Yet in the crisis it produces, both sides are

not equal. Like all those in struggle, the *Morning Star* strikers, as well as CPBers, throw off bureaucratic restrictions. In these conditions, they are more receptive than usual to communist lessons. The outbreak of civil war in the CPB therefore presents an opportunity which should not be missed.

Instead of recognising the significance of struggle as a catalyst in the development of consciousness, comrade Pitt is merely applying his sectarian Labourite dogma as if nothing was happening - and swallowing Rosser's hypocritical Scargill-baiting to boot. Like that arch-careerist Ken Livingstone, he is taking the wrong side of the picket line.

■ Reclaim Our Rights

Star strikers were upbeat at the SLP initiated Reclaim Our Rights conference on March 28. They were not visible amongst the range of left leafleters and paper sellers, but had their own table inside, where Tony Benn had himself photographed alongside them. They were in their element amongst rank and file union delegates and representatives of all the militant struggles currently in progress. Sales were healthy, and the *Star* workers had the gleam of commitment in their eye.

Mike Ambrose, *Morning Star* parliamentary correspondent and the strikers' press officer, told the conference that their conflict was a "plain industrial dispute," meaning it is not political. This is how the strikers, and the CPB leadership, want the dispute portrayed. However, he then proceeded to contradict himself, pointing out that there was more to it than "plain industrial."

There is a "partially dynastic element", he said, referring to the longstanding strivings of marriage partners Mike Hicks and Mary Rosser - appropriately dubbed the 'North Koreans' - to install Rosser's son-in-law Paul Corry as *Star* editor. Rosser already has her daughter employed at the *Star*. Furthermore, the actions of a "rogue Labour politician" - ie, Ken Livingstone - showed a "hidden agenda", and Ambrose warned against backing him for London mayor. Socialist Action, the undercover allies of Livingstone and the Hicks-Rosser CPB faction, were present in the conference, but did not speak.

On the subject of political openness, the strikers may find it instruc-

tive to compare their own paper with *The Socialist*, weekly paper of the Socialist Party led by Peter Taaffe.

The Socialist (March 27) carries a centre page spread on 'The battle for workers' rights' by SP industrial organiser Bill Mullins, aimed at the 600 ROR delegates. It mentions the "six national unions and dozens of regional and branch bodies" backing the conference, but omits to inform its readers that Arthur Scargill's SLP initiated it. The consequence of concealing this vital political fact is that *The Socialist* cannot educate its readers about the positive and negative features of the SLP's involvement - nor describe the weight or significance of the other various political forces involved. Instead, there is bland truism, useless for practical purposes: "When the working class moves into mass action in defence of its interests then we will see that the anti-union laws will be again pushed aside."

In Mullins' historical sketch of the struggle for workers' rights since 1980, the only left political organisation given credit for having a role is, predictably, Militant (the Socialist Party's predecessor) for leading the "mass illegal action" of the anti-poll tax struggle. Credit where credit is due, but only for oneself.

Similarly, *TWMS* (March 28) puts trade union rights on the front page. However the conference itself rates no mention, thus avoiding the 'sectarian' necessity of describing who launched it. However, space is found in the short front page piece to promote the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, because it is the creature of the CPB. Both CPB factions have a finger in the LCDTU pie. Its chairman, Kevin Halpin of the Griffiths-Haylett-Maybin faction, advises the TUC that "asking for little shows weakness and gets less". Its secretary George Wake, chairman of the management committee of the Peoples Press Printing Society, the cooperative which owns the *Morning Star*, is a signed up member of the Hicks-Rosser dynasty, with his own son David employed at the *Star*. Every week Wake has the mickey taken out of him as the strikers' fund columnist "Arfur Wake".

As is unfortunately customary, in the ROR conference itself, delegates have to guess what political tendency speakers represent. Everyone appears as representing some union organisation or the other, which tells you nothing or little about their politics. So the real discussion between different organised tendencies in the workers' movement goes on in veiled form. Rank and file militant workers are mobilised behind leaders with shadowy political allegiances and hidden agendas. Livingstone and Socialist Action are not alone in this.

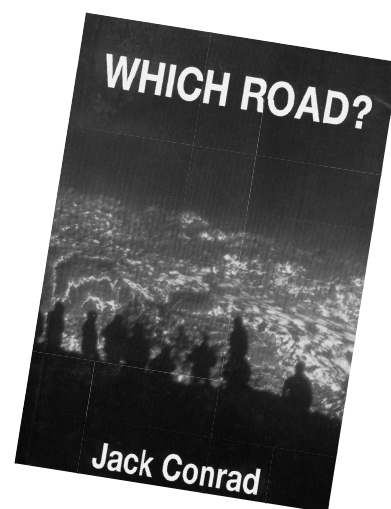
This poisonous culture of shame and secrecy about political differences must be ended through a struggle for openness. That is why the CPGB Provisional Central Committee has made the call for the columns of the *Morning Star* to be opened up to all shades of opinion on the left, making it truly "the paper of the left."

● The LCDTU is inviting bona-fide trade union organisations to a conference on the government's forthcoming white paper on trade union recognition: April 18, 11am to 3pm in the TGWU offices, Headland House, 308 Grays Inn Road, London WC1 ●

Ian Farrell

Which road?

Jack Conrad provides a sustained critique of the 'revolutionary' reformist programmes of the Eurocommunist CPGB, the CPB and the Militant Tendency (now the Socialist Party). It is the preliminary groundwork for our draft programme around which the struggle to reforge the CPGB is focused (pp267, £6.95 - available from the CPGB address).



Challenging the Union

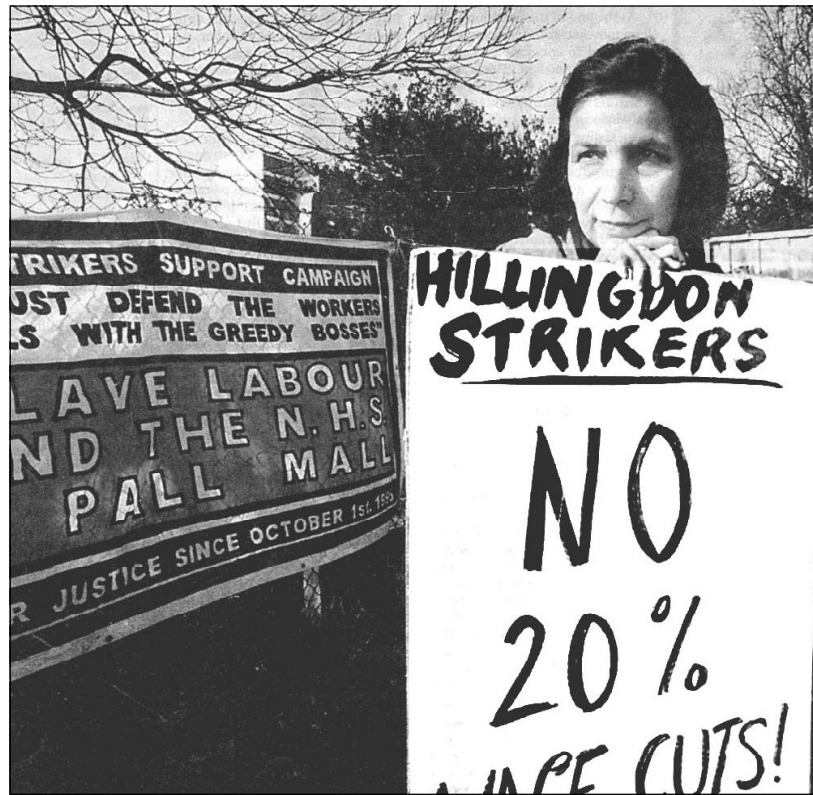
Whilst we should not get too carried away, the Reclaim Our Rights conference held at Westminster Hall, London on March 28 was the most important gathering of trade union militants in the past few years. It was by all accounts a positive and successful event and should help to raise the morale of rank and file activists. Hopefully it will prove to be the beginning of a real campaign against the anti-union laws.

There was a wide variety of speakers, from both the rank and file and the leadership of trade unions. These included those who had played a key role in recent disputes, such as Shirley Winter (Magnet), Sue Hoskins (Crichtley Labels), Jimmy Nolan (Liverpool dockers) and Malkiat Bilku (Hillingdon Hospital). Amongst the trade union leaders present were Joe Marino, BFAWU general secretary, Christine Blower, NUT president, George Brumwell, Ucat general secretary, Bob Crow, RMT assistant general secretary, John Foster, NUJ general secretary, Geoff Bagnall, CATU general secretary and Arthur Scargill, NUM president.

There were international speakers, notably Joseph Katende, general secretary of the Ugandan TGWU and Jean-Pierre Barrois from the Campaign in Defence of ILO Conventions. Voices from an array of left currents were also to be heard, most notably Tony Benn MP, but also activists from Socialist Labour, Socialist Workers Party, the Workers Power group, Communist Party of Britain and the Alliance for Workers Liberty.

The event was a rally rather than a conference. But with an estimated 600 delegates and observers it served to lift the spirit rather than deaden. The variety of speakers, coming from different perspectives, helped to avoid

SLP republican communist Jan Berryman evaluates the Reclaim Our Rights conference



Leading Hillingdon Hospital striker Malkiat Bilku

the impression that it was all stage managed, like the worst kind of rallies are. The whole event was moreover conducted in a fraternal and nonsectarian way.

Underpinning the event was a new pamphlet *Reclaim our rights* by John Hendy QC and Bob Crow. Whilst it was not discussed at the rally, it provides the most coherent statement of

the aims of the organisers. It explains the purpose and effect of the anti-union laws. It sets them in an international context, showing that British laws are in breach of the International Labour Organisation conventions, especially 87 and 98. Since 1989 the ILO has regularly condemned Britain's anti-union laws. The authors' go on to outline the sort of labour laws they believe we should have. The emphasis is on a legal framework of positive rights rather than having no laws at all.

At the end of the day the question is, what should be done? Clearly we need to support workers fighting against these laws. We need to secure their abolition and finally win new laws, which would establish positive rights. How we should do this is the weakest part of the pamphlet. Of course we must make propaganda "to reveal the truth about these laws". But the idea that the focal point of political action is making "demands of the Labour government" and the TUC indicates a real weakness of political direction.

Here we have an echo of Militant and the SWP's failed strategy for beating the poll tax. We were urged to "place demands on Kinnock and the TUC" to lead a militant struggle. Fortunately nobody took any notice, especially Kinnock. The poll tax was defeated by direct action. Kinnock and the TUC were never given the opportunity to sabotage it. That is one of the first lessons. Independent mass action without the so-called 'support' of the Labour leadership can and did succeed. Those who demanded such 'support' did nothing but sow illusions which tend to undermine the campaign. It is as if we say to ourselves "we are weak and feeble and can do nothing without the support of the 'great and the good'".

A Workers' Liberty leaflet offered the most coherent Labourite approach. In order to fight the anti-trade union laws we must change the Labour Party. We should therefore be "calling publicly for Blair's removal from the party leadership". Hence "the

fight against Blair is not only an industrial matter. We need a political strategy that can fuse rank and file struggle in the unions to a campaign for working class representation."

Therefore "the unions need to look to develop a campaign which will start to destabilise the New Labour bureaucratic machine". This involves "replacing existing Blairite MPs with working class candidates" and "removing sponsorship from MPs who vote for anti-working class policies". Then we should be developing policies on free trade unions and the welfare state "to become official Labour Party policy".

Workers Liberty sees Labour as the natural vehicle for working class representation under the constitutional monarchy. It is within that framework that Workers Liberty intends to stay. If they are not careful Hendy and Crow will be joining them, if they follow the logic of their own Labourite arguments.

The vision behind this political strategy is a return to the golden age of Labourism of 1945-50. Then the Labour government helped to build the new "social monarchy" - the post World War II welfare state with "free" trade unions. The rich man continued to live happily in his castle and the poor man was still at the gate, but properly represented by the TUC.

Syndicalists will have none of this. Rather than a political strategy, they see militant industrial action as the only way to defeat the anti-trade union laws. We could see a faint echo of syndicalism in Workers Power's call for a rank and file movement. We can see it if we read between the lines of the Socialist Perspectives leaflet. Whilst failing to address the main issue of how to fight the anti-union laws, their main arguments were directed to "breaking the unions from the employers coat-tails".

The TUC was identified as the main vehicle for promoting class collaboration or 'social partnership' in the trade union movement. But the syndicalists tend to forget the main political channel is Labourism. A healthy hostility to 'partnership' and support for militancy, means that they have no political alternative to that posed by Workers Liberty. At the end of the day this leads organisations like Workers Power and Socialist Perspectives back to voting Labour.

An alternative to Labourism and syndicalism was put forward in leaflets by SLP Republicans. Their perspective was for combining an industrial and political strategy. Industrial action was necessary to defeat the anti-trade union laws. But they argued that the problem with Reclaim Our Rights is that we never had positive rights embedded in a constitution in the first place. In the UK it has always been protection from the common law which gives employers rights to damages. The Republicans were in agreement with Hendy and Crow and the SLP in favour of positive rights. But for the Republicans, this meant a republican constitution in which workers' rights were a fundamental part. This should contain all the basic rights such as the right to strike, join a union, picket as well as rights to exercise workers' control in the workplace.

The time could not be more opportune for this approach. The Blair government has placed constitutional issues, such as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the House of Lords, freedom of information and the London mayor on the national agenda. We have seen the aristocracy mobilising a massive royalist demonstra-

tion over the threat to fox hunting. The royalists consider that fox hunting is a fundamental human and constitutional right and have taken to the streets to defend it. Charles Windsor and Camilla Parker-Bowles are the king and queen of the fox hunting set. For 'king, country and the fox' is the real politics of the Countryside Alliance, which put an estimated 250,000 people on the streets of London.

Republicans need to make trade union rights an equally fundamental issue, but for a very different kind of constitution. We want trade unionists on the same streets under the banner 'for the republic, for the people and for workers rights'. We want to widen the agenda. Putting the fight against the anti-trade union laws into a republican context is to widen out the struggle into a social and political movement. We need the modern equivalent of the Chartist movement. The royalist classes instinctively understand how to broaden their appeal from their right to kill the fox. The workers' movement needs to learn to do the same. This is a quite different approach from Workers Liberty.

The republican strategy is not an alternative to direct industrial action against the anti-trade union laws. On the contrary by raising the level of politics within the trade union movement, we can strengthen the urge to direct action by politicising it. Ministers of the crown, whether Labour or Tory have no moral or democratic authority with republicans. They and their laws are in breach of our fundamental republican rights. Yet it is their moral authority as a 'democratic government' which is used time and time again within the TUC and trade union movement as the glue for 'social partnership'. In short republicanism provides the ideological acid for dissolving the political glue that binds the TUC to Labour and the employers. It is the acid that the non-political syndicalists will not use.

How can we win trade unions from Labourism to republicanism? By building and organising the militant republican minority in the trade unions. On the basis of a united front, we need a political Minority or Rank and File Movement. We do not want a non-political movement that confines itself to purely trade union issues. In winning trade unions to militant republicanism, we are creating a rebel movement, the advanced part of a growing republican class.

The battle over which strategy to adopt will continue. Overall the SLP can take some comfort from the Reclaim Our Rights conference. After the trials and tribulations of last December's congress, this will help to get the SLP train back on the rails. Some of the fallout from that congress was in evidence. The *Marxist Bulletin* were there handing out a leaflet on why they resigned. They looked a bit forlorn. Harpal Brar and Roy Bull were seen discussing the foundations for their pro-Stalin faction of the SLP. Martin Wicks, who resigned in January but forgot to tell Arthur, recently received another letter from the SLP general secretary. Apparently he was threatened with hell fire and damnation for speaking to the Socialist Alliances. Now that Martin has left, it was all water off a duck's back. Still if he had stayed around, he could have left with a fanfare of trumpets, rather than disappear prematurely in a small puff of smoke. One effect of the conference was to help the ex-SLP left to assess themselves. Could it possibly be that their main contribution to the SLP had been the art of bad timing? ●

Fighting fund

Honest and open

New Labour is cracking down even further on debate within its own ranks. Dissent, no matter how mild will not be tolerated. Language - ie, thought - must be monitored. The price for another New Labour government is eternal gagging and muffling.

So it transpires from memos sent from Alastair Campbell, the official Downing Street spokesman, to Frank Field and Harriet Harman. These memos "remind" them that even senior ministers are not allowed to give interviews to the media without Blair and Campbell's clearance. The latter has also attacked Radio Four for allowing the 'Murdoch-Blair-Prodi' scandal to dominate its *World At One* programme on Monday. The BBC should concentrate on the "real issues", complained Campbell - which means joyously telling us how "the government is doing things on crime, on jobs, health and education, that matter to real people, and modernising a whole range of ways Britain is governed".

Unlike New Labour or the Tories, the CPGB does not believe in the

suppression of free speech. We defend *your* right to say what you want - no matter how 'undiplomatic' or 'unparliamentary' it might be. The *Weekly Worker* has forged a reputation for uncompromising honesty and openness as part of its struggle for human liberation and communism. We call a spade a spade and encourage our readers, sympathisers, supporters and members to do the same.

For this we need your continual financial support. We have no rich patrons like Rupert Murdoch, or advertisers - only you. Special thanks this week to AA from Edinburgh (£15), PS from Coventry (£15) and GH from Exeter (£30). Last month's total came to £493, just £7 short of our target. Good effort comrades, but try that tiny bit harder next month.

If your copy of the *Weekly Worker* was a bit late, do not panic. London postal workers staged a one-day strike last Thursday and, of course, we did not cross the picket line. Victory to the postal workers! ●

Katrina Haynes

Review

Redrawing boundaries

In a strident contribution to the recent debate on the relative merits of Lukács and Althusser, Phil Sharpe rashly writes: "Althusser's Marx is a proletarian revolutionary at the level of philosophic and historical materialism and not the expression of humanist popular frontism" (Letters *Weekly Worker* February 5 1998). By reviewing *For Marx* (originally published in 1965 as a collection of essays) I want to test Sharpe's contention in more detail.

The historical conjuncture of *For Marx* is the developing critique of Stalin's dogmatism that became current in the ranks of the international communist movement after Krushchev's denunciation of the 'cult of personality' at the 20th Congress of the CPSU (1956). Of critical importance to Althusser is the attendant re-discovery of Marx's *early works* and the concurrent thread of Marxist-humanism. *For Marx* is essentially Althusser's attempt to philosophically deal with Stalin's legacy. This is something it shares with Lukács' much maligned study, *The meaning of contemporary realism*.

It is of course the status of ideology that forms such a key component of Althusser's philosophic problematic. He begins in fairly uncontroversial style with the argument that "ideology is an objective social reality; the ideological is an organic part of the class struggle". However, Althusser moves on to attack the impact of ideology in the theoretical arena as "a threat or a hindrance to scientific knowledge" (*ibid*). Ideology is polarised as "a matter of lived relations between men and their world ... In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence ... In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (pp233-4). It is therefore only Marxist science that can adequately describe the history of a particular social formation. This oppositional couplet of science/ideology forms the basis of Althusser's utilisation of Gaston Bachelard's formulation of the 'epistemological break' to explain the contradiction between the major phases of Marx's theoretical output (discussed in more detail below).

It is at this point that the first major critique of *For Marx* should be made. Althusser's dualism can only give rise to an essentially static theory of knowledge. As he himself states, ideological struggle is organic to class struggle. The elaboration of proletarian hegemony cannot be accomplished until this particular fusion of ideology and science, the imaginary the real, is complete. That is the essence of *praxis*. No accident then that Althusser honestly admits that this work is deficient in exploring "the fusion of Marxist theory and the workers' movement" (p15). It is not difficult to see that this epistemology is a product of the intense polarisation of the Cold War, "The period summed up in caricature by a single phrase, a banner flapping in the void: 'bourgeois science, proletarian science'" (p22). Althusser goes on to expand that "we [in the French Communist Party] had been made to treat science, a sta-

For Marx Verso, London 1996, pp272

tus claimed by every page of Marx, as merely the first comer among ideologies" (*ibid*). The author's objections at this stage are reasonably circumspect but it is Althusser's error to redraw his methodological boundary in favour of a *neutered objectivism*.

The retrospective defence of Althusser is no idle fancy on the part of Phil Sharpe, in that the false strictures of *For Marx* appear to have impacted directly on him. In 1992 Sharpe was keen to come to terms with 'The autonomy and primacy of theoretical practice': "If the political and organisational cohesion of a revolutionary party is not to result in accommodation to bourgeois ideology, it is necessary to develop the autonomy of theoretical practice so that it is not subordinated to political practice. For on the basis of autonomy, the procedures of scientific theoretical practice can be created

For Marx is a brilliant, challenging read precisely because Althusser continually threatens to break the sterile confines of his chosen methodology. A critical engagement with *For Marx* and the work of Althusser certainly cannot be dispensed with if we really wish to exorcise the iron in our collective soul

..... that establishes the possibility of a revolutionary political practice" (P Sharpe 'The theoretical basis of democratic centralism' *Open Polemic* No7).

What then of Althusser's famous utilisation of the concept of the 'epistemological break'? The author argues that by "founding the theory of history (historical materialism) Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established a new philosophy (dialectical materialism)" (p33). Elsewhere, Althusser formulates the retreat of Marx and Engels "from ideology towards reality [which] came to coincide with the discovery of a radically new reality of which Marx and Engels could find no echo in the writing of German philosophy. In France, Marx discovered the *organised working class*; in England, Engels discovered *developed capitalism and a class struggle obeying its own laws and ignoring philosophy and philosophers*" (p81). It is on these foundations that Althusser constructs a periodisation of Marx's work, focusing on 1845 (*Theses on Feuerbach, The German ideology*) as the key turning point in Marx's development from ideology to science.

Ironically, Althusser gives the reader enough ammunition to *dispense* with this hopelessly abstract schema.

Some of the most sublime passages of *For Marx* are to be found in the essay, 'On the Young Marx' (pp49-86). Althusser argues explicitly against the use of a teleological methodology in the interpretation of Marx's work. For example, our author uses the example of Marx's article from the *Rheinische Zeitung* to reason that though "the exposition and formulation, [is] still inspired by Feuerbach or [is] still Hegelian ... It is clear that this discrimination between elements detached from the external context of the thought expressed and conceived in isolation, is only possible on condition that the reading of these texts is *slanted*, that is, teleological" (p57). This eloquent refutation of abstraction is ultimately rendered meaningless by Althusser's practice of mechanically periodising Marx's practice ('the early works', 'the mature works' etc), creating a set of preconditions whereby texts are treated as the function of such categories and not as a totalised process.

Althusser writes boldly that his definition "cannot be read directly in Marx's writings" and that "a complete prior critique is indispensable to an identification of the location of the real concepts of Marx's maturity" (p38). Unfortunately for this notion of a "prior critique", he goes on to give a rather more pessimistic description of its ultimate end: "The circle implied by this operation is, like all circles of this kind, simply the dialectical circle of the question asked of an object as to its nature, on the basis of a theoretical problematic which in putting its object to the test puts itself to the test of its object" (*ibid*). In such a scenario, it is difficult to see how Althusser's periodic schema could survive for long, as such an interaction surely results in a dynamic process, whereby objects and forms are continually dissolved and reformulated. The implication for Althusser's delicately balanced narrative is again one of knowledge in a static form, where categories are frozen onto a complex and shifting world of objects. It is a testimony to his theoretical ability that such conclusions can be gleaned from Althusser's fractured problematic.

How then does Althusser focus these methodological insights on the era of Stalin? He is keen to assess the precise meaning of the 'personal socialist humanism' (erected on the scaffold of Marx's 'early works') through which Stalin's epigones had rejected "the aberrant and 'criminal forms' the dictatorship of the proletariat had taken in the USSR 'during the period of the cult of personality'" (p237). For Althusser, humanism (and its 'cult of personality'/inhuman counterpoint) is essentially an ideological concept, therefore he regards viewing Stalin through such a prism as an *evasion* in scientific terms.

This can be made clear by a lengthy quotation: "It is regrettable to observe that the concept by which communists designate an important historical phenomenon in the history of the USSR and of the workers' movement: the concept of the 'cult of personality' would be an 'absent', unclassifiable concept in Marxist

theory if it were taken as a theoretical concept; it may well describe and condemn a mode of behaviour, and on these grounds, possess a doubly practical value, but, to my knowledge, Marx never regarded a mode of political behaviour as directly assimilable to a historical category, that is, to a concept from the theory of historical materialism: for if it does designate a reality, it is not its concept.

..... Lukács' point of departure is an analysis of the subjectivism of the Stalin era, "the inevitable ideological consequences of the personality cult" exemplified by "Stalin's cavalier attitude to scientific facts and objective laws"

..... However, everything that has been said of the 'cult of personality' refers exactly to the domain of the *superstructure* and therefore of state organisation and ideologies; further it refers largely to *this domain alone*, which we know from Marxist theory possesses a 'relative autonomy' (which explains very simply, in theory, how the socialist *infrastructure* has been able to develop without essential damage during this period of errors affecting the superstructure)" (p240).

Here we have the ideology of 'official communism' writ large. In the midst of the revelations of 1956, Harry Pollit is reported to have said to CPGB oppositionists "if you've got a headache, take an aspirin"! This then is Althusser's preparation of puerile objectivism. Even starker is his argument that the "developmental motor principle of a particular ideology cannot be found within ideology itself but outside it, in what *underlies* ... the particular ideology: its author as a concrete individual and the actual history reflected in this individual development according to the complex ties between the individual and this history" (p63). Such formulations do more than call into question the apparent disjuncture between the ideological 'superstructure' and 'socialist' infrastructure sketched out above, they can in fact be used for a retrospective rehabilitation of Stalin. If the infrastructure of the USSR was indeed 'socialist' during the Stalin period, could not the 'cult of personality' be construed as a necessary ideological defence mechanism? We do of course have the important benefit of hindsight. The collapse of the Soviet Union as *system* has brought the realisation that the political practice of the bureaucracy penetrated into the very core of the Soviet society, negating completely Althusser's antiquated base/superstructure model. In the final analysis it was simply impossible to be consoled by dear old Yuri Gagarin.

The failure of *For Marx* to theoretically comprehend developments in the USSR in a *revolutionary* manner, appears only compounded once we turn to Lukács' *The meaning of contemporary realism*. As is so often the case with Lukács, it is his pungent critique of literary form that develops into a metaphor for societal development. The essay under consideration - 'Critical realism and socialist realism' - is no exception.

Lukács' point of departure is an analysis of the subjectivism of the Stalin era, "the inevitable ideological consequences of the personality cult" exemplified by "Stalin's cavalier attitude to scientific facts and objective laws" (G Lukács *The meaning of contemporary realism* London 1979, p117). This of course manifested itself in the literature of socialist realism, which as Lukács argues, often resembled a crude agit-prop rather than a balanced mediation of socialist perspective and the actuality of realism.

The author bluntly reasons that "if Marxist-Leninist objectivism is abandoned ... the dialectical unity of theory and practice, of freedom and necessity, will be lost or dangerously weakened"; the outcome being "a polarisation into dogmatism on the one hand, and pragmatism on the other" (*ibid* p18). It is important to realise that Lukács was not being opportunistically seduced by objectivism, in that he was fully aware of the dangers of what he described in literary terminology as *naturalism*, seeing its umbilical cord to the false polarisation of the Stalin period. Lukács explained that there "are many varieties of naturalism. Common to all is the weakening of the relation between ideological principle and individual fact. That is why pragmatism and empiricism have an affinity with naturalism" (*ibid* p119). Thus it was that Lukács could confidently call for aesthetic alliance between the best traditions of critical and *socialist* realism.

Lukács does however echo Althusser in his insistence that it "would be slanderous to assert that during the Stalinist period socialist democracy, or the socialist basis of economic construction, were totally destroyed" (*ibid* p133). However, in Lukács case this is the price on entry into the debate. Unlike Althusser, he does not seek to wrap the Stalin years in the scientific shrouds of impenetrable 'facts'. The statement that "the true face of socialism can only re-emerge if the forces working against it during past decades are eliminated" (*ibid*) is adequate homage to the muscular, revolutionary epistemology of Georg Lukács.

This brief outline of some of the salient points of *For Marx* will hopefully be enough to cast doubt upon Phil Sharpe's idea that Louis Althusser's version of Marxism approximates to that of a "proletarian revolutionary". However, the idea that Althusser can be reduced to the status of a mere Stalinist epigone would be equally fallacious. *For Marx* is a brilliant, challenging read precisely because Althusser continually threatens to break the sterile confines of his chosen methodology. A critical engagement with *For Marx* and the work of Althusser certainly cannot be dispensed with if we really wish to exorcise the iron in our collective soul ●

Phil Watson

Don Preston's piece ('Admission of failure' *Weekly Worker* March 5) on the article, 'Marxist theory of the state', in the latest issue of *Trotskyist International* was pitifully inadequate, failing completely to get to grips with its subject.

The article in *Trotskyist International* is a detailed examination of the overthrow of capitalism in Eastern Europe in the period 1948-51. It asks whether Stalinist parties in those years could be said to have smashed the bureaucratic-military apparatus of the bourgeois state or not. It gives an account of what for Marx and Lenin was specific about the notion of 'smashing' the state in the proletarian revolution as opposed to laying hold and 'perfecting' the existing state machinery as occurred in bourgeois and all previous revolutions. It records an important change in the League for a Revolutionary Communist International's analysis, correcting the notion, as contained in Workers Power and the Irish Workers Group's 1983 book *The degenerated revolution*, that the smashing of state could for Marxists be reduced to the violent seizure of power.

Don Preston filled his article out with several lengthy quotes from *Trotskyist International*, but never actually bothers to address any of the issues. He admits that he is "not concerned here with the actual 'rights' and 'wrongs' of the theoretical position sketched out [sic] in the article", and later again dodges expressing any view on the article's conclusions with another agnostic phrase: "Whatever the merit [!] of such a perspective ..."

Ever the carefree philistine, Preston returns to the CPGB's petty obsession: the "near comical" fact that the LRCI has changed a position, after a lengthy debate, international discussion, a vote at an international congress, to which the CPGB was not privy. But the more Preston and the CPGB attempt to paint a picture of the LRCI as a bureaucratic organisation in which dissent and disagreement is not tolerated, the more they reveal the opposite to be the case. The undeniable conclusion, which any but the most jaundiced observer would have to reach about our debate on this question - as on Workers Power (Britain)'s debate and change of position last year on the Scottish Assembly - is that the LRCI and its sections have a thriving internal democracy. It is possible to campaign for minority views within our tendency - there are no sacred articles of faith which may not be criticised - and it is possible for minorities to become majorities in the course of political struggle.

All Preston's cheap sniping about "swapping one infallible truth for another", "the gods walking among us", etc, is just demagoguery. It panders to the scepticism of anti-party intellectuals towards the whole idea that an organisation can and should have a position on theoretical questions.

The real issue here is the CPGB's insistence that there is something 'bureaucratic' or 'sect-like' about an organisation deciding on its policy after an internal debate, and then requiring its members to fight publicly for the majority position. This, we are told, is not how the Bolshevik Party operated. For Lenin's party, unity in action

Fighting for an international programme

Richard Brenner of Workers Power replies to recent criticisms in the *Weekly Worker*

around agreed positions was the key; factional or theoretical differences could nevertheless be debated publicly.

True - as a norm for a mass party which had passed beyond the stage of a propaganda group still fighting to develop and defend its programme. But here the CPGB starts to get into real difficulty. Because, as they are well aware, the groups on the far left in Britain and around the world today are not parties at all. They remain propaganda groups - some active and militant like the LRCI, others completely passive like the CPGB. In this sense Workers Power and every section of the LRCI are indeed, as Mark Fischer has recently reminded us in the *Weekly Worker* (February 19), like factions without a party. And - again as you have conceded - factions are groupings united around a clear political and programmatic goal, necessitating a higher degree of homogeneity. Thus the Bolshevik faction did not just allow its members to take any position they wished on, for example, whether to boycott the duma, but adopted a position in favour of participating in elections and excluded from its ranks those ultra-leftists who would not argue for this conception in the RSDLP.

Without applying democratic centralism in this manner, a fighting propaganda group today would become a mere talking shop. And yes, in a period in which revisionism is running rife on the far left, this must apply to the organisation's struggle against Stalinist, social-democratic and centrist theories. If a part of our membership comes to believe that one of our theories is inadequate or false, they have the right and the duty to struggle for its correction - but unless and until they secure a majority, they must uphold the existing position of the organisation in their public activity.

Apart from anything else, Preston is not going to get very far trying to convince WP or LRCI members that there is something wrong (let alone 'anti-Leninist') about our ideas simply by pointing out that our organisation stands by its majority decisions. If I were to attack, for example, the CPGB's slogan of the 'federal republic' simply by writing "So the CPGB 'just knows' that this slogan is 'right'" it would be futile. If a democratically-organised group takes a position of course it is because it believes it to be correct. Mocking this only serves to undermine the idea - as Preston does - that there is such a thing as objective truth ('right' or 'wrong'), that one position can be broadly correct and another can be fatally flawed and false. Instead I should concentrate on criticising the substance of the position under discussion, not the mere fact that a position has been taken.

Now this was beyond Preston, not just because he did not understand the 'tortuous' - in fact perfectly clear - article, but because he does not know what to say about its content. After

It is possible to campaign for minority views within our tendency ... and it is possible for minorities to become majorities in the course of political struggle

all, the CPGB has made no analysis of this vital question. Did the Stalinists smash the capitalist states in Eastern Europe in the Marxist sense of the term in the 1940s? What was the class character of the form of the bureaucratic military apparatus? What was the class character of the property relations they introduced? How was it possible for capitalism to be restored in several states in the 1990s without a violent struggle? A communist organisation worthy of the name has to be able to answer these questions. And please, we need not only a discussion, but some answers, some conclusions that give guidance to advanced workers on how to respond to these developments and what lessons they carry for the future. Otherwise your organisation is, frankly, of no use - bankrupt.

Of course the LRCI has never claimed for one minute that any of its theories or programmatic positions are 'infallible truths' - the fact that we do change positions in a democratic manner should explode this ridiculous assertion. Nevertheless, it is simply untrue for Preston to say that this debate was in any way an alteration of "our entire world view".

Indeed, the difference in the debate was very specific. Preston is obviously disappointed that nobody in the course of our debate opposed Trotsky's analysis of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state, but ... nobody did. We can hardly be expected to share in his disappointment, because ... well, we think Trotsky was

right on this (though not on everything, as Preston would know if he bothered to read our material on his post-war perspectives and his view of imperialism).

That is why we had complete agreement not on "everything under the sun" but over the programmatic necessity both to defend the gains that existed for the working class in those states and to smash the Stalinist bureaucracy's bureaucratic-military apparatus of oppression of the working class. Of course disagreements are normal in every organisation, but this does not mean that unity around fundamentals is a bad thing. Just because Preston's national-centred grouplet has not achieved such a level of clarity about its aims, goals and international programmatic tasks does not make clarity and unity undesirable ends in themselves.

Finally, the CPGB has to misrepresent reality in order to avoid recognising what they obviously regard as a deeply embarrassing fact: the existence of the LRCI as an internationally-organised democratic centralist tendency. This is why when Don Preston writes of "Workers Power, British section of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International", he adds: "(in reality, we all know that WP is the LRCI)". Here Preston is simply appealing again to the hoped-for ignorance of his British readership. As he knows full well himself, the LRCI has sections in Sweden, France, Germany, Austria, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia. Under a third of the members of the LRCI are in Britain or members of WP(B). The far left and vanguard workers in each of these countries will be well aware of their existence - publications, papers in German, Swedish and French, our comrades' intervention in spheres of struggle such as the student protests in Berlin, the Melbourne Dockers' strike, mobilisation against the FN in France, the recent demonstrations of Kosovans in Vienna and so on.

But Don Preston is obviously desperate to deny that this can be real. To do otherwise would be to highlight - once again - both the possibility of developing an international programme and winning forces to it, and the miserable national-centredness of the CPGB, a group which makes no efforts whatsoever to organise an international tendency or develop an international programme itself ●

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Around the left Turning fantasy into reality

Never underestimate the power of dogma and wishful thinking. This can be the only conclusion to draw from reading the publications of the Socialist Workers Party. Ever since New Labour's resounding general election victory, the SWP has proffered the extremely silly, if not madcap, thesis that we witnessed a "class vote" last May - ie, Blair rode to power on a swell of leftwing opinion.

The obvious corollary to this thesis is that the further New Labour drifts to the right, the more unpopular it will get - 'old Labour' supporters will become disillusioned. This analysis by the SWP serves the useful function of justifying its automatic 'vote Labour, but' position. By definition the defeat of the Tories - consistently presented as the *main* evil in SWP propaganda - and the election of (New) Labour could only be an advance for the working class.

Therefore, it was only to be expected that *Socialist Worker* rushed into print - albeit somewhat foolhardily - when *The Guardian* appeared to come to the aid of the SWP's ailing political line. "Labour's post-election honeymoon is now at an end", ran the *Guardian* article. Alex Callinicos reprints this line and quotes enthusiastically from a pre-budget *Guardian*/ICM poll, which reported that the "government's lead over the Tories, 36% in October, has now dropped back to 13%, the level at the general election last May" (March 21).

"Why is Labour's lead slipping?", asks comrade Callinicos: "The answer is that [people] do not support carving up the welfare state".

Comrade Callinicos continues: "The attitudes revealed by the poll are a world away from the thrust of New Labour's welfare 'reform'. Which is to deny benefits to the poor and vulnerable as a way of forcing them into low paid jobs. But the most interesting aspect of the poll did not get the headline treatment. Only 36% thought Labour should stick to its infamous election pledge to respect Tory levels of income tax and government spending even if that meant cutting back on public services. By contrast, the *Guardian* says, 56% wanted higher public expenditure even if it meant breaking the election pledges on tax and public expenditure."

"So what Gordon Brown contemptuously likes to call 'tax and spend' - the 'old Labour' policies of using the state to redistribute wealth and income tax from rich to poor - would be popular. Yet Brown is rumoured to be planning to extend the commitment to Tory targets from its original two years to the entire life of the present parliament."

"Here we have the key to Labour's shrinking lead. It lies in Labour's failure to radically break with Tory policies" (my emphasis).

After Brown's budget, *The Times* published a Mori opinion poll. It stated: "Support for Labour has hardened to 53%, up a point since late February, after slipping for four months running. The Tories are unchanged on 28%, with the Liberal Democrats down a point at 14%. Some 57% of the people questioned believed that Gordon Brown's package was good for the country, while only 22% felt it was bad. On a personal level - where people are generally more sceptical - 33% thought [the budget] was good for them compared with 39% who thought it bad. This is the best rating since the Lawson budget of a decade ago ... The balance of those satisfied against those dissatisfied with the way the country is being run has risen from plus one to plus eight points, while the 'net balance' of those who believe the economy will improve rather than get worse in the coming year has risen from plus two to four" (March 26).

So, who do we believe? The Callinicos/SWP spin on the pre-budget *Guardian*/ICM poll about "Labour's shrinking lead" or *The Times*' post-budget Mori poll about how support for Labour has "hardened"? In fact, an *intelligent* - ie, non-dogmatic - reading of both polls does not reveal any great paradox or contradiction. The truth is relatively simple. It was only natural that New Labour's opinion poll ratings shot up after the general election period. Everybody wants to be on the winning side. Then eventually, as always in a Tweedledum-Tweedledee bourgeois democracy, the government loses popularity. But with all the fanfare and hype surrounding Brown's budget, it went up again.

In other words, the working class does not exist in any real, political sense. It only exists in a purely sociological sense, as atomised and alienated voting - and poll - fodder. With no alternative vision of society, with capitalism looking triumphant and eternal, when the masses are told that Brown's budget is 'good for Britain, hence good for you', many *accept* it - and, in that sense, support it.

There was no 'class vote' last May. There is no imminent 'class' anger which threatens to dislodge New Labour. The sooner comrade Callinicos and the SWP realise this the better - and the more chance we have of turning comrade Callinicos' fantasy into a potential actuality ●

Don Preston

Blair touts for business

New Labour's love affair with the free market becomes more passionate with every day that passes. To doubt the sincerity of the Blairites' ardour or, conversely, to entertain any 'left' illusions in New Labour, is to enter the realm of self-deluding lunacy. Yet the remarkable fact remains that come the May 7 local elections many left groups will continue to call upon the working class to vote for Blair - the benefits butcher.

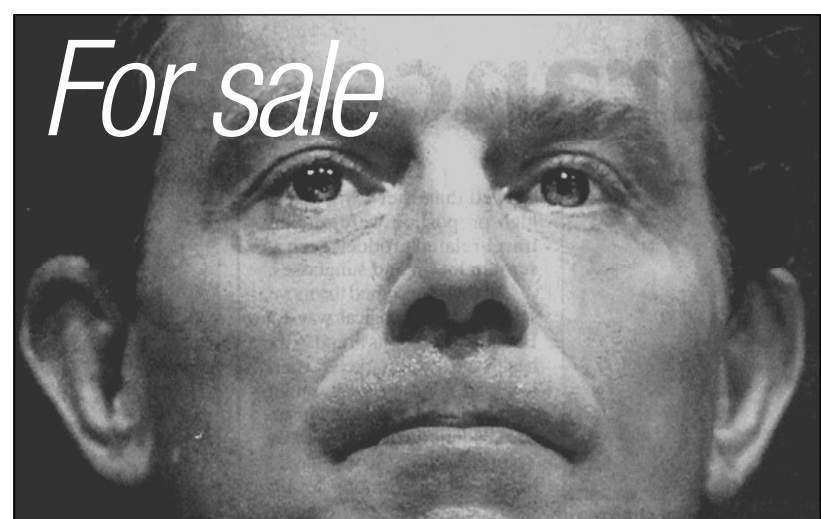
Meanwhile, Blair continues to cuddle up lovingly to capitalist millionaires and billionaires, including as we know, media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Last week came the revelation of a phone call between Blair and Italian prime minister, Romano Prodi, head of the Olive Tree alliance. In this conversation Blair just happened to "mention" Murdoch's bid for Italy's leading commercial TV business, Mediaset.

The only interpretation is that Blair is touting for Murdoch and BskyB, under the guise, as an anonymous member of the Blair team put it, of "speaking up for British firms". (Rupert Murdoch - a naturalised US citizen - is BskyB's biggest shareholder, via his Australian media firm, News Corporation)

Murdoch has courted - ie, purchased - friends in the highest places. He needs such help if he is going to make that next killing. For some time he has been attempting, unsuccessfully so far, to break into the non-English language European market. Murdoch has sought to invest £2 billion of his corporate profits from BskyB - to comply with Italian media ownership laws - into a controlling 50.6% share in Silvio Berlusconi's media holding company, Mediaset. Ironically, Berlusconi's newspaper, *Il Giornale*, published an article last Tuesday which complained that such a sale to Murdoch would run the danger of delivering Mediaset - which accounts for half of Italy's entire TV advertising revenues - into "leftwing" hands. It seems like Murdoch's conversion to New Labourism is not popular in some circles.

The supreme arrogance of New Labour was revealed by its instinctive response to growing criticisms of Blair's role - an evasive denial. Alastair Campbell, official press secretary for New Labour (and, also, technically a 'non-party' civil servant), dismissed the idea that Blair had "intervened on behalf of Murdoch by speaking to Romano Prodi" (*Financial Times* March 24) as a "complete joke", "a load of baloney", "crap" - depending on which account you read.

But the line was hard to sustain. Eventually, we were told that the allegations were true - well, sort of. Then again, Campbell had no choice but to come semi-clean. Last Friday a state-



ment by Murdoch on the 'Blair-Prodi' scandal was printed in *The Times*. It confirmed that Murdoch had asked Blair to quizz Prodi about whether or not the Italian government would allow Murdoch's acquisition of Mediaset. Murdoch's mouthpiece went on to describe the use of the UK prime minister as a "perfectly innocent request for information which I would expect from any British business needing help from their government in European-wide investments". The paper also said Murdoch used the information supplied by Blair in the decision to scupper the deal after Mediaset's price tag was raised by Berlusconi.

Insider dealing, by any other name. This was how the financial press saw it. 'Cool Britannia' gives way to Crony Britannia', ran the headline to *The Independent's* business editorial (March 25). In damning tones, it thundered: "[Blair's] liking for corporate deal making is not tycoon specific. He seems to like all tycoons ... The fondness he displays for the aims and ambitions of big business is worryingly wrong headed ... Nobody is suggesting that what we are seeing in New Labour is the sort of fully fledged crony capitalism that came to epitomise the now discredited economies of the Far East, but there are enough warning signs here to have cause for genuine concern".

Pathetically, Robin Cook insisted on Sunday that there was no "cosy relationship" between Murdoch and Blair: "There is no special access for Mr Murdoch. This is the report that has naturally and understandably been put about by Mr Murdoch's rivals". He went on to spin the story that Prodi had called Blair, not the other way around. The Labour Party is not "indebted" to Murdoch for switching *The Sun's* allegiances during the run-up to last year's general election, added Cook.

It looks like 'pay back' time for Blair. Faustian pacts with the devil do not come free of charge, as Andrew Neil, the former editor of Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, points out. He remembers

being told by Blair that "how we treat Murdoch's media interests when in power will depend on how his newspapers treat the Labour Party in the run up to the election and after we are in power". As for the Mediaset deal, Neil makes the claim that Murdoch told his most senior colleagues: "I'll have Tony test the waters" (*The Observer* March 29).

It will come as no surprise to learn that Murdoch has been the guest at Chequers, Blair's country residence, twice since the general election. Blair has also been a frequent visitor to the media tycoon's London home. And Cook says Murdoch has no "special access".

From Blair's perspective, Murdoch is no Bernie Ecclestone, the Formula One boss. After all, at the end of the day, that was just £1m - or £250,000, according to who you believe. Murdoch offers far more than a measly million quid. He is the gatekeeper to 3.6 million *Sun* readers - who can be ideologically buttered up to support the New Labour, New Britain project.

Blair's liaisons with Murdoch, as with Ecclestone before, provide fresh evidence of New Labour's *class* orientation - of the social milieu it wants to attract, move in and articulate. Only last week Blair addressed a dinner for Asian businessmen known as the 'Asian 200', where he yet again displayed the symptoms which so distressed the business editor of *The Independent* - ie, a fawning and sycophantic admiration for the rich and wealthy, for "the successful".

Labour is being de-Labourised before our eyes. It is metamorphosing from a bourgeois workers' party into something more akin to the great Liberal Party of Gladstone.

It could not be more clear. If you are a wealthy businessman, if you are a millionaire, if you are a media tycoon, if you are "successful", then Blair wants to know you. Welcome to 'communitarian' and 'stakeholding' New Britain ●

Danny Hammill