



Learn the lessons of Magnet defeat

Another lengthy dispute involving workers sacked after going on strike has ended in defeat. Workers at the Magnet factory in Darlington voted, by 47 to 34, to accept a pay-off. It was hardly surprising that, after such a determined, courageous and bitter struggle, there were angry scenes on the picket line when the close result was announced.

Only those workers who had not obtained other work during the 20-month dispute were permitted, by the five unions involved, to participate in the ballot on the £850,000 lump sum offer from the company. Nevertheless, the workers will distribute the money between all 320 who went on strike in August 1996, according to how long they participated in the dispute.

The Magnet workers had been sacked after commencing official strike action following a ballot conducted in compliance with the anti-union laws. They have consistently demanded nothing short of reinstatement, and the strike committee had called for rejection of the pay-off.

The loss-making Magnet Kitchens was bought for a snip in 1993 by Beresfords. The new owner immediately demanded that the workers accept a £35-a-week pay cut. The workers defeated this move. But they accepted a pay freeze until the company went back into profit. In 1996 an annual profit from the Darlington plant of £10 million was declared. The unions then submitted a three percent pay claim. Management responded by offering the rise claimed to 60% of the workforce and nothing to the other 40%. When the strike ballot result was announced, Magnet's bosses rushed to settle a similar claim from workers at its Keighley factory, in order to isolate the Darlington workers.

The dispute displayed features that are familiar in contemporary working class struggles in Britain. Strong rank and file control of the strike was established through a strike committee led by the shop stewards. A highly active women's support group was formed. The factory was picketed solidly around the clock, against a heavy police presence. The official union machines concentrated on contributing to the strike fund, printing publicity leaflets, and making speeches at rallies. But they did nothing to secure the respect of all trade unionists for the picket lines. Nor to call for solidarity action in defiance of the anti-union laws.

The strikers' local Labour MPs, Alan Milburn and prime minister Blair, declined to offer any support and re-



Blair stayed away

fused to visit the picket lines. Magnet workers at Keighley and other sites could not be won to come out in defence of their Darlington colleagues. Management was able, however slowly, to build up a scab workforce. There were several instances of thugs attacking the pickets, including an attempted firebombing of their caravan, and a charge from hooded assailants wielding iron bars. The scabs, however, did not thrive. The Liverpool dockers' paper (*Dockers Charter* April 1997) reported that management were already seeking to buy out the scabs' contracts and offer new ones on reduced wages.

One of the forms of solidarity sought by the strikers was help in promoting a consumer boycott at Magnet's 200 outlets. Trades councils, in particular, were asked to assist. Although the strikers report that 167 outlets were leafleted during 1997, the nature of the business means that these are 'moving targets'. At the best of times such boycotts rely on the actions of individual consumers. They are unlikely to be effective at a time when there is no movement that could deliver such solidarity *as a class*.

This is the inescapable lesson of the defeat of yet another working class struggle. The balance of class forces in Britain is overwhelmingly in favour of the capitalist class at this time. The craven and treacherous nature of the

British trade union bureaucracy is undoubtedly a factor. While the *Weekly Worker* (April 23 1998) can report that the president and secretary of the Australian Council of Trades Unions - under pressure from a mass movement - were amongst 5,000 pickets responding to a state supreme court injunction against the picketing of the Webb dock in Victoria, our own TUC leadership is preparing for ignoble surrender to Blair and the Confederation of British Industry over trade union recognition legislation.

But it is far more than this. The working class in Britain has seen a prolonged assault on its rights and living standards over the last 20 years, and a painful strategic defeat in the miners' strike of 1984-85. This was fundamentally the ending of the post-war social democratic settlement between the working class and the bourgeoisie. The sorry state of the trade union movement reflects the resultant crisis of Labourism. A fundamental political break of the working class with the dead weight of failed Labourism is necessary before the balance of class forces can be decisively turned around.

The working class must become a political class. The conscious intervention of communists, along with the reforging of the Communist Party of Great Britain, is the key to this ●

Derek Hunter

15th Summer Offensive, May-June 1998 **Tough target**

The CPGB members' aggregate on April 19 took into account our weakened cadre base when it adopted a target of £20,000 (£5,000 less than last year) for our 1998 summer fundraising campaign, which kicks off on May Day. The 15th annual Summer Offensive aims to involve all members and supporters in two months of intensive work, creativity and self-sacrifice over May and June, culminating in our traditional celebration, which also highlights the achievements of individual comrades as they vie with each other in socialist competition.

Place of honour will go to the comrade who raises the largest sum, with recognition also going, for example, to the most innovative methods, best newcomer, exemplary effort or self-sacrifice - or perhaps to the comrade most successful in involving others in fundraising. This competition helps to foster a healthy morality, highlighting the most selfless work and the best methods developed, so as to generalise them.

Comrades should recognise the importance of coming together both in the fundraising work itself and in our celebration. We draw strength from each other. Every individual contribution to the collective effort encourages others, just as every individual retreat can weaken the resolve of other comrades. Each faces an ongoing personal struggle to put theory into practice, to place communist work for the cause before the private struggle to make ends meet. Only through collective strength can we learn to swim against the tide of reaction. That is why every comrade must take a conscious approach to the task of drawing in others.

While our overall target has been lowered, there has been no retreat on the minimum target for CPGB members. For supporters and sympathisers there is no minimum level for participation in the Offensive. Some will no doubt raise significantly more than this minimum. In-

deed, everyone who values the *Weekly Worker* and recognises our significant role in the worldwide struggle to reforge a communist programme and communist organisation should strive to take part at the highest possible level.

Communists, and communist organisation, must be built in practice, not just in theory. The most advanced consciousness cannot be achieved except through the struggle for the highest levels of communist commitment - and serious fundraising work is an essential ingredient. To those who accept the necessity of reforging the Communist Party and making world revolution, the Summer Offensive says, 'Put your money where your mouth is'.

The Summer Offensive idea was taken on by the 2nd Conference of the Leninists of the CPGB in 1984. Challenging comrades' good intentions with the test of practice, it has always acted as a purge on our organisation, sorting out the 'talkers' from the 'doers'. One founding comrade pulled out straight after the 2nd Conference, having argued that the minimum target would prevent recruitment. Comrades will remember how the Open Polemic faction resigned from our organisation just in time to miss the Offensive in 1996.

Serious fundraising is essential to the survival and development of genuine communist politics. Just as serious practice and commitment finds the faint-hearted wanting, so it is the very thing that attracts those who mean business. The fight to extend the number participating in the Offensive is also the fight to build our organisation.

Comrades will be setting their initial personal targets at meetings this weekend.

Reports of both targets and achievements - as well as cheques (payable to the CPGB) - should reach me by phone, fax, e-mail or letter by Monday of each week, so that progress can be reported in this column ●

Stan Kelsey



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

Long live May Day!

This May Day issue of the *Weekly Worker* sends its revolutionary greetings to all partisans of the working class, of genuine democracy and human progress the world over. May 1 this year also coincides with the launch of our 15th Summer Offensive. This is not simply an annual financial push for us; it is one of the high points of Party political campaigning during the course of the year.

Every Summer Offensive stretches our organisation. It is a painful process of struggling not for what is 'possible', but for what is necessary, what must be. Inevitably, our material resources constantly lag behind the practice we are fighting for, as our Party treasurer will tell you.

This year's Offensive will be a particularly difficult one, however. A fact explicitly recognised by our organisation when it lowered the target from £25,000 to £20,000 for the two-month duration of the campaign. Over the recent period, we have lost some experienced comrades. Our periphery of sympathisers has grown slightly, but these are mostly very inexperienced and will certainly find the rigours of the Offensive difficult, particularly without close attention from experienced veterans of the campaign.

Our more general periphery of occasional correspondents and readers has expanded massively over the last two years or so. Relative to the size of the organisation that produces it, the *Weekly Worker* must be the most successful paper on the revolutionary left. Indeed our circulation is now starting to rival organisations the size of the Socialist Party - with the qualification that, while ours is going up, its is declining. But it is hard to describe this element of our periphery as 'sympathetic': they read our paper because they simply have to.

At the moment, most are - irrationally - resistant to actually supporting the organisation that produces the paper they rely on for accurate news and analysis of the left.

Every year, our members and closer supporters are the backbone of our fundraising. This year, comrades must pay particularly close attention to their targets, must look to really maximise them.

The Summer Offensive always has an important exemplary aspect. Indeed, a degree of mystique surrounds it. Opponents of our organisation tend to regard it as generally admirable but slightly unhelped.

The amounts that individual comrades are able to raise have been quite prodigious. Our SOs originated in the struggle of the Leninists against the opportunist leadership of the Communist Party in the 1980s. We were thus able to directly contrast the levels of commitment and sacrifice of our comrades with members of contemporary factions in the Party. One comparative statistic that sticks in my mind from the time was our discovery that some of our lower totals being raised by individuals were more than those managed by several whole districts of opportunists during their limp annual 'appeal'.

Thus, a serious approach to money has always characterised this organisation. Given the nature of the tasks we set ourselves, how could it be otherwise? The SO is the high point of our fundraising, yet day to day the Party receives serious money in the form of dues from its comrades. Members give 10% of their income as a required minimum. Of course, comrades in dire financial straits are not driven to the workhouse, but in general we regard this as perfectly reasonable. Moderate, even.

This approach flows from how we regard our tasks as revolutionaries. To believe in communism in practice means taking the necessary steps now that will get us from here to there. The left in Britain flounders in day-to-day 'practical' activity, with a platonic commitment to a communist chimera, gleaming off there in the remote distance. Some of these comrades have even called our level of dues and financial demands "immoral" in that they alienate "ordinary workers".

First, history shows that masses of workers have been more disposed to building serious organisations in a serious way, rather than the flighty sects of the revolutionary left. 'Ordinary' people have flocked to organisations - from the Communist International to the catholic church - on the basis of their deeply held beliefs, not which provided the better bargain. Did the miners of the Great Strike of 1984-85 not make huge financial sacrifices? What about the heroic stand of the Liverpool dockers - what did that do to their bank balances?

The project for world communism demands commitment on a qualitatively higher level than that of the most militant workers. Certainly those who fail to even aspire to such levels should not insult militants by blaming their failings on the supposed whimsical and shallow nature of the working class.

Second, these comrades show just how far they are away from any understanding of genuine communist morality. Our morality is "what serves to destroy the old exploiting society and to unite all the working people around the proletariat, which is building a new, communist society ... to a communist all morality lies in this united discipline and conscious mass struggle against the exploiters" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 31, Moscow 1977, pp290-5).

An energetic and successful 15th Summer Offensive will provide an excellent example for a revolutionary left in a state of flux and decline. Comrades must approach this year's SO with attention to detail, guts and imagination ●

Mark Fischer
national organiser

Open debate

Mark Fischer's report on the Socialist Forum '98 in Glasgow last weekend (*Weekly Worker* April 23) failed to address some key issues which should interest your readers.

As everyone knows, compared to the SLP, the SSA is a model of democracy, openness and tolerance of different views. However, the proposals our membership is being presented with could, I believe, force us into copying the worst aspects of the SLP regime. And this at precisely the time when the tide is turning in England and Wales in favour of our, rather than Arthur Scargill's, conception of organisation. We could be in danger of sleepwalking into disaster.

During the forum that addressed the question raised in Alan McCombes' draft proposals for the creation of a Scottish Socialist Party, I quoted from the Paisley branch motion passed unanimously at last year's SSA conference. It stated:

"Dual membership gives us the opportunity for constructive dialogue and fraternal debate. This allows us to clarify differences, putting them into perspective, possibly even overcoming some of the most serious. Dual membership is the only viable alternative to a permanent war of sectarian point-scoring and deliberate misinterpretation of what the other is arguing."

If dual membership was the only alternative to a permanent war of sectarian bickering last year, what suddenly happened to justify its abolition? In reply, Nicky McKerrel, SML executive member, argued that the proposals on the table rule out neither dual membership nor the affiliation of external organisations such as the SWP. At this point I called on Alan Green to either endorse or reject what had just been said, because if Nicky's reading of Alan McCombes' draft is the right one, then most of my objections would fall by the wayside. Alan could however offer no help. He did not know whether or not he was proposing to abolish our dual membership constitution! This utter absence of clarity would make a nonsense of any vote we take on this issue.

In his report-back, Alan Green said that of the 10 members who spoke, only two were opposed to the proposal. The impression given of 80% support is absolutely meaningless. I made it clear that if Nicky McKerrel's interpretation was accurate, I would not strongly object. Because neither our national secretary nor anyone else could provide an authoritative rebuttal, many of those who did not speak to oppose might have been stirred into doing so, had Nicky not tried to give reassurance that the proposals do not mean what I believe they mean. And one of those Alan Green counted as "broadly in favour of the proposals" explicitly stated he was in favour only of changing our name from SSA to SSP, but certainly not in favour of changing our existing structures. Alan McCombes has however categorically stated that, whatever it is he is proposing, it is far more radical than a mere change of name.

Those who have not made up their mind cannot do so until we democratically debate the consequences of the proposed changes. If they mean what the SP executive committee think they mean (and my reading is exactly the same as theirs), then die-hard supporters of the CWI are going to be witch hunted out of the SSA/SSP by 'here today, gone tomorrow' supporters of the CWI. The former will be forced, along with the SLP, the SWP and others, to split our potential vote. Before we reach that point though, our organisation will become infested with secret, as opposed to open, factions. We know from the experience of the SLP and the Labour Party before it, that this will give rise to paranoia, bitterness, kangaroo courts and purges. All this will have devastating consequences for us - not least electorally.

Voting in the absence of adequate information is democracy in name only. It would be a farce if the SSA voted at conference on such a life-and-death question

when there is not a shred of clarity as to what we are supposed to be voting on. We certainly do not want a repeat of what happened at last year's conference. The vote then against the CPGB-sponsored active boycott turns out to have comprised two fundamentally opposed groups. It was not until I got a phone call from Alan McCombes in response to a letter in the *Weekly Worker* that I discovered Alan and I voted for two entirely different motions. While I only discovered this months after the vote, Alan was aware of the divergence in our ideas before it. He has, in my opinion, acted contrary to the spirit of openness, which the dual-membership alliances were supposed to guarantee. As he knows perfectly well, my vote ought not to have been counted as a vote in favour of the SSA restricting its electoral programme to the narrow political patch Tony Blair is willing to surrender to us. I am also convinced that the overwhelming majority of those who voted against the active boycott would have substantially amended the motion, had they an inkling that it was going to be presented in the manner Alan McCombes is now presenting it.

If Alan really thinks conference voted to allow Tony Blair to censor our election manifesto, why did our national council issue leaflets months after the vote calling for the transfer of funds from warfare to welfare, a massive extension of public ownership and other measures ruled out by Blair? If Alan thinks we should become converts to constitutional cretinism, then he would surely want to distance himself from Tommy Sheridan for proposing an illegal deficit budget last year at Glasgow city council. Tommy Sheridan is surely being accused of hypocrisy for rejecting the legitimacy of the constitutional limitations of the council and for his support of illegal strikes and mass picketing to hamper the councillors doing their constitutional duty. The Poplar councillors and the Liverpool councilors are surely being denounced as ultra-lefts, as anarchists, for their decision to break the law, not the poor. The four Renfrew district councillors who were elected as Militant supporters (including the leader of the council, Hugh Henry) must have had right on their side when they voted to bring in the police to smash a joint Paisley SSA-CPB-CPS protest at the £10 million-cuts budget on March 6 last year. Our member who was arrested and taken away in handcuffs for not giving the police his name is surely being told by Alan that he only has himself to blame for engaging in a protest demanding the council sets an illegal budget.

The SSA should adopt a Leninist approach to all elections. We should use them to educate, agitate and organise. We should use them to organise our class and all oppressed groups within, and against, capitalist society. We should use them to promote the interests of our entire class, regardless of nationality or other sectional interest. Those who hold a different view should say so openly and honestly, so the implications of their arguments can be debated within the SSA and beyond.

PS: In the process of editing my previous letter (April 16) down to fit your letter's page, the impression was given that I had become converted to the CPGB's use of the term 'national socialist'. I want to stress that this is not the case. I remain as opposed as ever to the use of it as a description of workers who do believe you can have socialism in one country. Furthermore, contrary to the impression given by Alan McCombes, I personally doubted that he has crossed the Rubicon from Trotskyism to Stalinism on this crucial question.

Tom Delargy
Paisley

Not worth it

I attended a meeting of the Lambeth Socialist Alliance on Sunday April 26. It was held mainly in order to discuss and promote the local election campaign. One of the speakers was Hugh Kerr MEP, who

was recently expelled from the Labour Party because he thought it was worth standing up to Blair.

One interesting thing to note was a contribution by a member of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Whilst expressing his support in general for the SA project, he questioned the wisdom of standing left candidates against New Labour. After all, the comrade argued, the SAs can only stand a handful of candidates - and we all know that they will only get a few votes. He cited the example of the Socialist Party candidate in Uxbridge, who got a "terrible vote". On the electoral plane, the SAs - at the moment - were on a "hiding to nothing".

Perhaps more importantly for the AWL comrade, was the matter of his New Labour party card. "Is it worth getting expelled from the Labour Party in order stand in elections?" he asked semi-rhetorically.

Well, I have to inform the AWL comrade, yes it is. We need to build the left alternative to Blair now, not wait passively for the "massive struggles ahead", as another AWL comrade put it. Nor should we wait for the RMT, or any other union for that matter, to come to our rescue and graciously decide to back a left candidate - another 'strategy' advocated by AWL comrades.

Marxists should base their analysis on a study of concrete reality - and upon the struggle for what is necessary. Unfortunately this method seems alien to many comrades on the left, doggedly waiting for real life to conform to their theories.

Danny Hammill
South London

Impressive

The coverage of recent events around the CPB/*Morning Star* have by themselves shown the *Weekly Worker* to be invaluable. I have also found your perceptiveness about how things would develop in the north of Ireland to be most impressive and particularly helpful.

Whilst, inevitably, there is much to disagree with within its pages, the *Weekly Worker* expounds some pretty fundamental aspects of the case for socialism, including, for example, the need for it to be global and that the working class must emancipate itself through its own efforts and understanding.

I am pleased therefore to enclose a donation for the fighting fund.

Andrew North
Kettering

Free Zoorah Shah

The judgement in Zoorah Shah's appeal against conviction for murder is to be heard on Thursday 30 April 1998, at the High Court in the Strand, London.

In 1992, Zoorah Shah killed Mohammed Azam following 12 years of physical and sexual abuse, and economic exploitation. She was convicted of a number of charges, including murder and attempted murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Zoorah's appealed against the convictions of murder and attempted murder in March 1998, on the grounds of diminished responsibility. This was the first time she was able to disclose her history of the sexual violence she had suffered, having been too ashamed and frightened to reveal this at her original trial.

Please show your support for Zoorah by attending a demonstration outside the Court of Appeal in the Strand, London at 9.30am on April 30 1998.

For further information phone 0181-574 9595 (Fax: 0181-574 6781; e-mail: FreeZoorahShah@ncadc.demon.co.uk).

Southall Black Sisters
West London

From The Call, paper of the British Socialist Party, May 2 1918

May Day

Shut tired eyes for a while. Forget the harsh, straight lines of the factory roof, its dirt-grimed, uncurtained windows, the noise of its machinery, and the sordid little houses of the exploited workers across the way.

Thrust these aside. The soft white clusters of the cherry blossom nod in the breeze, grey-white against the dazzling whiteness of the sunlit clouds driving across the blue. Sprays of young leaves half veil the tree trunks, making an ever changing tracery as the branches sway. Green grass, vividly poignant green, causing an almost painful pleasure after the city grey.

Forget the city and its politicians' intrigues; dream of the golden age of equal comrades, the socialist epoch which we meet to herald on Labour Day. The spring threads her mantle all over Europe. The German valleys are now besprinkled with deep blue gentians and yellow cowslips. The lads will be wearing flowers in their Tyrolean hats, the girls in their velvet bodices, as they go to the great labour gatherings, to see the musterings of banners and hear speeches of hope delivered by labour's greatest orators.

May Day will be a joyous festival graced by song and dance, flowers and the finest work of the painters and sculptors of the commonwealth when the socialist world is won, and the free, splendid men and women of the international fraternity meet for its celebration year by year. But today those who demonstrate are toil-warped and poverty-stunted. Instead of unity the workers are divided into hostile camps. Instead of helping one another they are slaying one another ...

Workers of the world, unite! The inspiring words of Karl Marx, the socialist prophet, whose centenary we celebrate this Labour Day, never sounded so imperative an appeal, so alluring a promise as now, in this dark hour ...

At the outbreak of war the socialist parties of the world were compelled to make a choice: either to hold to the International and to the socialist faith; or to fall apart and each support the capitalist government of its own separate country in the capitalist war. The majority of socialists failed at the time of testing. Because the workers discarded solidarity and independence, and became the willing tools of their capitalist masters, the workers of our time have been as impotent to affect or hinder the propaganda of this war as they were to stop wars which took place in Karl Marx's day. But the Russian Revolution has come to prove to the workers of the world that their impotence is self-made and that they have the power as soon as they will it both to stop the war and to take the entire management of the world into their own hands.

As hunger causes unrest amongst the people, as their thoughts revolt against the war - this great fraud upon humanity - they will look for guidance to the socialists who have opposed the war and who have long told them that socialists possess the secret which shall bring peace and joy to the world. How will the socialists of the world meet this second great choice of our time which fate will place before them? Will they in this and other countries fear, as they did at the first choice, to steer a straight course in the hour of crisis; will they tell the old false story by which the people have been gulled themselves since the game of party politics began? ... Or will the socialists truthfully tell the people that in their solidarity they are the mightiest, that they alone can save themselves and bring peace to the world and that socialism is the only way?

... Let us pledge our faith this May Day to the independent organisation of the workers, to socialism and the International! ●

E Sylvia Pankhurst

Communist challenge

action

The CPGB is standing two candidates in Manchester in the May local elections: Steve Riley in Hulme, and John Pearson in Moss Side. The left as a whole is contesting 20 out of 186 wards in Greater Manchester, with 17 SLP candidates and one each from the Socialist Party (formerly known as Militant) and the Socialist Party (formerly known as SPGB).

Surprisingly the Socialist Party (Militant) has moved its candidate, Margaret Manning, from her traditional contest in Rusholme to Barlow Moor. This is in deference to sitting Labour councillor John Byrne, who the SP considers to be leftwing, and presumably worthy of support. This is a tactical question of course. It may indeed be the case, as has been said, that councillor Byrne voted against cuts, or has otherwise not supported the Blair project, but this is not the end of the matter. The point is that Labourism is the problem, not just its right wing. Even if Manchester city council returned a majority of John Byrne types, they would not be fighting to end the rule of capital or overthrow the monarchical United Kingdom state.

The 1980s-style left Labour councils of Manchester and Sheffield were tried, tested and failed - even at the miserable level of reformism. They promised to protect jobs and services and raised their shields against the attacks of the market. Then they threw their dented shields away. They scurried to implement cuts and sackings as fast as their small careerist ambitions would let them. But frankly the Socialist Party, as reformists, have been little better. The leftwing rebellion in Liverpool suffered no less ignominious a defeat. It was first bought off by Heseltine when it should have pitched in wholesale with the miners' Great Strike. Then it was smashed with all the authority of market forces, ending again in mass sackings and swingeing cuts in services.

No matter how 'honourable' the left Labourites and their friends inside and outside the Labour Party think that their fight is, it has been demonstrated time and again that Labourism is no answer, not even its left variant. John Byrne and any others who genuinely want to act in defence of the working class must look beyond Labourism.

The size of the SLP challenge to Labour - perhaps as a result of exhortation from centre - is to be welcomed, given Socialist Labour's recent steep decline in Manchester. Previous local elections have been characterised by a reluctance to maximise the number of candidates. Even at a time when the SLP's ability to mount campaigns was at a higher level



Militant's Derek Hatton: led Liverpool to defeat in the 80s

than it is now. In central Manchester - dominated by followers of the Fourth International Supporters Caucus - almost every one of the Fiscites are standing. Yet Stockport, where the *Economic and Philosophic Science Review* rules the roost, the one SLP candidate is not an EPSR supporter. In Bolton constituency - the former home of the Lancashire NUM, and now the North West, Cheshire and Cumbria Miners Association - the Kelly family are standing: three in all. The SLP is also contesting three seats in Trafford.

It is a disappointment that the SLP has ended up opposing other left candidates: the CPGB in Moss Side and the Socialist Party (SPGB) in Levenshulme. This is indicative of difficulties which have been experienced in many areas in gaining electoral cooperation amongst the left, and with the SLP in particular. Through the Greater Manchester Socialist Alliance, CPGB comrades aimed for a joint campaign with GMSA affiliates on an agreed minimum platform. This attempt was sabotaged firstly by the Socialist Party. In Manchester it refused to countenance a common campaign, seeing it as more important to promote its own organisation. This decision, expressed first in December 1997 and confirmed in February 1998, would appear to go against SP national policy. At the March Network of Socialist Alliances meeting Dave Griffith of Coventry SP said that there were no principled objections to standing as SA candidates where SAs were strong enough on the ground. Then Paula Mitchell told the London SA meeting that the SP favours its candidates standing under the SA banner where SAs exist; and

simply as Socialist Party where they do not.

The next blow against an electoral agreement came from the GMSA itself. At the February meeting of the GMSA committee, in a motion supported by GMSA Labourites, it was decided that the GMSA committee would recommend against forming an electoral alliance. Yet the issue still had to be decided by the GMSA membership. The meeting organised to debate this on February 26 was cancelled by GMSA convenor John Nicholson in favour of an anti-Gulf War meeting. No alternative arrangement was made. The move within the GMSA to stage a coordinated electoral challenge to Labour was wrecked by comrades in the GMSA who still hold onto Labour's coat tails. This is despite the founding document of the GMSA, 'A charter for socialist change', which calls for an electoral strategy to contest local and parliamentary seats on an agreed programme.

Ironically, Fisc member Trevor Wongsam was among three SLP members who turned up for the cancelled electoral platforms meeting. Wongsam went into private conversation with John Killen of Manchester SP. But he stated publicly that he had no wish to come to any agreement with the CPGB. Nevertheless, Manchester CPGB earnestly believes that there should be a united challenge on May 7, with one workers' candidate in each ward. We have approached the SLP with a view to gaining some agreement even at this late stage. If the SLP candidate will publicly support a minimum platform of working class demands then the CPGB will stand down in Moss Side and support the SLP candidate ●

Steve Riley

■ CPGB seminars

London: May 3 - 1968, year of dreams; May 10 - 'Sentimental' socialism. For details call 0181-459 7146. Manchester: May 4 - The minimum wage; May 18 - The reserve army of labour. For details contact Steve Riley 0161-798 6417.

■ 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.

■ London Socialist Alliance election rally

Sunday May 3 - 2pm, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, EC1. Speakers include Hugh Kerr MEP.

■ Brent SA

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

■ 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.

■ 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.

■ SLP election rally

Monday May 4, 7pm - Dominion Centre, The Green, Southall. Speakers: Arthur Scargill; Avtar Jouhl, general secretary, Indian Workers Association (GB); Malkiat Bilkhu, Hillingdon hospital strikers; Noon Products shop steward.

■ Justice

Second march for social justice, called by the Merseyside Port Shop Stewards Committee. Saturday May 30. Assemble 12 noon, Thames Embankment, Temple tube. For more information, contact Liverpool Dockers London Support Group: 31b Muswell Hill Place, London N10. Tel: 0181-442 0090.

■ May Day gig

Benefit for the Liverpool dockers, Friday May 1, 7.30pm. Wood Green Labour club, Stuart Crescent, N22. Tickets £5 (£2 concessions).

■ Liverpool TUC

150th anniversary celebrations. Friday May 1: Debate - Which way forward for the unions? Conference room, Trade Union Centre, Hardman Street, Liverpool, 7pm. Saturday May 2: March and rally. Assemble 12 noon, Myrtle Parade. Music night, 9pm-2am, Upstairs at the Picket, TU Centre.

1918

Russian Revolution
this week 80 years ago

Around the left

Backing Blair on May 22

In the face of the imperialists' peace settlement offensive in Northern Ireland, most of the left has collapsed with barely a whimper. Going with the tide of propaganda - as opposed to resolutely standing against it - many Marxist revolutionaries have become transformed into peaceniks. Whether they come from the state capitalist, Trotskyist or 'official communist' tradition, principled anti-imperialism is certainly off the agenda.

Of all the groups and organisations on the left whose brains have turned to social pacifist mush, none come more soggy than the Communist Party of Britain/*Morning Star* grouping. For decades the CPB has been the loyal 'Marxist' opposition to the bourgeoisie - so loyal in fact that it seems to regard 'ultra-lefts' (ie, revolutionaries) as the main enemy of the workers' movement. Totally committed as it is to the *British* road to socialism, proletarian internationalism takes a definite back seat for CPB leaders. When it comes to Ireland, the CPB abandons even the residue of genuine internationalism and instead embraces a sickly sentimental humanism that has far more in common with Clare Raynor - or Mikhail Gorbachev - than VI Lenin.

The *Morning Star* contains a jubilant report on the Scottish Trade Union Congress conference. It details how the "congress rose to its feet to applaud the role played by Irish trade unionists in securing the Northern Ireland agreement". Grotesquely celebrating how the peace of the oppressors has triumphed over the violence of the oppressed, we are told: "Delegates welcomed Irish Congress of Trade Unions vice-president Inez McCormack, who said that the importance of the agreement was that all communities had 'recognised their common humanity'. She said that 'the healing process has to start' and it was vital to end violence and promote justice and equality." Here we have a trade union bureaucrat who cannot differentiate between the oppressed and oppressor. Someone who recognises the "humanity" of British imperialism and loyalist death squads but would not hesitate to condemn the revolutionary violence of the IRA or Inla.

Naturally, the peace-loving STUC congress - presumably along with its Socialist Party and SWP delegates - "unanimously backed an emergency resolution from the general council that not only welcomed the agreement, but also pledged practical support in the forthcoming campaign for a 'yes' vote in the agreement referendum". STUC deputy general secretary Bill Spiers, we are told, "congratulated all the Northern Ireland political leaders who had worked to hammer out such a 'historical agreement'. He paid particular tribute to the ICTU for the role it had played, 'even in the darkest of times', in reaching out to all sides of society." Confronted by such even-handedness, the *Morning Star* reports that "congress rose to its feet to applaud".

There was an important and very symbolic STUC fringe meeting on April 21. The chair was Bill Spiers and the speakers were Mike Kirby (Union), Kevin McCorry (Campaign for Democracy), Martin Margan (SDLP) and ... that friend of Ireland, Roy Gar-



Confident of imposing imperialism's peace

land of the *Ulster Unionist Party*. Those who attended this fringe meeting politely applauded Garrahan after he explained how the British-Irish Agreement helped to cement the United Kingdom and legitimised the sectarian Six Counties statelet. Reaching out "to all sides", as practised by the STUC and the ICTU.

The Socialist Party has essentially the same imperialist-friendly outlook - it is just less honest, that is all. Last week's edition of *The Socialist* tells us that the "people of Northern Ireland, both catholic and protestant, are relieved that the months of 'peace talks' ended in agreement rather than stalemate. They feared the bloody implications of a total failure to agree" (April 17). This display of simpering and sickly pacifism is a disgrace to the name of Marxism, as is the SP's liberal failure to distinguish between the 'warring parties'. Thus we are told: "There are plans for a new power-sharing assembly in Northern Ireland, but it will include only the parties who participated in the talks, sectarian and/or Tory parties. These establishment politicians depend on either almost exclusively protestant support or on almost exclusively catholic support. This new assembly will further institutionalise sectarianism" (my emphasis).

If that is the case, comrades from the SP, how come you are saying 'yes - sort of' to this new assembly, which will "further institutionalise sectarianism"? As the editorial, with tacit approval, phrased it: "The new assembly will give local politicians, unionist and nationalist, a (small) degree of power for the first time".

We noted last week that "the SP is oblivious and ostrich-like towards the politics raging around it". The latest issue of *The Socialist* (April 24) only serves to confirm this fact, as it fails to mention the forthcoming referendum at all. Obviously the SP comrades know their role ... discussing local authority cuts and drains, while Blair gets on with the real politics.

The Irish SWP, like its British counterpart, loves imperialism's peace as well. It argues: "Socialists are for peace in Northern Ireland because it creates the best conditions for catholic and protestant workers to unite. Any return to the armed struggle will

heighten sectarian tension and bring more suffering to working class areas for no possible benefit" (quoted in *Socialist Worker* April 18).

If the heat gets too much, you can always resort to lofty-sounding digressions in an attempt to disguise a fundamentally reactionary position. Puffed up as ever, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty patiently explains that "socialists who want protestant-catholic working class unity should welcome any moves that offer serious hope of permanent peace and an end to blind-alley militarism. We cannot and should not, however, take responsibility for either London or Dublin. We state *what is* and prepare the future. We work for the development of independent working class politics. The first step is to understand reality clearly, and that means rejecting all delusions that 'anti-imperialist war' can bring progress in today's Ireland" (original emphasis *Workers' Liberty* March).

Boiled down to its essentials, the AWL defends the right of the oppressors ... to oppress. This is made explicit elsewhere, if you strip away the convoluted stream-of-consciousness 'method' that characterises so much AWL thinking and literature: "Ireland was partitioned against the will of the majority of Irish people. But the fact that the majority of Irish people were against any right for the minority to secede did not automatically invalidate secession, any more than the fact that the majority of the UK population were against any part of Ireland being given independence invalidated the right of the Irish/catholic/Gaelic people to secede ... The right of the protestants to secede should be taken for granted ... It is a lie to say that because the Six Counties is an artificial entity that cannot and should not survive, therefore no entity where there is a clear-cut protestant majority expressive of their desire for autonomy is possible" (March).

Full marks for obfuscation. But no marks for Leninist clarity - or principle. Does the AWL call for a 'yes' or 'no' vote on May 22? Or does it fight for an active boycott? The AWL does not hesitate to attack Sinn Fein ... but the referendum is another matter. Who is the AWL afraid of upsetting? Its reticence cannot - and should not - have anything to do with the fact that AWL members are still 'implanted' in New Labour and are cogs in the machine of the trade union bureaucracy.

In the final seal of approval, the Kim Il-sungist *New Worker* - publication of the New Communist Party - also gives its blessing to the Tony Blair/Bill Clinton-brokered British-Irish Agreement, myopically seeing it as an advance towards Irish unification. For this 'official communist' fossil, uncritical support for petty bourgeois national liberation organisations like Sinn Fein is second nature - even if it means embracing the imperialist project in the process.

Watching comrades line up behind Blair at the mere wave of his media-hyped peace settlement document is not pleasant. Just imagine how the left would behave if and when there was a *real* movement - or crisis - in society, whether it be from above or below or both ●

Don Preston

Factional war rumbles on

Rosser removed



Rosser: no reason to celebrate now

The lecture hall at Marx House in London's Clerkenwell Green was packed out on the afternoon of April 25 for the 65th annual general meeting of the Marx Memorial Library.

Though the library has a nominal membership of 922 individuals and 68 organisations, the turnout of 90 was unusually high due to the factional war still raging in the so-called Communist Party of Britain. Many came to oust chairwoman Mary Rosser from the committee. Others were mobilised in her defence.

In the event Rosser lost her place by a single vote. She came sixth out of ten candidates competing for the five seats. Robert Griffiths, new CPB general secretary, was re-elected in third place, with only three votes more than Rosser, despite attending only two out of 11 committee meetings in 1997-98 and being absent from the AGM itself.

The challenge to Rosser was not only due to her role as chief executive of the Peoples' Press Printing Society, the cooperative which owns the *Morning Star*, in sacking editor John Haylett. As at the *Star*, she seems to have accumulated a comparable list of disgruntled opponents at the library. They have taken her defeat on that front as their cue to finish her off.

With Haylett reinstated, Rosser and her clique now seem to be on a losing run. In January her husband Mike Hicks lost his position as CPB general secretary, while Rosser lost the treasurer's post, leaving behind the unresolved question of a missing £16,000. Her retaliation against Haylett backfired at the hands of the striking *Morning Star* journalists. Removal from the Marx Memorial Library committee surely foreshadows the outcome of the forthcoming PPPS shareholders meetings.

In addition to librarian Tish Newlands, also present at the Marx Memorial Library AGM were such Rosser loyalists as Ron and Joan Bellamy, Bob Newlands and George Wake. But significantly Socialist Action failed to material-

ise. These opportunist leeches, who some feared would mobilise behind the crumbling Hicks-Rosser dynasty, will no doubt be looking round for fresh blood to suck. No point in loyalty to a *defeated* ally.

The CPB, however, showed its pathetic lack of commitment with its dismal failure to mobilise effectively. A mere four votes could have tipped the balance against its general secretary in favour of the dissident Rosser. Evidently the CPB activists are again indifferent. But, there again, the CPB is no activist party.

During questions on the committee's report, discontent was expressed over the event commemorating the 150th anniversary of the *Communist manifesto*. Hardly surprising. Christian 'Marxist' MML president David McLellan gave only a 20-minute oration. He was followed by a representative of the Chinese embassy. One speaker at the AGM complained that this choice was inappropriate: "History has not yet delivered its verdict on socialism with Chinese characteristics." Mary Rosser, it turns out, has had an article neatly placed in the CPB's *Communist Review* under the title 'Is China socialist?' Her answer is, of course, predictable - as is her fate.

Peoples Press Printing Society

The requisitioning of a special shareholders meeting of the PPPS to remove the six management committee members who backed Rosser's attempt to remove Haylett is proceeding. Shareholders who have not yet signed the requisition should contact the Save the *Morning Star* Committee, 422 Kingsland Road, London E8 4AA (Tel 0171-254 5000; Fax 0171-254 5151). The ordinary AGM, which normally takes place in a number of venues around the country, is scheduled for June 8 in London, with May 15 as the deadline for nominations, etc. The management committee meets on May 16 ●

Ian Farrell

Capital backs Mandela

In the first of three articles following his recent stay in South Africa Peter Manson analyses the process of capitalist consolidation following the transition from apartheid

Earlier this week an African National Congress delegation, headed by Cyril Ramaphosa, the ANC chief negotiator during the transformation from apartheid, arrived in Belfast.

The delegation is part of a concerted drive by the British state, backed by Sinn Fein, to win a 'yes' vote in the May 22 referendum on the British-Irish Agreement. An SF spokesperson said that the ANC team would "bring a lot of experience of their own peace and negotiating process" to Ireland.

There is however far more than a superficial similarity between the South African and Irish peace processes. Both aim to establish a new social stability, based on the majority consent of all sections, in order to allow the more efficient operation of international capital. And both provide excellent opportunities for former leaders of the liberation struggle to carve out positions for themselves in respectable bourgeois politics and lucrative business openings.

Nobody could epitomise this more than Ramaphosa himself. Previously a leading 'anti-capitalist' figure in Cosatu, the main trade union centre, and formerly general secretary of the militant National Union of Mineworkers as well as of the ANC, he jumped ship two years ago. Today he is a multi-millionaire who heads the Johnnic industrial empire and New Africa Investments, the "emblem of black empowerment" (*Weekly Mail and Guardian* January 24 1997).

At the celebration dinner marking Anglo American's launch of Johnnic, Anglo boss Michael Spicer congratulated Ramaphosa with the words, "I think we can call you Chairman Cyril now, rather than Comrade Cyril." "Thank you, comrade Spicer," replied Ramaphosa. In the name of "people's capitalism" Johnnic sold 2.7 million shares to individuals in the "historically disadvantaged communities" - ie, to middle class blacks.

Clearly 'black empowerment' has nothing whatsoever to do with alleviating the plight of the impoverished South African millions. It is the accepted establishment euphemism for the self-enrichment of a tiny minority, for ensuring that continued capitalist exploitation can be safely fronted by black faces. ANC involvement in such arrangements reaches right to the top of the government and is considered perfectly splendid by the bourgeoisie. For example Zanele Mbeki, wife of president-in-waiting Thabo Mbeki, has an interest in a consortium which bid for Aventura, a government-owned company facing privatisation. She owns the Women's Development Business, which trades as the Women's Development Bank. A government spokesperson denied that there was any conflict of interest, as the position was known from the beginning and Mbeki was not directly involved in the bidding process herself.

The total value of the 52 known 'black empowerment' transactions during 1997 was 8.3 billion rand (£1 billion), according to chartered accountants Ernst and Young. As in the case of Johnnic, the acquiring 'black' companies are frequently set up by

existing white businesses. Another example is that of Alexander Forbes, the financial services company, which has just launched a black-owned negotiated benefits firm, NBC Consultants and Actuaries. It will be responsible for handling funds worth R25 billion (£3 billion). Graeme Kerrigan, joint managing director of Forbes, explained that his company had effectively sold 71% ownership of its own negotiated benefits division in exchange for "guaranteed profits" in the new joint venture. "This is not just for socio-economic reasons," he said, "but also because of cold-hearted capitalist reasons."

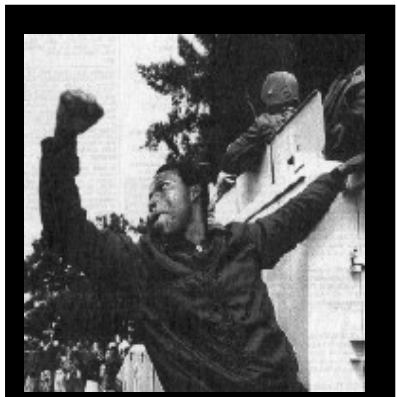
That is why 'black empowerment' is actively encouraged by sections of the business establishment. Recently Jan le Roux of the PA Group estate agents berated those companies who were slow to take up measures of 'affirmative action'. They were "missing out on a golden opportunity and could pay dearly for it," he said.

Another capitalist tactic employed as part of the same process is to appoint former or even existing trade union leaders onto their boards. A recent remarkable example of this is the case of James Motlatsi, the president of the National Union of Mineworkers, who has just been appointed an executive director of AngloGold, a subsidiary of Anglo American, the world's biggest gold producer and a major employer of NUM members.

"We will be misrepresented outside by quite a number of workers that the trade union has been coopted by management and that the interests of workers have been sold out," said Motlatsi. I could not have phrased it better myself. Bob Godsell, the chief executive officer of AngloGold, claimed that the appointment did not mean that "any lines of contrast between ourselves and the union movement have become blurred". Rather it was an excellent example of class collaboration, in that "both we and the union ... are entirely dependent for our future survival on the weal or woe of our industry".

Not only have trade union leaders been elevated to the boards of existing companies; but 'business unionism' has itself become a significant force. Cosatu has set up the Kopana ka Matla Investment Company, while a number of its affiliates have followed suit. Several unions have substantial holdings in South Africa's largest private health company, Netcare, and some have even set up capitalist firms which employ their own members. Many union companies are clients of Alexander Forbes' 'black empowerment' offshoot, NBC.

Writing in the *South African Labour Bulletin*, Robert Mashego, the Gauteng chair of the rail and harbour workers' union, Sarhwu, informed readers that the union had transformed itself from a militant into a "business-minded organisation". He admitted that "the idea of union investment companies" was still new to workers. But, he added, it was "futile singing slogans about the working class taking control of the means of production without doing anything about it in practice".



After apartheid

Mashego's words admirably sum up the present character of the South African working class movement. Under the leadership of the South African Communist Party the Cosatu unions played a major role in the revolutionary upsurge which defeated apartheid. The language of class struggle dominated the union movement in the 1980s. But there was no theory beneath the militant Marxist phrases, no matter how sincerely they were voiced. So it is hardly surprising, with the SACP moving rightward at a rate of knots and former revolutionary leaders now heading the capitalist state, that prominent trade unionists seek to explain away their blatant class collaboration in pseudo-Marxist terms.

Some union leaders have expressed reservations about this wholehearted embrace of capitalism. Mbuyiselo Ngwenda, the general secretary of the metalworkers union, Numsa, has questioned Cosatu's orientation: "It carries the potential to weaken the whole question of union principles and goals in the long term." He went on: "Increasingly union investment companies are being seen to shape the behaviour of many unions and unionists, instead of vice versa."

He asked: "Do we say, for instance, we are opposed to privatisation at a political level, but when it comes to acquisition of deals we just take whatever comes?" Comrade Ngwenda's doubts have not however prevented his union from forming its own investment company.

Cosatu's speedy adaptation in practice to capitalism - by deed, if not completely by word - has played no small part in keeping it firmly allied to the ANC government. Nelson Mandela's administration has quietly put its 1994 reconstruction and development programme (RDP) on the back burner. The RDP promised one million new houses by the year 2000; 10 years' free, compulsory education; quality healthcare for all; and two million extra jobs in 10 years. However, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, this was soon superseded by the wondrously misnamed 'growth, employment and redistribution programme' (Gear).

Based on the overriding demand to limit government borrowing to three percent of the gross domestic product, Gear necessitates slashing public spending, axing thousands of jobs through state sector redundancies (retrenchments), the introduction of compulsory arbitration in industrial

disputes, and extensive privatisations. Over the last two years the government has succeeded in cutting 138,000 state jobs, and has just embarked on a programme of easing out 43,000 teachers and other educational workers. According to the government, the civil service itself still employs 55,000 "surplus" staff.

Gear has led to that anachronism from the apartheid era, the National Party, presenting itself as attacking the ANC from the left. It complained bitterly of "the serious shortage of textbooks and stationery in most provinces" and called for a halt to the retrenchment of teachers.

While Cosatu - allegedly an equal alliance partner alongside the ANC and the SACP - was not consulted over the adoption of Gear, it has done no more than bleat its opposition, while thousands of its members lose their jobs. The SACP too has raised extremely muted criticisms, even though one of its leading members, Alec Erwin, a government minister, has spoken out in its favour. Cosatu general secretary Sam Shilowa said: "We must take pride in the government. We must show it where things go wrong. But even if things do not go well with the ANC, it is still our government."

This notion was reinforced by Thabo Mbeki himself at a recent Cosatu recruitment rally in Johannesburg. He called on all workers to join Cosatu and, with nauseating hypocrisy, to "come together to fight retrenchments and unemployment". Referring to the ANC-alliance emblem, he reminded his audience that Cosatu was the shield, while the ANC was the spear. He rather contemptuously dubbed the SACP "the small spear".

Even when union tops lead defensive strikes arising directly from government policy, they claim to see no contradiction between industrial opposition and political support. For example the government has just reneged on a three-year pay deal in the public sector, and three unions have threatened strike action. Thulas Nxesi, the general secretary of Sadtu, the teachers' union, said: "This has nothing to do with the ANC, the SACP or the alliance; it is a matter between employer and employees." SACP members hold prominent positions in the leadership of most unions of course, as well as in the ANC government.

Finance minister Trevor Manuel described his dealings with the union leaders in an interview with the South African *Sunday Times* last month. "The relationship with Cosatu is warm and cordial," he said. "On some policy issues we have not been able to agree. So it comes as no surprise that the person I am having discussions with leads a march against me a few days later. Sometimes we even tacitly agree but are unable to articulate that we do - for example, on the need to have an affordable retrenchment bill. But I cannot expect a union leader to get up and publicly support retrenchment - their commitment is to their members" (March 22).

This statement demonstrates not so much the ANC disdain for the Cosatu tops as its absolute contempt for the working class itself.

While to date the government has been able to keep Cosatu on board, its support from the bourgeois establishment increases by the day. Although the question of "the sustainability of its alliance with the trade unions" (*Cape Argus* April 4) gives rise to some concern, business

commentators in general express their confidence. For example, Hendrik du Toit of Investec Asset Management told his audience at a recent business seminar that their investments were safe in the run-up to the 1999 election. "Quite clearly the next election is a one-horse race, and the horse is deputy president Thabo Mbeki."

According to the *Argus*, du Toit expressed satisfaction that "black economic and political empowerment has consolidated and there is far less uncertainty in South Africa than before. The main problems facing the ANC government, du Toit says, are that it is caught between the hammer of international financial markets and the anvil of the poverty of its constituents." Rather, it seems to me, the government has firmly grasped the hammer itself.

Johann Rupert, whose family company controls around 85% of the South African cigarette market, also had kind words for the ANC. "The central government has been really exemplary in cutting expenditure," he said. "They are fiscally far more prudent than their predecessors ... and take note of our concerns" (quoted in *Revolutionary Socialist*, paper of the South African International Socialist Movement, June-July 1997).

More recently the same sentiments were expressed by the director of the World Bank's human development department, Peter Fallon. "Confidence is a very difficult thing to measure," he stated, "but one crucial component is the pursuance of social stability in South Africa. Fortunately great progress has been made towards that end since the present government came to power in 1994. We certainly do not want to see escalating fiscal deficits, and I am pleased to say that the government has done a great job on this" (*Cape Times* April 7).

It is true that Mandela has been ticked off by some for not being sufficiently stringent in cutting the budget deficit as a result of his "willingness to cosy up to the far left, especially Cosatu, to perk up his political support" (*Wall Street Journal*), but by and large bourgeois commentators nearer home have been much more aware of the careful path Mandela has had to tread in order at least to neutralise the revolutionary aspirations of the working class masses.

Yunnis Carrin, an ANC/SACP provincial MP in KwaZulu Natal, expressed this contradiction in this way: "We need to define a clear economic policy that will suit both the rich and the poor" - an outrageous statement for a self-proclaimed 'communist'.

Anyone who has passed through the sprawling Khayelitsha township, as I did earlier this month, will know what Carrin is referring to when he talks of "the poor". Just outside Cape Town, Khayelitsha is growing daily, as every centimetre of space is taken up by the 300,000 residents who inhabit shacks of wood, tin or cardboard. To imagine that these people have any common economic interest whatsoever with "the rich" - the big business fat cats whose major concern is to ensure that these same masses can be controlled - is to defy reason.

But a call for class against class - let alone a Marxist analysis - is the last thing you would expect now from the SACP.

Next week I will look at its role in attempting to retain the masses' support for the ANC capitalist government ●

Death of Pol Pot

National communism

Establishment obituaries have revelled in their portrayal of Pol Pot as the most evil-doing man in the 20th century. His shadowy life is told almost as if it were a modern-day Faustian legend. Pol Pot hated those who oppressed his people. Pol Pot decided to commit himself as a personality to fundamental social change. Pol Pot wanted to make his country a heaven on earth. What foolishness! What egotism! What arrogance! Thankfully, hell on earth is the punishment of both his methods and aspirations. Supposedly a fate reserved for those who give themselves to Marxism. So the story goes.

Such a mystifying and essentially dishonest approach is intellectually barren in explanatory terms, and more to the point, utterly conservative. Nevertheless its very self-satisfaction underscores not only the material triumph of the bourgeoisie over bureaucratic socialism but its claim of moral victory too. In the absence of any perceived alternative, market capitalism, has at the level of common sense, been well and truly established as the natural and right order of things. Tampering with it brings forth chaos. History cannot be cheated ... and will always be revenged.

For the philistine, life appears to confirm it. The labour dictator Stalin tried. In 1928 he uprooted commodity production and launched the first five-year plan and the 'second revolution'. Ten million died. Mao tried. The 'great leap forward' was announced in 1957 and 10 years later the 'cultural revolution'. Thirty million died. Pol Pot tried. The 'super great leap forward' brought economic collapse and disaster in terms of human suffering. Between 1975 and 1979 two million perished from politically imposed starvation, murder and overwork. However the USSR had a population of over 200 million and China nearly a billion. Cambodia on the other hand is a small land which had no more than 8 million people.

Proportionally therefore Pol Potism killed greater numbers than either Stalinism or Maoism. And whereas the monocratic Stalin and Mao regimes spanned decades Pol Pot was in power a mere four years. His terror was far greater both in relative terms and in intensity. There is a final irony. Democratic Kampuchea - "the number one communist state" - is again Cambodia. The USSR is extinct, and most of its various fragments are in the claws of a particularly greedy form of robber capitalism. As to China, Mao would, if he was alive, certainly brand it capitalist. Tragically these countries have plied a course from capitalism to capitalism via the way of a hugely costly and bloody interlude.

As world historic personalities Pol Pot, Mao and Stalin are, to say the least, discredited - their names are nowadays flung about as grievous insults. Despite that the national socialist or national communist phenomenon that spawned them reproduces itself spontaneously. Scottish Militant Labour is after all about to declare for a programme of socialism within the suffocating confines of a breakaway Scotland. It is far from alone. Every 'official communist' and 'revolutionary reformist' faction and group has a similar perspective for a hardly less constricting Great Britain - including the Socialist Party of Peter Taaffe, Lynn Walsh and Mike Waddington. What is true for this section of the left

in Britain is true virtually everywhere else. In countries with well integrated labour movements and stable parliamentary institutions, laying hold of and using the existing state is considered the pinnacle of practical politics. Ask any sober-minded trade unionist. In poor countries however, reformism offers next to nothing apart from the ashes of disappointment. Insurrection can be the only chance to bring a better life for the overwhelming majority.

Either way though, socialism is understood as a series of partial negations of capitalism that comes about through the nationalisation of the means of production, resulting from, alternatively, mundane legislation or a heroic revolution carried through by a party-army elite. Inevitably because of the unrivalled prestige it continues to enjoy - including among certain pro-capitalist academics, economists and journalists - these schemas are dressed up as, or are actually believed to be, Marxism. Objectively nothing could be further from the truth. That is if by Marxism one means the body of revolutionary theory originally developed by Karl Marx, as opposed to the ideas of those who merely happen to call themselves Marxists.

Throughout his life as a communist politician Marx stressed the universal nature of capitalism and the necessity of negating it positively through a universal class and a universal revolution. In other words human freedom - the overriding aim - is possible only on the material foundations of advanced capitalism and the conscious self-activity of the world's working class. Precisely because of the global existence and metabolism of capital, partial or local negations would either have to spark the whole planet aflame or turn painfully into their opposites.

In 1845 the young Marx and Engels explicitly warned against the illusion of national communism - as wondrously described by a range of utopian thinkers and fierce critics of capitalism. Such a society - albeit in prosaic form - was not unfeasible in the estimation of Marx and Engels. At least for a short period of time. But would, because of its "local" being, be able to do little more than make "want" general, before "all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored" (K Marx, F Engels *MECW* Vol 6, Moscow 1976, p49).

Lenin and the Bolsheviks fully shared this assessment. Every manifesto, programme and action shows that they were committed to world revolution. As a backward, mainly peasant country, Russia was by no means ripe for any sort of full socialism. Yet it was riven with deep social and political contradictions. Tsarism could not rule in the old way. Crucially the working class and peasants refused to be ruled in the old way. That made Russia ready for a proletarian-led revolution. Russia could therefore play a vanguard role in Europe. Expectation became reality in 1917.

However - it hardly needs saying - the Russian spark failed to ignite a wider revolutionary conflagration. In Britain workers were successfully diverted by clause four Labourism. The German revolution was stopped halfway by social democratic betrayal. Russia was left isolated. It began, first with war communism and then with the New Economic Policy, to turn in on itself. The socialist character of the

regime became increasingly precarious, relying, as Lenin said, more on the policy and conviction of the Communist Party's "old guard" than the self-activity of the decimated and declassed proletariat (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 33, Moscow 1977, p257).

Bureaucratic deformations were unavoidable. Lenin and others fought these negative developments - albeit fitfully, contradictorily and desperately. However, from 1924, as proven by the infamous second edition of his *Foundations of Leninism*, Stalin consciously adapted to them. He effectively made himself the political expression and champion of bureaucracy and its sectional interests. And it was Stalin and his line of socialism in one country that triumphed in the factional struggle of 1924-27. Isolation became unproblematic. Almost a virility symbol. The ideological-political conditions for social counterrevolution within the revolution were in place. It began with the launch of the first five-year plan in 1928.

The first five-year plan was not the consolidation of so-called proletarian property forms, or the "demonstration" of socialism's "right to victory" over capitalism, as argued by Leon Trotsky and his epigones (L Trotsky *The revolution betrayed* New York 1972, p8). Nor was it the birth of bureaucratic state capitalism and the emergence of "capital in its purest form", as later argued by Tony Cliff (T Cliff *State capitalism in Russia* London 1974, p169). The residues of positive workers' control were ruthlessly destroyed, along with all manifestations of commodity production. Stalin and his cohorts presided over the creation of a freak society, where labour power was not sold or brought by enterprises, but had to be delivered to them by law. The bureaucracy could maintain domination only through political methods. There was neither democratic control by the producers nor the blind hand of the market. Caught between moribund capitalism and imminent socialism, the USSR was an ectopic social formation.

Initially bureaucratic socialism seemed to bound from one unfettered success to another - while there was surplus population, dynamism lasted. The five-year plans with their reported target achievements in every branch of production stood in complete contrast to the crisis-ridden capitalism of the 1930s. Moreover, when put to the acid test in the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union was able to survive the onslaught of the German armed forces before rolling them back from the gates of Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad all the way to Berlin and unconditional surrender.

The Soviet Union became the model to emulate. Its socialism-in-one-country version of Marxism eclipsed almost entirely the genuine thing (the persecution and mass killing of oppositionists helped). Millions believed in and acted upon it. What gripped people's minds thus went into shaping the geo-politics of the second half of the 20th century, just as the religious notion of the second coming inspired 11th century crusaders to 'liberate' the holy land and found their contrived feudal kingdom of Jerusalem. In other words widely held ideas can themselves become a material force.

Of course, Stalin and his successors wanted to use their Marxism as



He abolished money and the working class

an ideology to reinforce the subordination of the world communist movement to the diplomacy of the Soviet state. For a time they succeeded. However, as Trotsky brilliantly predicted, national socialism in the USSR justified and spurred others towards the same heresy - the freak form became the ideal. Even by the mid-1930s communist parties were draping themselves in the national flag. To all intents and purposes they followed the footsteps of social democracy along what was imagined to be the national road to socialism. 'Official communism' in this way eventually became nationalised in every country.

The British road to socialism relied on a crude objective idealism and inexorably led to passivity: ie automatically voting Labour, fatalism and routine trade union work. In contrast, where the state lacked secure social anchorage, the national road was often used as a stirring call to revolutionary action - China, Vietnam, Korea. A programme prone to extreme voluntarism, given the conviction that some sort of socialism and eventually communism must follow *within* that country. Hence, in Khmer Rouge ideology, technology was "not a determining factor". The "determining factors" are "politics, revolutionary people and the revolutionary system" (quoted in B Kiernan, 'Kampuchea and Stalinism' in C Mackerras and N Knight [eds] *Marxism in Asia* London 1985, p233). Overthrowing a weak capitalist state could be achieved if sufficient will was there. Replacing the laws of capitalism - eg, the law of value - with something higher, something superior within the narrow national space was another matter entirely. Whatever the determining subjective will, the determining determinant - ie, objective conditions - are just not sufficient.

Pol Pot has to be put against this broad background. It is vital for explaining not only how a utopian vision of communism in one country was combined with xenophobic nationalism, but why the whole project ended in such horror.

Pol Pot was born Saloth Sar in May 1928. His family were well-off peasants who enjoyed connections with the royal court - Pol Pot's cousin was a palace dancer and became one of the king's principal wives. After attending high school in the market town of Kompong Cham he gained a prized scholarship to study radio-electricity in Paris. Like so many others university politicised him. Loathing of the French colonialists was combined with a profound admira-

tion of Stalinite bureaucratic socialism. Pol Pot joined the Cambodian section of the French Communist Party. He formed a tight circle of friends who were to stay with him for over 40 years - Ieng Sary, Thioung Thioeunn, Thioung Chun, Khieu Samphan and Khieu Ponnary (the latter whom he married on Bastille Day 1956). Contemporaries say that Pol Pot was self-effacing and charming: "he would not have killed a chicken" (B Kiernan *The Pol Pot regime* New Haven 1996, p11). Nevertheless an introverted national socialism was already evident. Pol Pot was reported to have insisted that "everything should be done on the basis of self-reliance, independence and mastery. The Khmers should do everything on their own" (*ibid* p12).

There can be no doubt that Pol Pot's rise to power would never have happened without the Vietnam war and the US decision to destabilise the regime of Prince Sihanouk (though it is impossible to agree with John Pilger that there was some sort of US masterplan to promote Pol Pot). Sihanouk took a neutral position and had the temerity to turn a blind eye to the use of the National Liberation Front made of Cambodian territory as a haven and to ferry personnel and equipment from north to south Vietnam. In March 1970 Sihanouk was ousted in a US-inspired coup. Bombing raids increased and in the May of that year president Nixon ordered US and Saigon troops to invade. Cambodia was economically ruined. Millions became refugees and tens of thousands were killed.

Every B-52 carpet bombing raid acted as a recruiting sergeant for Pol Pot's forces. Up until 1970 the Khmer Rouge had enjoyed little success. Now it gained a mass base amongst the peasantry and the attractiveness of victors. A few years later Pol Pot was to state that the Khmer Rouge "won without any foreign connection or involvement. We dared to wage a struggle on a stand completely different to the world revolution. The world revolution carries out the struggle with all kinds of massive support - material, economic and financial - from the world's people. As for us we have waged our revolutionary struggle basically on the principles of independence, sovereignty and self-reliance" (B Kiernan and C Boua *Peasants and politics in Kampuchea 1942-1981* London 1982, p223).

This nationalist nonsense is to tear events in Cambodia apart from those in Vietnam. Yet the two countries were organically linked by the anti-imperi-

and brother No1

alist war in which the Vietnamese played the leading part. It is a simple statement of fact that US forces in Cambodia were given a bloody hiding by the Vietnamese. They also liberated a whole swathe of territory in the eastern zone from the pro-US regime of Lon Nol. Nor can it be denied that it was intransigent Vietnamese resistance which forced Nixon to withdraw the bulk of US forces from Indo-China in 1973. From then on in, the way was open to Pol Pot and year zero.

On April 17 1975 Khmer Rouge troops - wearing black and carrying AK-47s - entered the capital Phnom Penh. The Lon Nol regime had disintegrated. Pol Pot took command and immediately began his national socialist project. There have been all manner of interpretations about the exact socio-economic nature of his Democratic Kampuchea. We will focus on four.

First, its own account. According to the Khmer Rouge by the mid-1970s Democratic Kampuchea was the "number one communist state" (followed by Albania and then China). In 1976 they boasted that Kampuchea was "four to 10 years ahead" of other examples of bureaucratic socialism in Asia, having "leaped" from feudalism "to a socialist society straightaway" (quoted in B Kiernan, D Chandler and C Boua [eds] *Pol Pot plans the future* New Haven 1988, pp45-46). There was even wild talk of instant communism and the need to dispense with a step-by-step policy of going through socialism.

Second, the 'official communist' account. Apart from the requirements of diplomacy, 'official communism' celebrates Pol Pot's coming to power but mourns his "Maoist deviation". "Pol Pot's disastrous social policies began to undermine the material and social basis of the Kampuchean revolution" (I Silber *Kampuchea: the revolution rescued* Oakland 1986, p7). Fundamentally Democratic Kampuchea is considered an aberrant or deformed socialism - to all intents and purposes an analysis shared by Trotskyites.

Third, the state capitalist account of the Socialist Workers Party. Paul McGarr wants to fit the complex reality of Kampuchea into the state capitalist theory. "The aim" of Pol Pot - copying the USSR and China - "was to ruthlessly exploit the population" in order to build up "military and industrial might to maintain an independent national state". Such rulers as Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot "used the language of socialism to justify their rule but in reality they were state capitalist, using the state to exploit people in the way every capitalist does". However, Kampuchea was far poorer than the USSR or China. Consequently, says comrade McGarr, "the result was even worse". The "drive to squeeze a surplus from the peasantry in a wrecked economy led to the most horrific exploitation and repression" (*Socialist Worker* April 25 1998).

Fourth, the account of Michael Vickery. After a detailed study of rural based uprisings, he concludes that in Democratic Kampuchea was a "peasant revolution", "perhaps the first real one in modern times". In spite of Pol Pot's gestures to Marxism "nationalism, populism and peasantism really won out against communism" (M Vickery *Cambodia 1977-82* Boston 1984, p290).

The first three very different accounts can be tackled using the same basic line of reasoning. There cannot be capitalism or socialism without the modern working class. Capitalism is not, as comrade McGarr and the SWP suggest, some generic description of an exploitative social relationship. That would make feudalism and slavery examples of capitalism. They were not. Capitalism has a specific history and specific features. Real capitalism is generalised commodity production. Commodity production taken to the point where the labour power of the workers is itself a commodity. As to socialism it emerges positively from advanced capitalism as the self-liberation of the working class. Socialism begins as a free association of the producers with a national form: ie it begins by the revolutionary overthrow of the existing state. But its content is international: ie, it is the start of the transition from world capitalism to world communism.

If we examine Democratic Kampuchea in this light, it is impossible to maintain the fiction that it was either socialist or capitalist. The first act of the Pol Pot regime was to clear the cities of their populations, including the two million inhabiting Phnom Penh. The small working class was abolished at a stroke. People were told that the Americans were about to bomb them. It was a lie. Pol Pot planned the whole thing. The new society was not to have cities. They ate rice but did not grow it. He considered cities nests of evil and non-Khmer. Phnom Penh had originally grown with French colonialism, Chinese merchants and the bureaucracy of the monarchy. All this was to be swept away. People could be changed, said the Khmer Rouge, but not cities. Pol Pot's vision of socialism was rural, not urban; peasant, not proletarian.

In Phnom Penh the evacuation began with the fall of the old regime. Those living in the north of the city were forced to trek north. Those in the south had to go south. Those in the east were marched east. All with the object of getting them out of the city as quickly as possible. They were told not to take much with them. "You'll return in two or three days, as soon as we've cleaned up the city," they were assured (F Ponchaud *Cambodia year zero* Harmondsworth 1978, p23). So, herded into snaking columns, people - including those who had been lying ill in hospital - set off into the countryside with a few clothes and a little rice. Most were never to return (anyone linked to the Lon Nol regime was rooted out and killed en route).

Phnom Penh became a ghost town. Its population was cut from two million to no more than 20,000 - all of them Khmer Rouge officials and their families. Kampuchea was ruralised. Old class divisions were ended - all rich people and many intellectuals were considered expendable. Virtually the entire population were remade into unpaid agricultural labourers. Money was abolished. The Khmer Rouge made a great show of blowing up the central bank in Phnom Penh. There was illegal barter of products and services. But that hardly amounts to a universal equivalent. Labourers received meagre rations, not wages. Moreover the labourers were unfree. Their hours were long and subject to harsh, military discipline. There was no leisure time. Nor did they have any

say over the projects on which they worked.

Labour was subordinated to political power, not capital. There was no production of commodities - the production of goods for sale. Only the production of goods for immediate consumption and crucially the state. Formally everything was in the hands of Angkar - the state and party 'organisation'. The result was what Ben Kiernan perceptively calls an "indentured agrarian state" (B Kiernan *The Pol Pot regime* New Haven 1996, p164).

To describe Democratic Kampuchea as socialist is therefore intolerable. To describe it as state capitalist is insupportable.

What about Vickery's idea of a peasant revolution and peasantism? The thesis has the great virtue of recognising that the Pol Pot regime had a unique anti-urban twist to it. China, Vietnam and North Korea all had revolutions which essentially relied on the rural base surrounding the towns. Nevertheless once in power these party-army regimes did everything they could to develop industry and technical education. Not Democratic Kampuchea. What industry remained was residual - the production of rudimentary medicines, etc. Education virtually ceased. Children were dragooned into work brigades. All they got was a diet of crude propaganda.

Vickery explains the anti-urbanism of the Khmer Rouge in terms of an almost atavistic revenge of rural revolutionaries against traditional urban enemies. It was the "complete peasant revolution", not the brain of Pol Pot, that caused the horrendous violence of Democratic Kampuchea (M Vickery *Cambodia 1975-1982* Boston 1984, p286). In this theory Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership are painted as mere vehicles for the peasants. They were "pulled along" by "the peasant element" in a way that they could not have "either planned or expected" (*ibid* p289-90).

This not only lets Pol Pot, "brother number one", off the hook, but is unconvincing. The nature of rural life disorganises peasants. They form a huge mass but cannot enter into close relationships with each other because of the tyranny of distance. The irresistible demands of harvesting and planting drain away any ability to act politically on a national scale. That is why Marx thought that peasants were "incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name" (K Marx *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Moscow 1972, p106). They cannot form or represent themselves as a class. They must be represented by an authority that stands over them as an unlimited force and "sends them rain and sunshine from above".

Naturally as a guerrilla army the Khmer Rouge - led by urban-trained intellectuals - recruited peasants and organised a rural struggle first against Sihanouk and then Lon Nol. And, as noted already, in the aftermath of the April 1975 revolution virtually the entire population was ruralised. Hand in hand with that, society was divided up into two castes. Democratic Kampuchea "represented" and granted a relatively privileged position to the "base people" or *neak moulanh*: ie the peasant majority who had lived in insurgent areas for some time before the fall of Lon Nol. The "new people" or *neak thmey*, those

evacuated from the cities or who lived in areas under Lon Nol, made up some 30% of the population. This strata received smaller rations and were generally despised and maltreated. Nevertheless it needs to be emphasised that the Khmer Rouge subjected the rural masses as a whole to a primitive and absolute exploitation - between 1975 and 1979 hours of work increased and rations decreased. Indeed the peasants were depeasantised by their new masters. They owned no land nor means of production. They worked for Angkar.

Because the Khmer Rouge could not rely on the democratic support and self-activity of the labourers, because there was no spontaneous economic mechanism forcing them to produce a surplus, the state used what were essentially military methods to dominate society. Vietnam was singled out as the "hereditary enemy". Pol Pot dreamed of a greater Kampuchea which would include north-east Thailand and the Mekong Delta in its entirety. Xenophobic irredentism was presumably supposed to unite and galvanise the masses against the common enemy (minority peoples and those with personal ties with Vietnam were suspect and therefore to be eliminated). From 1977 Kampuchean armed forces began an undeclared border war with Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge regime was in fact a political economy of permanent war.

The population was marshalled into huge work gangs - labour was militarised. At the same time while "proclaiming a communal ideal" the Khmer Rouge "atomised its citizens to assume maximum social control" (B Kiernan *The Pol Pot regime* New Haven 1996, p167). People were forced to live in thatch huts or barracks, with couples separated from other members of their family and sometimes from each other. There was collective cooking and eating in mess halls. Any complaint was considered an act of treachery - execution was the usual result (children were encouraged to spy and inform on their parents). Hence the peasants were deprived of everything they held dear - land, privacy, family and independently organising their own labour.

Not surprisingly under these conditions the Khmer Rouge found they could trust no one. Not even themselves. The system was a lie and to survive every atomised individual had to lie. Pol Pot saw lies everywhere because there were lies everywhere. Khmer Rouge ideology rationalised the politics of permanent terrorism. Every accident, every shortcoming was explained by sabotage and politically incorrect consciousness. Wrong attitudes and therefore wrong people had to be hunted down and killed.

A popular Khmer Rouge slogan ran: "Spare them, no profit. Remove them, no loss". In the drive for a "pure society" it was said that "only 1.5 million" young Kampuchians will "be enough". Many tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands were butchered in cold blood. If Pol Pot had not had been overthrown by the Vietnamese invasion of 1979, who knows what the eventual death toll would have been? One thing is for certain though. Pol Pot's barbarism should stand as a chilling warning for all those still enamoured with, or tempted by, national socialism ●

Jack Conrad

What we fight for

- Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this Party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything.
- The Communist Party serves the interests of the working class. We fight all forms of opportunism and revisionism in the workers' movement because they endanger those interests. We insist on open ideological struggle in order to fight out the correct way forward for our class.
- Marxism-Leninism is powerful because it is true. Communists relate theory to practice. We are materialists; we hold that ideas are determined by social reality and not the other way round.
- We believe in the highest level of unity among workers. We fight for the unity of the working class of all countries and subordinate the struggle in Britain to the world revolution itself. The liberation of humanity can only be achieved through world communism.
- The working class in Britain needs to strike as a fist. This means all communists should be organised into a single Party. We oppose all forms of separatism, which weakens our class.
- Socialism can never come through parliament. The capitalist class will never peacefully allow their system to be abolished. Socialism will only succeed through working class revolution and the replacement of the dictatorship of the capitalists with the dictatorship of the working class. Socialism lays the basis for the conscious planning of human affairs: ie, communism.
- We support the right of nations to self-determination. In Britain today this means the struggle for Irish freedom should be given full support by the British working class.
- Communists are champions of the oppressed. We fight for the liberation of women, the ending of racism, bigotry and all other forms of chauvinism. Oppression is a direct result of class society and will only finally be eradicated by the ending of class society.
- War and peace, pollution and the environment are class questions. No solution to the world's problems can be found within capitalism. Its ceaseless drive for profit puts the world at risk. The future of humanity depends on the triumph of communism.

We urge all who accept these principles to join us. A Communist Party Supporter reads and fights to build the circulation of the Party's publications; contributes regularly to the Party's funds and encourages others to do the same; where possible, builds and participates in the work of a Communist Party Supporters Group.

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TUC prepares retreat

The release of the government's white paper on employment law, 'Fairness at work', is to be further delayed following a failure of the Trades Union Congress and Downing Street to find agreement on the key issue of union recognition. Union leaders met with the prime minister last Monday prior to the TUC's general council meeting.

Far from a return to beer and sandwiches at No10, according to the *Financial Times* (April 28), the 90-minute meeting was "cold and formal" with the only refreshments on offer being glasses of water. Leaving TUC general secretary John Monks and his chums to stew, Blair has said he is prepared to meet the 'inner six' union leaders again in two weeks time. The TUC has postponed its special conference on union recognition scheduled for May 6 until the white paper is released.

Tony Blair is supporting the Confederation of British Industry against the TUC. With negotiations deadlocked, it seems that the white paper will not be finalised until the end of May. The lord chancellor has warned that if there is no document by then, there is unlikely to be any legislation ready for the next parliamentary session.

The key sticking points are what should constitute a majority in a workplace ballot for recognition; whether small firms should be exempt (including the definition of a small firm); and over what, and for whom, recognition entitles unions to negotiate.

The TUC wants a simple majority of those voting in union-defined bargaining units to be sufficient to qualify for statutory recognition. The CBI is arguing for an absolute majority of those entitled to vote - in a unit defined by the employer. Abstentions would in this way count as 'nos'. The Labour Party's pre-election promise on recognition was deliberately ambiguous on what constituted a majority, stating that there would be "a legal obligation on employers to recognise a union for collective bargaining where a majority of the relevant workforce vote to be represented by a trade union".

Up until now, Blair has been urging the TUC and CBI to sort their differences out between themselves. Now it is crunch time. With pressure mounting to get even limited legislation into parliament it is the TUC which blinked first. Last week, John Monks announced that he was prepared to accept a 30% threshold - a minimum percentage in favour of union recognition from all those entitled to vote - alongside a simple majority of those voting.

While a position paper released after Monday's general council meeting does not mention the 30% figure, it concedes "there could be a case for specifying a minimum 'yes' vote". It goes on to argue that a figure of 40%, which is favoured by Blair and is believed to be acceptable to the CBI, "would be unreasonable and unworkable".

The TUC document is thoroughly class collaborationist. While attempt-



Keep the red flag flying - once a year

ing to concede nothing concrete at this stage, it lays the framework for backsliding on all outstanding issues. For example, on small firm exemption the CBI defines 'small' as under 50 employees. The TUC argues: "We reject the idea of any threshold that would exclude significant number of workers from bargaining rights"; but "acknowledge that in very small firms - with, say, 10 employees or under - a ballot may not be appropriate". Such an approach comes from a bureaucratic impulse to come to an agreement, no matter what. Concessions are based on pure pragmatism, not underpinned by any principle. Such an approach means anything or anyone can be sold down the river, and probably will be. So much for GMB boss John Edmonds saying unions will 'do a Countryside Alliance' over recognition.

Not surprisingly, the entire tone of the document is for industrial peace. This approach is no diplomatic fig leaf, but represents a real desire to come to a quick settlement which is "fair, reasonable and workable", as John Monks puts it. In contrast, the CBI has been intransigent. Until Monks won the TUC general council over to the 30% threshold, the CBI did not budge. Now that the unions have moved onto their turf, the bosses can appear to compromise and move to the 40% figure backed by Blair.

Throughout, Blair has been determined not to be seen to back down to the unions. Attempting to defuse any claims that he is opposed to workplace democracy, he has said that the white paper will address all employees, not just unionists. Despite this he faces difficulties in demanding an absolute 'yes' vote in what are in effect work-

place referendums on union recognition, whereas his own rigged referendums in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and London have no requirement for an absolute majority. In addition Blair has potential problems on the back bench. Derek Foster, Labour chair of the Commons employment subcommittee, has backed the TUC on recognition ballots. John Monks said hopefully that the TUC "expects our position to receive wide support in the cabinet and throughout the parliamentary Labour Party". On past form, any Labour left opposition - parliamentary, union or amongst the rank and file - is likely to crumble pretty soon.

Given tension and cracks at the top, the response of the left is critical. So far, most of the revolutionary left has offered up varying versions of the 'crisis of expectations' thesis. This holds that by having automatically called for a vote for Labour on May 1 1997, we set the stage for History with a capital H to trigger militancy from the millions of atomised workers who voted for Blair in the vain hope that 'he couldn't be as bad as the Tories'. The left, according to this schema, need not raise a finger independently of the spontaneity of the masses - just follow them into the polling booth and wait for them to fall into our lap. Last May, groups such as the Socialist Party, SWP and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty were suggesting the possibility of a fall-out of France 1936 proportions between the industrial and parliamentary wings of the Labour Party. Clearly poppycock.

Such a complacent approach relies on a mechanical characterisation of the class struggle. This is beautifully

summed up by Workers Power, which admits that it "overestimated the speed with which a conflict between Blair and the trade unions would take place" (*Workers Power* April 1998). This passivity and craven tailing of the Labourite union bureaucracy presumes a clash is inevitable. Over the past year, we have had Blair boast of the most restrictive union laws in the western world; we have seen the abolition of single parents' benefit and the student grant. Universal unemployment insurance is being wiped out in favour of a draconian workfare scheme. The disabled are under attack. There has been imperialist sabre-rattling in the Gulf. Where is the bureaucratic rebellion? If we believe Workers Power, it is just a matter of time ...

Thirteen years of a Labor government in Australia, originally elected on a platform more along the lines of traditional social democratic reform, failed to produce any clash between the unions and government. In fact, the unions were hand in glove with Labor right throughout their attacks on the working class. The Australian Council of Trade Unions went so far as to actively support the government's deregistration of two unions which would not toe the line. It has taken the election of a conservative Liberal-National coalition for the union bureaucracy to stand up to the government in Australia.

A schism between the unions and Blair is not automatic. It must be fought for. This is not to say it will not happen. Such an assessment would be equally mechanical. However, by waiting for history, the revolutionary left will be left behind, tailing the bureaucracy. And the bureaucracy will

of course be there with the initiative, taking any spontaneous movement only so far, before trying to hose it down.

Given such a situation, the Socialist Labour Party's 'Reclaim Our Rights' initiative could be crucial. While it has not yet shaken any foundations, the likes of Edmonds, Monks and Bickerstaffe will be keeping a nervous eye to their left. Nine national unions have affiliated already. The Communist Party of Britain's Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions seems sidelined. Dozens of regional and local unions are on board. There is support from much of the revolutionary left and militant minority groups, such as the Campaign for a Fighting Democratic Union.

Nevertheless, there is a long way to go. Moves to organise a demonstration in a year's time on May 1 1999 is not necessarily the prelude to the sort of illegal action and picketing which the maritime workers in Australia have used to reach the point of victory. In Britain, heroic struggles are few and far between and - like the Liverpool dockers and, just last week, the Magnet Kitchen strikers - are left isolated and are eventually forced to surrender.

Given the ease with which Monks has conceded ground over union recognition, a strategy of depending on the TUC to lead a campaign to defeat the anti-trade union laws is clearly disastrous. Yet this is precisely what has been proposed by Bob Crow and John Hendy, chair and secretary of ROR. A difference is emerging at the top of the SLP between Scargill and Crow/Hendy over the TUC. So far, Scargill has his fellow national executive members on a long leash. The miners' president may let them freelance for a while - the ROR-type framework allows him to play from the left. He could yet front a mass movement against Blair.

Those who have walked out of the SLP - supposedly splitting to the left - now look foolish. Most are back where they feel most at ease: tailing Labour in their small grouplets. Yet Scargill is no answer. Far from it. He is no believer in rank and file control and has already been seen to squeeze militant minority groups from the official ROR structures, provisional as they may be. Scargill may not want to put his faith in the TUC in the manner of Hendy or Crow, yet he prefers a structure in which union general secretaries feel comfortable to any militant minority movement from below. For the AWL to give this stitch-up a revolutionary cover is opportunist in the extreme, pleas about the interim nature of the ROR structure notwithstanding.

On the union front, there is some movement. So far it is painfully slow. The movement desperately needs the anti-union laws to be taken on and destroyed. But neither the unions nor the left is up to it in their present state. A successful struggle over trade union issues is inextricably linked with the need to take up a broader, political agenda ●

Marcus Larsen