

British-Irish debate	3
Scottish Socialist Party	5
CPGB and Livingstone	7
Sinn Féin in government	8

London Socialist Alliance negotiations

Unity at last

Link with Campaign Against Tube Privatisation on the cards

London Socialist Alliance last week took a positive step forward towards a united working class campaign for the elections to the Greater London Assembly next May, as part of and alongside the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation challenge.

For more than a year, the LSA's half-hearted moves in the direction of electoral unity were dogged by amateurism, sectarianism and fear of its own shadow. All hopes of a joint slate to contest the European elections were dashed when the alliance collapsed before Scargill's Socialist Labour Party. The Socialist Workers Party, deeply divided on its central committee, was paralysed for weeks before eventually deciding that an intervention was no longer "viable" in view of Scargill's decision to place himself at the top of the SLP's list. They were followed by the Independent Labour Network, Socialist Outlook, the Socialist Party and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. The CPGB was left to stand alone in opposition to Blairism and Scargillite sectarianism. Until last week, the LSA seemed intent on dithering towards a miserable repeat performance in the lead-up to the GLA elections next May.

Central to the crisis of these organisations has been their fear of taking a lead. The ongoing refrain has been for 'real' forces to front any campaign - as if the unprecedented unity of the socialist sects was a mere phantom.

In reality - particularly for the SWP - the hesitation was rooted in the understandable reluctance to put wildly inaccurate assessments of the supposed near pre-revolutionary anger towards Blair to the test. The 'crisis of expectations' thesis peddled by most of the left to excuse its 'lesser of two evils' vote for Blair in 1997 failed to materialise, yet none of the organisations have had the courage to honestly reassess their doctrine.

Yet for the first time we are beginning to see the first signs of rebellion against Blair - millions of Londoners have fond memories of the GLC and have no wish to see the underground deteriorate further with Prescott's - Tory-style - privatisation (albeit no longer with Railtrack). This mass mood has found expression around the mercurial figure of Ken Livingstone and organised discontent within the London Labour Party and the London trade unions. In the process the claims of those such as the Socialist Party in England and Wales

The mass mood is having an impact on the London Socialist Alliance

that the Labour left is finished and Labour is a bourgeois party with no working class content have been steadily undermined.

The mass mood is having an impact on the factional dynamics of the component parts of the London Socialist Alliance. At last week's LSA meeting, this was particularly noticeable with the SWP. The balance of forces on the central committee has tilted towards those who wish to break from auto-Labourism and instead stand on a united socialist platform for the GLA elections. No fewer than four representatives - John Rees, Pat Stack, Weyman Bennett and Rob Hoveman - turned up on November 24, representing a clear upping in the importance the SWP places on the LSA project.

Late, but welcome. However, the stalling of the LSA left a vacuum and militants in the RMT union have already stepped in to fill it. The Campaign Against Tube Privatisation has committed itself to standing 11 candidates for the proportional representation party list slate. On November 9, the CATP made its decision to enter the fray on an oppositionist platform to the Blair-Scott plans for a public-private partnership for London underground.

These developments in the trade union movement - spurred on by the Paddington disaster - and the growing momentum of Ken Livingstone's campaign have focused the minds of all the serious forces in the LSA. The necessity to cohere a working class alternative to Blairism is forcing unity.

That the CATP has taken the first step is good. That a layer of militant workers have decided that they must go beyond mere strikism and into the field of politics is encouraging. Yet, as all those at the November 24 LSA meeting pointed out, a 'stop privatisation' platform is dangerously lim-

ited. However, it is precisely the indecisiveness of LSA which is to blame for a situation where a single-issue campaign has taken the lead. It would be the height of sectarianism to demand the CATP step down, and stand as the LSA regardless. The need is to combine the tentative unity of the left with the leap into politics taken by militant trade unionists. Last week's LSA meeting was therefore a big advance.

Marcus Larsen, acting chair in the absence of Nick Long, a member of the Socialist Democracy Group, invited Oliver New of CATP and the RMT's London region to open the LSA meeting. Comrade New presented the agreed position of CATP. While couched in the most comradely language, the essence of what he presented was that CATP was standing - and that was final - but that support of the LSA would be much appreciated.

Comrade New stressed the difficulty of taking rank and file RMT members even this far. In his view to re-enter into discussions for an open alliance behind the LSA would be a bridge too far. This was challenged as narrow syndicalism - again, very fraternally - by the SWP's John Rees, who in effect suggested that the CATP contest the 14 local first-past-the-post constituencies, and join the LSA's slate for the all-London party-list slate.

This was obviously the SWP's set position, its divided but closely balanced central committee having at last made a firm decision. While the argument had some validity, the SWP cannot blame the CATP for acting while the sects waited for 'credible forces' to gallop over the hill.

In truth, a united campaign under the CATP banner, alongside a campaign to support Livingstone as mayor, could put an independent working class alternative on the agenda. The meeting, it ought to be noted, agreed that all organisations will be free to stand on their own programmes and make their own propaganda in support of any joint campaign. Another step forward and a blow against the previous intolerance and fear of criticism exhibited by the SWP, ILN, etc.

Of course, if the SWP had had the courage to stand in the European elections in June, the centre of gravity would now be with the LSA. A joint campaign under a socialist banner would have been much more likely -

and more reasonable to insist upon.

However, it is clear that a compromise is needed. The position of the CPGB was that it does not matter what the joint LSA-CATP campaign is called. Even if we stand under the CATP banner, but with open LSA candidates on the slate, we can give the intervention a socialist content, backed up by LSA campaigns in the constituencies. Behind the scenes - though not mentioned at the meeting - the CATP is prepared to offer four positions to the LSA. This should be accepted as a basis to go forward when the LSA next meets on December 15.

The CATP's platform is inadequate, to say the least. Prescott's announcement on Tuesday that he will exclude Railtrack from the PPP on the tube is, of course, an about-face. Blair could still completely pull the carpet from under the feet of the CATP. That is why it is essential that the LSA input is as strong as possible.

A joint CATP-LSA campaign is also vital in the context of Livingstone's mayoral fight. Whether or not Livingstone is the Labour candidate or an independent, the LSA must link up with his campaign. We must call for a vote for Livingstone ... but a vote against all New Labour's GLA candidates.

In a subtle, but important, departure from SWP propaganda, John Rees in effect backed what the CPGB has been saying: popular support for Livingstone is not about privatisation, but is a movement from below - a rebellion against Blair - and that it is this that we must relate to. Comrade Rees correctly pointed out that, even as Livingstone moves to the right to try to secure the official Labour nomination, his base in and around the Labour Party and the unions is shifting to the left. We must encourage and give consciousness to this through a socialist campaign - united organisationally in a CATP list - and as the LSA in the constituencies.

In the discussion on Livingstone, which is yet to be formally decided by the LSA, the ridiculous position of the Socialist Party in England and Wales was further exposed. Comrade Jim Horton raised his voice to insist that the SP had never said it would *not* vote for Livingstone as official Labour candidate. In fact there is a deafening silence on this possibility. After all, how can it vote for Livingstone if he stands as the candidate of an out-and-out "bourgeois party"? This definition was of course adopted soon after the Militant entryists were shown the door by Kinnock.

The meeting also considered minor amendments to the LSA platform. Debate reflected the comradely and convivial atmosphere. For the first time comrades have begun to express a businesslike - as opposed to posturing - attitude to getting the job done.

Small shifts to the left were achieved. The absent Nick Long's localist suggestions of more road humps were rejected. The proposal by Hyman Frankel - of the Green Socialist Network - to support only those refugees seeking "political" asylum was chucked out. This opened up an exchange on immigration laws. The CPGB amendment to replace "remove all racist immigration laws" with "remove all immigration laws" was passed with only the Socialist Party, the ILN's Toby Abse and Hyman Frankel arguing against: ie, the extreme right of the LSA. While these shifts are welcome, the CPGB still holds that the LSA platform is woefully eclectic and economic. Yet we as the extreme left are prepared to *accept* it in the interests of unity, given the agreed proviso that all organisations may criticise and campaign on their own platforms as well.

The next meetings of the CATP and LSA will be pivotal. While the CATP majority are honest syndicalists, the re-emergence of the disgraced Fourth International Supporters Caucus within CATP after their woeful SLP performance is a matter of concern. There must be no more anti-CPGB witch hunts. However, according to reports from RMT activists, Fisc is seen as a Johnny-come-lately. Neither is it completely united. Comrade Pat Sikorski is said to favour cooperation with the LSA.

Another factor is the attitude of RMT assistant general secretary and SLP member Bob Crow. His exact position on the CATP's electoral intervention, with or without LSA's involvement, is still unclear. However, if Scargill insists on a separate SLP campaign, it will place comrade Crow in an awkward situation. He will have a fatal choice. Stay with Scargill and lose his credibility in left union circles, or take a meaningful lead against Blair and New Labour.

The maturity and seriousness of the left will surely be tested in the coming months. For the first time since May 1997, a mass rebellion is beginning against Blair and his government. Communists will fight for a Livingstone victory, for a united CATP/LSA list and an organic working class split from New Labour ●

Marcus Larsen



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

CWI parasites

I read with great amusement your article on the Committee for a Workers International in Scotland split (*Weekly Worker* November 18).

So what's new? We are treated to the same cliché-ridden, turgid arguments and fantasy perspectives that they have been using all throughout the history of Militant Tendency, Militant Labour, the Socialist Party, CWI, or whatever you want to call it - this 'thing' whose existence was once so vehemently denied.

They are the politics of parasitism. Nothing has changed. Their documents show what they really are and always have been - an organisation that finds a larger organisation, enters it and becomes parasitic upon it. They have been constantly incapable of forming an autonomous party. Having left the Labour Party in the early 90s, they have been wallowing around ever since, looking for a larger social democratic organisation in which to dissolve themselves. Finally, not being able to find one suitable, they have had to form one themselves! This attitude exposes them as left Labourite reformists, looking to hide in a social democratic organisation to avoid giving themselves a form and content of their own because they have not got one, nor do they appear to want one, because they are afraid of its revolutionary implications.

In the extracts from the documents the words 'Marxism' and 'Marxist' are thrown around in a meaningless manner, as if simply to give spice to a bland dish or to create a veneer or illusion that they are Marxist, when there is precious little Marxism in their thinking. Perhaps this is to appeal to the profoundly ignorant or politically naive, which they seem to recruit in great numbers.

The extracts go on to talk about some mysterious entity called "genuine socialism" - as if there was something called 'false socialism'. This is one of their most irritating clichés. It is tempting to think that the ideas of the 'CWI organisation' may become diluted due to contact with the ordinary membership of the Scottish Socialist Party, but a moment's reflection shows that their ideas are already diluted to be on the path that they are.

It must be remembered that the most influential and notorious hour of these people was when they were firmly entrenched within the Labour Party. Perhaps they are desperately trying to recreate those conditions. Those days are over and the tactic is no longer viable. Unfortunately they will continue with this practice - that is where they belong, because they have the same form and content as the organisations upon which they prey.

I think it would be a dark day for mankind if these people were ever to gain control of the world: everywhere they go they create a mess and some one has to pick up the tab. They can only consume; they cannot create.

Martin Pinder
Coventry

New CPGB

I cannot help but be put out by the attitude of the Conrad-loyalists. The debate about self-determination for the Six Counties protestants shows all the symptoms of the comrades running away from principle, of hiding behind bluster and invention. The short but pointed article by comrades Downing *et al* (*Weekly Worker* November 18) restates the points made repeatedly by defenders of the right of the people of the whole of Ireland to self-determination. It places this right firmly in the context of the class struggle in Ireland.

Responding against this view, Andy Hannah (*Weekly Worker* November 25) replies that we should fight against the "reversal of the poles

of oppression". I would like Andy to say when exactly this reversal took place. To what extent has the nationalist and republican movement become the new oppressors? How are the endangered unionists, in their workers' organisations or otherwise, raising the demand for the right to secede? Clearly the comrade is working to a hypothesis based on seriously flawed conjecture. Not for this alone, however, but for conformity to the leader's three-line whip, the good comrade is willing to junk the principle of many years. Sad times in a period of reaction.

Ian Donovan, whom I have known for less time, but who is versed in the Spartacist school of 'the equality of orange and green terror', becomes incoherent himself in the same issue. Comrade Donovan tortures his readers, bending the phrases he uses to disguise their real meaning.

In his attack on thesis 1, Donovan manages to hide from himself the fact that self-determination is always subordinate to the class struggle, and in the Irish context this means any national aspiration of the (non-national) protestants are forfeit to the need to defeat imperialism. Thesis 2 is denounced as outrageous, because the Welsh are not English. He inconspicuously substitutes the word 'English' for 'British', and thus the Welsh are made different and in need of secession. Against thesis 3 he says it is absurd to compare the situation of white slave-owners to protestant supremacists, when indeed it is more than cogent to do so. In fact we could also include the Zionists and the supremacist Afrikaners in the same round-up of bigots.

The comrade's imagination gets the better of him in countering thesis 4. He believes that there is a movement for self-determination among the Six Counties protestants to be compared with that for re-unification of Germany. The man's head is stuffed somewhere other than on his shoulders! In countering thesis 5, Donovan descends into throwing garbage in the hope that some will stick. Dishonest and disreputable tactics, comrade - grow up and face the argument: "Winning unionist workers through a programme of revolutionary socialist transformation" (Downing *et al*) does not equate "protestant people are irredeemably reactionary" (Donovan).

Thesis 6 is countered by restating the strained and tarnished two-nations theorem, and against thesis 7 Donovan can only wield hyperbollocks. In theses 8-12 Downing and his comrades press some dodgy side issues on the Malvinas and the KLA, yet Donovan still fails to redeem himself.

There is a frivolous mindset at the heart of 'New CPGB' policy on Ireland which casts old truths away without regard for the consequences. The modernisers started with the 'slave society' analysis of the USSR. They continued with the removal of the Party banner from the Party paper. They exhibit sheer embarrassment when the Party anthem is sung, and would like it to be forgotten. They have removed Marx and Lenin's images from the Party website. It has now come to promoting the revival of the Labour left - Trojan horse in the workers' movement. Call me hidebound or sentimental if you like, comrades, but whither *The Leninist*?

Steve Riley
Manchester

Sheep-like

Pat Carlin (Letters, November 25) asks whether anybody at the Scottish Socialist Party 'Socialism 2000' event in Glasgow earlier in November questioned Progressive Unionist Party/UVF spokesman Billy Hutchinson's claim to be a "socialist". The answer is that some would have done so if

offered the opportunity. However, the debate was arranged in such a way that there were no chances offered to the audience to put any questions to the speakers from the floor. I understand that in the workshop he spoke at afterwards, Hutchinson did receive some kind of grilling, but I personally attended John McNulty's workshop as I wished to hear a republican socialist viewpoint, so I cannot confirm what happened in the other place.

Perhaps two-thirds of the audience at 'Socialism 2000' were SSP members or sympathisers and the rest were either ordinary people or from other organisations. I was reminded of an occasion described by George Orwell when Oswald Mosley was speaking in the 1930s. Orwell said Mosley was a very good speaker and went down well with most of the working class audience. Orwell thought the audience's ignorance made them unable to see through Mosley. However, one or two people who did heckle were roughly dealt with by British Union of Fascists stewards. Perhaps we have become even more sheep-like since the 1930s.

James Robertson
Linlithgow

New motor?

The united front between Jack Conrad's draft theses on Livingstone and Mark Fischer's 'infinitely flexible' tactics does not come over as the authors might imagine - think of Christopher Caldwell's infinitely variable gear stick. Instead, they potter up behind the reformist tailback hoping to cadge a lift, because the van's battery is flat and the guard needs a light.

Also, Eddie 'Hurricane' Ford's position of holding the reserved parking record for the shortest membership of the SLP - accelerating into his first SLP branch meeting shouting, "Get your *Weekly Worker*" - might encourage other comrades to peer through the exhaust fumes and see the old banger they are hitching a ride on.

Phil Rudge
London

Philosophy

With regard to Delphi's criticism of Steve Green, and implicitly Roy Bull, concerning praxis humanism, dialectical materialism, scientific determinism and epistemology, Delphi's stance is characterised by unreflective dogmatism (*Weekly Worker* November 18). Delphi's praxis standpoint, which is similar to Gramsci's opposition to Bukharin's historical materialism, is based upon a subjective voluntarist denial of objective laws because they are held to be rigid, immutable, and justify a predetermined end.

But who would deny the continuing importance and significance of the law of value? Does this recognition make us puppets of capitalism? Or, as Plekhanov and Bukharin argued, an understanding of objective laws, which are independent of our intentional consciousness, does not mean we are rigidly governed by necessity, but is instead the way to understand how we develop freedom.

But, Delphi could reply and argue, that the rigid acceptance of the objective primacy of historical laws leads to fatalism and passivity and the corresponding denial of the need for revolutionary class struggle. Hence the score is 1-1 between orthodox dialectical materialism and the praxis approach.

So, how do we arbitrate between contending theoretical claims that seem to have equal validity? The role of dialectical philosophy would be to show that reality itself is open-ended, and there are never any definitive answers because of the very changeable character of reality. Hence the rigid, scientific and evolutionist his-

torical materialism of social democracy led to counterrevolutionary degeneration, and the praxis activist humanism of Trotskyism has not established an effective alternative to the hectic instrumental praxis of counterrevolutionary Stalinism. In contrast flexible dialectical philosophy allows for open enquiry, and its potential non-dogmatism is the basis for objective evaluation of the contending types of historical materialism (scientific and praxis) in a manner which will not lead to rigid and closed answers.

Delphi equates praxis with the realisation of a utopian, ethical and humanist society. The dogmatism of this claim is its very negation. For Delphi does not acknowledge the problems with praxis - a potential for transformation into a counterrevolutionary opposite - and utopianism can justify prescriptive rigid blueprints that have corresponding authoritarian principles, as with the utopian socialists of the early 19th century.

What is necessary in order to clarify these complex questions is reflective dialogue. Thus, can utopia inspire transformatory class struggle, or is the concept of utopia an effective denial of the complexity of an uncertain and unpredictable historical future? For example, what would be the status of ethics in this utopian socialist society? Are ethics about what we cannot do, or what we could do, and do we need more laws under socialism than capitalism, or less laws?

Furthermore, is ethics about constraints on human behaviour, or is it about the removal of these constraints? Hence, what is the relationship between responsibility, obligation, duties and rights under communism? In order to establish a starting point for discussing these questions we need to develop a philosophical consciousness that needs to be fluid and not closed, because we cannot rigidly justify definitive answers in advance of revolution and the transition to communism. On the other hand we need to say something about ethics because the proletariat constantly inquires about ethics in spontaneous terms.

The theoretical development by a revolutionary party of an ethical understanding is connected to an important and constant philosophical problem: are ethics conditional, relative and subject to constant change, or are they universal, and virtually absolute? This complex philosophical question became an important practical problem for the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks lacked an ethic of restraint, and the class struggle was rationalised as a universal absolute in order to justify their actions. This approach was utilised by Lenin to justify the struggle against counterrevolution and to uphold the perspective of world revolution.

However, this absolutist and untheorised conception of ethics was turned by Stalin into the nihilistic ethic of the omnipotent god. Bolshevism became the effective denial of love, trust and solidarity between comrades, and this paved the way for the consolidated hegemony of an anti-ethics (the absolute dictates of god) which Stalin enforced upon an atomised party. The confident revolutionary rejection of Kant's perspective of the importance of transcendental moral truisms became the pretext for justifying expediency. The whims of the leader were an expression of the personification of the party, and was sufficient reason for the actions of the party.

If the Bolsheviks had developed a philosophically coherent ethics this would not have necessarily meant that Stalinist degeneration could have been avoided, but the elaborated ethics of the party could have helped to deny the ideological legitimacy of Stalinism. This would have facilitated the struggle against Stalinism, and possi-

bly brought about a unity between the conflicting Bukharin and Trotsky positions in ethical terms. It is significant that Bukharin's recently discovered novel outlines a secular ethic that opposes idealist and dictatorial omnipotence.

Some bourgeois ideologues have proclaimed the end of history. This perspective expresses a justification of rigidity and closure about history and social relations. Unfortunately this bourgeois triumphalism (an expression of an empirical adaptation to what is) has led to defeatism and demoralisation within revolutionary Marxism, or, alternatively, attempts are made to justify a hollow and superficial Marxist triumphalism, which is based upon the construction of a leftwing teleology in order to oppose rightwing teleology about history.

The confusion within Marxism about global counterrevolutionary developments indicates not only the need to elaborate historical materialism and political economy, but also suggests the need for philosophical revolution: a return to the pre-1845 stance of Marx (hopefully on a higher level) based on the understanding that philosophy expresses the revolutionary character of the proletariat. This means we need to develop a philosophy of openness, contradiction, negation, critique, ethics and opposition to instrumental activity at the level of society, human action and consciousness: the rejection of the expediency of pragmatic idealism.

The merits, or problems, of praxis humanism and scientific dialectical materialism, or any other Marxist theoretical trend, can only be evaluated through a process of self-criticism. In this context Delphi defends 'epistemological guarantees', or an inherent truthfulness for his philosophical stance (praxis is revolutionary class struggle), and so denies its problematic content. Primarily he refuses to recognise that we are still only at the beginning of our necessary philosophical tasks: the development of revolutionary dialectical philosophy.

Phil Sharpe
Nottingham

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Irish freedom and socialist revolution

I congratulate comrade Mary Godwin on her report of the November 13-14 CPGB weekend school on the national question (*Weekly Worker* November 18). It is concise, balanced and comprehensive. There is just one correction I would seek to make to Mary's précis of the statement I delivered on behalf of the CPGB minority. I would further wish to elaborate the minority's position, something we have been urged to do by comrades Mark Fischer, John Stone and Dave Craig.

I am reported as saying, "The task of communists is to overcome the historic division of the Irish working class between its nationalist and pro-imperialist sections. This can be achieved by fighting for the entire programme of the CPGB and uniting the working class in the struggle against all capitalists" (my emphasis). I actually said, of course, "the Communist Party," and not "the CPGB". I was referring to the Communist Party that must be built in Ireland.

We of the minority do not though disregard, or downplay, the equally crucial necessity for the programme of the CPGB to address the Irish national question and to do so in terms that unequivocally advocate the defeat of 'our own' imperialist United Kingdom state, in its being driven out of Ireland. Indeed our starting point in our difference with the Party majority is precisely the issue of what the CPGB programme should contain on the Irish question.

We defend the existing formulation within the draft programme, which is: "Ireland is Britain's oldest colony. In 1921 the Irish nation was dissected. A sectarian Six County statelet was created in order to permanently divide the Irish working class and to perpetuate British domination over the whole island of Ireland. We communists in Britain unconditionally support the right of Ireland to reunite. Working class opposition to British imperialism in Ireland is a necessary condition for our own liberation - a nation that oppresses another can never itself be free. The struggle for socialism in Britain and national liberation in Ireland are inextricably linked. Communists in Ireland also have internationalist duties. They must fight for the closest spirit of fraternity between workers in Britain and Ireland and their speediest coming together. They must be resolute opponents of nationalism."

The CPGB majority however, has won a resolution at a Party aggregate, stating that the programmatic formulation "requires elaboration and further development. This is especially so in relationship to the British-Irish" (*Weekly Worker* October 21). The precise terms of what this elaboration will be have not yet been proposed by

the majority, yet we can get some indication from the text of the 20 theses, 'Ireland and the British-Irish', which were published in the *Weekly Worker* on August 26, and of course from the extensive debate which has raged since.

Thesis 20 states: "Communists support the right of a British-Irish one-county, four-half-counties entity in a united Irish republic to self-determination, but argue against exercising that right in favour of secession. We favour voluntary unity and the growing together of the two traditions in Ireland on the basis of a common struggle for international socialism and world communism." The second sentence of this thesis is one we are agreed upon and it adequately codifies a crucial element of the minority's approach to the question of a communist programme for Ireland, of which more later. It is the first sentence wherein the difficulty lies. If the draft programme of the CPGB were to be altered such that it stated, "The CPGB supports the right of a British-Irish one-county, four-half-counties entity in a united Irish republic to self-determination, but argues against exercising that right in favour of secession", then it would hardly be accurate to describe this as an "elaboration" of the existing formulation. Rather, it would be a fundamental contradiction of the principle, "We communists in Britain unconditionally support the right of Ireland to reunite" (my emphasis). The CPGB can hardly sustain unconditional support for the right of Ireland to reunite if, say, in observing the proceedings of an inaugural constitutional convention of all Ireland, we were to cry foul (and presumably advise the British working class to withdraw its support), should the principle of the constitutional right of the 'British-Irish entity' to self-determination not be carried.

The winning of unconditional support from the British working class for Irish freedom is a pivotal requirement of a communist programme for Britain and has been since Karl Marx himself developed the position in 1869. It must not be put at risk now by an incorrect application of the principle of the right of nations to self-determination. In addressing the Council of the International Workingmen's Association, on December 10 of that year, Marx explained how the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment for the British working class; rather it is the first condition for their own social emancipation: "It is in the

direct and absolute interest of the English working class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland ... The English working class will never accomplish anything until it has got rid of Ireland ... The English reaction has its roots in the subjugation of Ireland." It remains the case that a successful revolutionary struggle in Ireland would have the potential to spark the socialist revolution in Britain, Europe and beyond.

The latest revolutionary upsurge in Ireland, however - one led by petty bourgeois politics - has failed. The unification of Ireland has not been achieved and the main revolutionary party, Sinn Féin, is about to enter the devolved government of the Six County province of the United Kingdom. In an historic compromise, the Irish republican movement is accepting the partition of Ireland and the institutionalisation of the continued existence of two communities in the north.

This failure is no surprise. It was anticipated for instance, by comrade Jack Conrad, who had this to say in a supplement in *The Leninist* in November 1984: "The politics of petty bourgeois nationalism have proved incapable of developing or sustaining an all-Ireland revolutionary movement against British imperialism which can rally to its banner both those experiencing repression most severely - today the catholic masses in the Six Counties - and all oppressed and exploited sections of the Irish population, including the protestant working class, or at least a section of it, all of which would be necessary if Britain is to be ejected from Ireland ... Sinn Féin, because of its petty bourgeois nationalism, cannot fight for the hegemony of the working class over the national question. It thus refuses to see that the struggles for national liberation and socialism, far from being separate, must be linked if British imperialism is to be defeated. Because of this there is always the danger that if petty bourgeois nationalism continues to dominate the national struggle, as in the past it will do a deal with British imperialism."

The domination of the post-partition national struggle in Ireland by petty bourgeois politics is not something that was inevitable. It was in no small part due to the rotten politics of an 'official communist' movement, under the direction of the Soviet bureaucracy, which handed hegemony of national struggles to bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces the world over. That politics - a reversion to Menshevism - was a product of the defeat

of the major political lesson of the October revolution. This was the understanding that, in the imperialist epoch, permanent historic gains in the process of transition from capitalism to socialism and communism will only be realised when the leadership of the revolutionary struggle - from national democratic revolution to international socialist revolution - lies with the working class. We now have to fight to rewin dominance for that politics. That fight is simultaneously a struggle to make the working class that is ready for revolution. The forging of that class is the primary task of communists in relation to Ireland, just as it is in relation to all states within the globalised capitalism of today.

The working class that is ready to make revolution is a class that has achieved the highest degree of unity, the class-for-itself that Marx described. It is a class that fully understands the need to press uninterruptedly from national democratic victories to international victories in the socialist expropriation of the capitalist class. Sectional, supremacist, separatist, racist and reactionary prejudices of all kinds will surely perish in the furnaces that mould this class. Mary Godwin was correct when she reported the belief of the CPGB minority that it is bizarre for communists to assume that sections of such a working class will want to go off, after its victory, and form their own separate states.

The current conjuncture in Ireland presents a fresh opportunity for the development of communist politics, for the re-establishment of the project of forging working class unity. This will not be achieved by the crass economic politics of the likes of the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, which the *Weekly Worker* is correct, and indeed duty bound, to ruthlessly oppose. We have seen before in the history of Ireland occasions when unity of the working class was achieved on economic demands only. It proved ephemeral precisely because of those limitations and because of its refusal to take up the national and democratic questions. Clearly the way to unite the class is by fighting for the full scientific programme of the Communist Party: the resolution of the national question; the whole battery of democratic demands; the whole range of demands for the satisfaction of the needs of the working class. We will overcome the divisions of the working class by uniting it in struggle against the capitalists - the green, the orange and the red-white-and-blue capitalists all, and by winning it to become the champion of all struggles of the oppressed.

The very best assurance that communists can give to the likes of the 'British-Irish', who might be worried at the prospect of the reversal of the poles of oppression when an oppressed nation is liberated, is that when revolutions are led by working classes and by communist parties we are not contemplating the preservation of any existing states, but the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the smashing of existing capitalist states. In unifying Ireland, as in all other steps forward for the world revolution, we start with clean sheets upon which to draw constitutions ●

John Pearson

action

■ CPGB seminars

London: Sunday December 5, 5pm - 'Marx's study of money and credit, 1851', using Simon Clarke's *Marx's theory of crisis* as a study guide.

Sunday December 12, 5pm - 'The modern state, part 2', using Ellen Meiksins Wood's *The pristine culture of capitalism* as a study guide.

Sunday December 19, 5pm - Jack Conrad on 'Jesus, his brother James and the origins of christianity'.

Manchester: Monday December 13, 7.30pm - 'Contemporary international developments' in the series on crisis.

E-mail: CPGB2@aol.com.

■ Support

Tameside

Support group meets every Monday, 7pm at the Station pub, Warrington Street, Ashton under Lyne.

■ Glasgow

Marxist Forum

Thursday December 9, 7.30pm, 'For a Scottish workers' republic?' Speaker: Allan Armstrong. Partick Burgh Hall. All welcome.

■ Mayor of London

Monday December 6, 7pm. Public meeting. Frank Dobson (invited), Glenda Jackson and Ken Livingstone. Willesden Green Library Centre, 95 High Street, Willesden, London NW10. Called by Brent unions and other organisations.

■ Millennium sale

Public meeting on New Labour's plans for PFI and PPP. Wednesday December 8, 7pm, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

■ 35-hour week

Brent Trades Council public meeting, with Bob Crow (RMT), Geoff Martin (Unison). Thursday December 9, 7.30pm, Willesden suite, Willesden Green Library Centre, 95 High Street, Willesden, London NW10.

■ Privatisation

Ealing Trades Council public meeting, with Bob Crow (RMT), John Lister (London Health Emergency) and speaker from air traffic control. Saturday December 11, 7.30pm, Ealing Town Hall.

■ Hands off

Colombia

Friday December 10, 4-7pm. Demonstration, US embassy, Grosvenor Square, London. Called by Campaign Against US Intervention in Colombia. For details call 0171-735 7267.

■ Party wills

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

■ Hackney Socialist Alliance

To get involved, contact Box 22, 136-138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS.

■ Brent Socialist Alliance

To get involved, contact Galaxy News, Box 100, 37 Walm Lane, London NW2 4QU, or ring 0181-451 0616.

Website

Our website carries a comprehensive archive section including key articles on Socialist Alliances, Russia, left polemics, the Northern Ireland peace process and the British-Irish question.

www.duntone.demon.co.uk/CPGB/

Jesus and the rise of christianity

Joint meeting organised by CPGB and Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Speaker: Jack Conrad

Thursday December 16, 7.30pm, ULU, Malet Street (nearest tube: Goodge Street), Room 2E.

Republican Communist

Quarterly journal of the Republican Communist Network

£2.50 inc p&p. 1 year (4 issues): £10 inc p&p. From RC, c/o PO Box 6773, Dundee, DD1 1YL. Cheques payable to 'Record of Letter'.

Permanent and national revolution

Gerry Downing examines differences among the Bolsheviks on the national question

When Lenin began his battle against Great Russian chauvinism in the Bolsheviks, as manifested in the handling of the Georgian and Ukraine questions by Stalin and Dzerzhinsky in 1922 and 1923, he entrusted Trotsky with the brief and gave him strict instructions not to compromise with Stalin at the 12th Congress. But Trotsky agreed to a few face-saving amendments to Stalin's theses and abandoned Christian Rakovsky to fight alone.

His reasons were many. He did not want to carry out Lenin's instructions and split the party by attempting to remove Stalin just after Lenin had suffered his second major stroke and was at death's door. Stalin's power over the apparatus was fully clear to him. Whereas Lenin and Trotsky together could have defeated him, Stalin not only had the apparatus now, but also the backing of Zinoviev and Kamenev. This triumvirate controlled the party from the beginning of Lenin's illness in 1922.

Also it is incorrect to read backwards into history the evil intentions of Stalin. He was not yet the Stalin of the purges. In fact all were reticent to accept Lenin's mantle because they were all aware that the Seventh of Thermidor was upon them and they did not wish to become the new Bonaparte. Trotsky in particular was the obvious candidate for this position and he was very careful to avoid any suggestion of accepting the role. But it may also be true that he did not appreciate as yet the extremely reactionary nature of Stalin's attitude to Georgia, as Lenin and Rakovsky did, and what this indicated about the bureaucratisation and degeneration of the party itself.

Nonetheless he did begin the battle in earnest on October 8 1922, when Dzerzhinsky proposed that party members should spy for the GPU. A week later the *Platform of the 46*, a document mainly by old Bolsheviks attacking the degeneration of the party, appeared. Stalin made a tactical retreat and the central committee opened up a debate on bureaucracy in the party. On December 11 Trotsky published his *New course* against bureaucracy. He also outlined in detail the need for the central planning of the economy. The inevitable result was a defeat for Trotsky and the oppositionists against the combined forces of the troika now joined by the rightist Bukharin. Stalin already controlled all congresses because he now appointed the delegates.

Bukharin had swung from the ultra-left to the right over the issue of the monopoly of foreign trade in capitulation to the peasantry. It took the combined efforts of Lenin and Trotsky to defeat that Bukharin-Stalin alliance. The 13th Congress on January 16-18 1924 condemned 'Trotskyism', days before Lenin's death and effectively marginalised

Rakovsky had to educate the Left Opposition on the national question and on the transitional method contained in respect for the national consciousness of the oppressed. Trotsky's 1939 position on the Ukraine was obviously informed by this struggle of Rakovsky

Trotsky until the break-up of the troika in 1925.

Rakovsky had changed his position on the national question following his analysis of his experiences as president of commissars of the Ukrainian Socialist Republics and his conclusions marked the first serious theoretical fight against the rising bureaucracy. Previously he had held the dominant position, inherited from the German social democracy - which ignored Lenin's far better, if pragmatic, position - that the revolution would solve all and that the national question was merely a backward and reactionary separatism. His new approach of respect for and defence of the progressive aspect of the culture of the oppressed is summed up in the introduction to his writings by Gus Fagan, which consists of quotes from Rakovsky's speech interspersed with continuity commentary by Fagan: "Tell me, comrades, how many of you can explain in what way the October revolution solved the nationalities question?"

It did not resolve it, nor could it have. National culture does not cease to exist because a state is a workers'

state or because the economy is no longer privately owned. National culture is the only way through which the working and peasant masses will gain access to political and cultural life.

"And hand in hand with national consciousness comes that feeling of equality which Lenin speaks of in his memorandum. Because of centuries of tsarist domination, the nationalities are now experiencing that feeling of equality in a much deeper and stronger way than we think. It [the party] faces the question of how to find the bond between proletarian internationalism and the national development of wide layers of the peasant masses with their aspiration for a national life, for their own national culture, for their own national state" (C Rakovsky *Selected writings on opposition in the USSR 1923-30* London, p33).

And Rakovsky went on to link the rise of bureaucratism to the lack of any serious attempt to tackle national oppression, as Lenin had done. This fight was the real origins of the Left Opposition and then what is known as 'Trotskyism'.

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Both of them, and Lenin, would have been far better informed on this vital matter for the survival of the revolution had they studied the debate that raged on this very question within the Jewish Marxists. They might have learned from the Bundist theorist Vladimir Medem, whose long study, *The national question and the social democracy*, published in Yiddish in 1904, contained the following remarkable forerunner of Rakovsky's remarks: "A national culture as an independent entity, as a closed circle with its own content, has never existed. The nation is the particular form in which the human form expresses itself. The essence of cultural life, which generally is the same everywhere, takes different colourings and national forms to the extent that the different groups, around which specific social relations are established, adapt themselves to them. These social relations - the context in which class conflicts are born and intellectual and spiritual currents develop - confer on the culture a national character" (E Traverso *The Marxists and the Jewish question* pp101-102).

According to Traverso, Medem saw the Yiddish-speaking Jews in the Pale of Settlement as a nation, but his view of a nation was not territorial: it was cultural and linguistic solely. He developed the theory of *national neutralism*, which allowed history to decide the eventual outcome of the question: "We are neutral. We are not against assimilation; we are not against anti-assimilation."

The Bolsheviks should have reciprocated this correct anti-Zionist approach. However, it seems that the relationship with the Bund, which ebbed and flowed following the split

of 1903, was never developed sufficiently again to encompass this vital understanding of the national question. After Lenin's death Stalin's dogmatic, schematic understanding and Trotsky's tardiness in tackling the problem at all led to wholesale confusion. Rakovsky's understanding came too late.

This remarkably concise understanding of the national question by Medem contains and develops the idea expressed by Marx in a letter to Engels on April 20 1866. Lenin had quoted this, as had Rakovsky in his last speech to the Bolsheviks where he was listened to with any respect, the 12th Congress in April 1923 already referred to:

"Yesterday there was a session of the council of the International on the current war ... As was expected, the session eventually came to the question 'of nationalities' and our attitude to them ... The representatives of 'Young France' (non-workers) came out with the announcement that all nationalities and even nations were 'antiquated prejudices' ... The English laughed very much when I began my speech by saying that our friend Lafargue and others, who had done away with nationalities, had spoken to us in French - that is, in a language which was incomprehensible to nine-tenths of the meeting. I also suggested that by the negation of nationalities he appeared, quite unconsciously, to understand their adoption by the model French nation."

There does not appear to be much of the 'historic nations' versus 'non-historic' counterrevolutionary nationalities in this approach of Marx. What else do the quotes from Rakovsky, Medem and Marx represent in modern terms but a legitimisation of the rights of every oppressed nation and nationality to struggle against their national, cultural and military oppressor, particularly as it comes today in the guise of the Coca-Cola culture and neo-liberal reaction?

The mass movement that was the Jewish Bund had developed the most progressive and dialectical understanding of the national question, but the Bolsheviks were too little engaged with them to learn it. The new revolutionary government's understanding of the Jewish question never really had a chance to develop. The pogromistic anti-semitism of the whites drove the Jews into the arms of the revolution, so the Bolsheviks did not really have to fight for their allegiance. The Jews were engaged in light, consumer industries that did not have the revolutionary potential of large factories and were too remote from Moscow and Petersburg to influence to outcome of the revolution itself.

The Bolsheviks were successful champions of the oppressed Jews and all oppressed nationalities and nations for the few short years (1917 to 1923) of the revolution's forward drive. The Jewish intellectuals (but of the 'non-Jewish Jews' - ie, assimilationist variety) were strongly represented on the Bolshevik leadership. The mass of Jews remained committed to the Soviet Union for most of its history, despite the increasing anti-semitism

of the Stalinist regime.

A final word is necessary on Lenin's last struggle, the Georgian affair. Firstly the suppression of the Georgian Menshevik government correctly had the support of all sections of the Bolshevik leadership. Trotsky details the conduct of the Mensheviks against the revolution:

"The Special Detachments, if you please, are the Menshevik Cheka. The Special Detachments seized and imprisoned and shot all who were active against the Menshevik democracy. The Special Detachments in their method of terror in no way differed from the Extraordinary Commission of Soviet Russia. Where they did differ was in aim. The Extraordinary Commission protected the socialist dictatorship against the agents of capital; the Special Detachments protected the bourgeois regime against the Bolshevik 'anarchy'. But it was for this very reason that the respectable people who cursed the Cheka did not notice the Special Detachment" (L Trotsky *Social democracy and the wars of intervention 1918-1921* London, p44). He is referring to social democrats like Kautsky, Mrs Snowden, Henderson, etc.

When Stalin, Ordzhonikidze and Dzerzhinsky rode roughshod over the Georgian Bolshevik government and sought to hide this from Lenin and the politburo Lenin fought him in his famous last struggle so well described by Moshe Lewin. Lenin or Trotsky never made any apologies for crushing the counterrevolutionary Menshevik regime in Georgia. The conflict was about the denial of the national rights of Georgia as represented by the Georgian Bolshevik government. On January 30-31 1922 he produced his final addendum to his testament, recommending the removal of Stalin as general secretary and setting out his own memorandum on the national question referred to by Rakovsky above.

Note in particular that this memorandum tacitly acknowledges that the initial statement of the Bolshevik government on the right to separate, etc was naive in subordinating the revolution to counterrevolutionary forces like the Georgian Mensheviks. He rejected the bureaucratic suppression of national rights by Stalin, Ordzhonikidze and Dzerzhinsky so forcefully: "That really Russian man, the Great Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is."

He gave as his reason, not the needs of the internal situation in the USSR, but the need to relate to the developing revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed masses: "The morrow of world history will be a day when the awaking peoples, oppressed by imperialism, are fully aroused and the decisive long and hard struggle for their liberation begins" (both quotes from M Lewin *Lenin's last struggle* pp86-87).

Marxist understanding of the need to relate to the consciousness of the most oppressed had indeed developed in line with how that consciousness had developed since 1848 when Engels promised "blood revenge" against the south Slavs for opposing the revolution of that year ●

Action stations

Tom Delargy believes that the split within the Committee for a Workers International in Scotland could end the toleration of factions in the Scottish Socialist Party

The only possible interpretation that can be put on the document written by comrade Alan McCombes is that the SSP will (if they have anything to say about it) follow the Socialist Labour Party down the road of witch hunts and voiding of branches

whom support the single currency!

The compromise motion cobbled together at the last minute between the anti-CWI individuals and the CWI was, in my opinion, a vast improvement on both the original antagonistic motions. But Hannah Sell (SPEW observer at conference) and other CWI leaders must have been scratching their heads, perplexed as to what exactly is the point of uniting with others if CWI supporters intend to surrender even when they are in the majority! An excellent question.

Comrade McCombes tried to sell his liquidation of SML by reference to the American Trotskyists uniting with non-revolutionaries in the 1930s. However, while suggesting to Peter Taaffe that the SSP could become a CWI affiliate within a year or so, he was telling Allan Green, Hugh Kerr, Bill Bonnar, etc a very different story. Clearly the unapologetic social democratic wing of the SSP is not content with *promises* that CWI members will not outvote them at conference. They want *guarantees*. They clearly are the ones "suspicious and resentful" at the CWI "party within a party". For precisely the same reasons as Neil Kinnock before them, they want it smashed to pieces. And, tragically, comrade McCombes is happy to oblige.

All revolutionaries, in Scotland and beyond, need to support the right of the Scottish CWI minority against this veiled attack on it. If com-

rades McCombes, Sheridan, Venton, Curran, Baldassarra, McKerral, etc have neither the energy nor commitment to entertain dual membership of the SSP and the CWI, then nobody is twisting their arms. Peter Taaffe has built no Berlin Wall; nor has he hired border guards charged with the task of imprisoning dissidents. They are at liberty to leave either (or both) organisations any time they like. And if comrade McCombes is a democrat, he ought to respect the right of Phil Stott, Harvey Duke and other CWI loyalists - comrades who clearly do intend to operate inside a broad workers' party (and despite all the pretentious twaddle designating the SSP as a 'party of a new type', a broad workers' party is precisely what it is) - and to do so as part of a "tightly knit caucus", then that ought to be their right. If Phil, Harvey and others want to organise closed meetings of CWI supporters, to publicly distribute independent CWI literature, literature critical of named leading members of the SSP or of the leadership as a whole, and even to distribute (somewhat less publicly) internal bulletins, then that also is their right.

Although I disagree with Phil, Harvey and the rest of the CWI on the question of the single currency, on Ireland, on the question of a parliamentary road to socialism, on the possibility of socialism in an independent Scotland and much more besides, I support their right to organise inside the SSP as a coherent faction, just as I supported their right to do so when they operated inside the Labour Party. Comrade McCombes *et al* seem to have forgotten (if they ever understood it) that Lenin's Bolsheviks operated inside the RSDLP as a "tightly knit caucus", and that, from 1917 onwards, Lenin, Trotsky and all revolutionaries argued that the key reason why the workers' revolution in Russia was successful, while it was defeated everywhere else, came down to the absence of such a party outside Russia. We can all argue over precisely what should be the rights of factions and minorities within Bolshevik-type parties, but the implied threat to supporters of Peter Taaffe (to liquidate his organisation, or to suffer the same fate dished out to them by Kinnock), is an attack on all revolutionaries inside the SSP.

Socialist Outlook supporters and Alliance for Workers' Liberty members already operate inside the SSP. I do not know whether either has registered itself with the SSP executive as a faction. What is beyond doubt is that even if they have not, these individuals will be meeting together privately in order to prepare interventions at the level of branch, day school, conference, etc. The Kinnockite turn announced by comrade McCombes ought to act as a wake-up call to them also. They need to unite (as does the Republican Communist Network) with the Scottish CWI minority in defence of the right of Bolshevik-type factions inside the SSP.

If the Scottish CWI's Kinnockites treat *Socialist Outlook* and the AWL with kid gloves (which may or not be part of their game-plan), that can only be explained by the inoffensiveness

of these factions. And by inoffensiveness I mean, of course, utterly lacking in influence. It would be as counterproductive for comrade McCombes to pick a fight with them at this stage as it would have been for Harold Wilson to have picked a fight with Militant in the 1960s, to have done so when Ted Grant's supporters were contemptuously dismissed as a joke rather than (as was subsequently the case) recognised as an ever more powerful, and well organised, group challenging for leadership of the party.

If comrade McCombes manages to push his prohibition of coherent factions through, this would be an unhealthy state of affairs, with paranoia, kangaroo courts and bitter ex-comrades constantly stabbing one another in the back. Hardly a conducive atmosphere within which to promote fraternal working class unity. But the responsibility for such a sickness, one that would paralyse the SSP, would be the property of those 'Trotskyists' who have surrendered to the prejudices of the SSP's influential social democratic minority.

And the arguments cobbled together to justify the liquidation of factions (all factions other than McCombes's own Kinnockite anti-faction faction) are bizarre in the extreme. One argument deployed against Peter Taaffe (although I cannot for the life of me understand why) was that the RCN (not mentioned by name) advocated that SSP MSPs refuse to swear the oath of allegiance, "a position that would not have been accepted or understood even by the most advanced sections of the working class". Although I worked with members of the RCN at the time, I strongly disagree with their position of 'on principle' not swearing this oath, a stance motivated, in my opinion, by nothing more than an ultra-left moralism. But I cannot understand why this RCN position is an argument for revolutionaries liquidating their "tightly knit caucus" inside a broad workers' party. If anything it is surely an argument for strengthening organisation rather than dissolving it. Had those who have subsequently separated into the majority and minority of the Scottish CWI not systematically hammered out (amongst their entire membership, in isolation from the broad workers' party) a united position on the oath of allegiance, then it would have been more likely the RCN position could have carried the day.

Then there is the question of campaigning for mass non-payment of student fees. Several months ago the Paisley SSP branch held a meeting on student fees. Although a large percentage of contributors to the debate were members of the Scottish CWI (including two English comrades, who had, for over a decade, cut their political teeth as Militant supporters in England), I was the only SSP member to suggest that the meeting moves on from preaching to the converted about why fees were not a good thing, platitudes which even Paddy Ashdown and William Hague could, did, and still do, mouth. When I advanced the position that had, for several months, been outlined in the

pages of *The Socialist*, I was told that a debate on the branch advocating a mass non-payment strategy was (more or less) ruled out of order.

Since the SSP executive was paralysed on this question, the branch had to wait for a definitive position to be handed down to us from on high. I was, thankfully, allowed to come back in and to point out that the reason Tommy Sheridan obtains votes substantially greater than other SSP candidates is directly related to his entering the public arena as the figurehead of the organisation of one of the most significant extra-parliamentary struggles Britain has seen this century. By his willingness to go to jail, rather than to surrender to the law enforcement agencies which tried to harass us into paying the deeply unpopular poll tax, Tommy has built up enormous reservoirs of goodwill amongst socialists in Scotland. Tommy, and the rest of the Scottish CWI leadership (both the majority and minority), have every reason to feel proud about the heroic role they played in this struggle. And yet what a difference between their attitude to the mass non-payment of the poll tax, on the one hand, and the campaign against student fees, on the other.

When Militant failed to win a majority inside the Labour Party, they did not think twice about acting independently. I fully expected that if the Scottish CWI could not instantly win the SSP executive to their position of opting for mass non-payment, then they would, once again, act independently. This would have been the right thing to do in order to further the struggle against fees. It would also (from a purely 'sectarian' point of view) strengthen the position of CWI members inside the SSP. Why precisely was comrade McCombes willing to surrender to the SSP's social democratic minority on this issue, while he was not prepared to do it when Kinnock demanded surrender on the question of the poll tax? If the long delay in getting the SSP to adopt a strategy of non-payment is to be explained by the social democratic tail of the SSP wagging the 'Trotskyist' dog, then this only reinforces the arguments of revolutionaries that we need to be allowed the right to organise our own factions and, when necessary, to act independently of the party.

If the AWL, SO, RCN and Peter Taaffe's loyalist section of the Scottish CWI are going to be faced with a united offensive by the social democratic elements of the SSP, in conjunction with the majority of the Scottish CWI, then it is imperative that we coordinate the defence of our rights.

Hopefully, if ex-supporters of the CWI start to attack the rights of a genuine CWI faction inside the SSP, they will see the sense of coordinating the defence of all revolutionaries inside the SSP. Peter Taaffe does not need to like, or even overly trust, members of SO, AWL, RCN or myself in order to see the sense of coordinating the defence of minority rights inside the SSP. Comrade McCombes might want to take in Peter Taaffe's supporters first, and only then to pick a fight with the rest of us. We cannot allow ourselves to be defeated by a cynical use of such divide and rule tactics. Even socialists who are not members of any of the above revolutionary groups - even those who have no intention of ever joining any "tightly knit caucus" - have an incentive to oppose these plans to smash revolutionary factions inside the SSP ●

There are occasions when socialists can only watch political organisations falling apart from the sidelines, our active engagement with the process limited to rubbing our hands with glee. There are other occasions when we are duty-bound to intervene, solidarising with one side against another, offering advice on how the (relatively) progressive side ought to fight. Clearly the Tories' problems with Jeffrey Archer fall into the first category, while New Labour's problems with Ken Livingstone very much fall into the latter. For now, however, I want to focus on the Committee for a Workers International in Scotland.

I had heard that a serious split inside the organisation was on the cards. Even so, when I read the Scottish CWI documents (*Weekly Worker* November 18), they filled me with dread. The most cursory glance is all it should take to make any revolutionary or independent-minded leftist, feel extremely anxious. The only possible interpretation that can be put on the document written by comrade Alan McCombes ('Marxism in the new millennium', endorsed by six out of seven members of the SCWI executive) is that the SSP will (if they have anything to say about it) follow the Socialist Labour Party down the road of witch hunts and voiding of branches. I would urge the minority CWI loyalists inside the Scottish Socialist Party, and all SSP revolutionaries outside the CWI (and those revolutionaries in England and Wales who point to the SSP as the model for a broad workers' party in England and Wales) to critically examine this document.

Examine in particular point seven of its proposals. Peter Taaffe's strategy is denounced by Alan McCombes in terms identical to those with which Neil Kinnock denounced Militant at the time he dragged them both before a series of kangaroo courts. He then justifies the hostility of non-revolutionaries to the type of caucusing Militant, and others, have always advocated: "It would be a mistake for the ISM to function as a tightly knit caucus with a predetermined position on all the day-to-day tactical, organisational and policy issues that arise. [The ISM - International Socialist Movement - is the latest in a never-ending round of renaming the CWI's Scottish section.] Such an approach towards the SSP would not advance the cause of Marxism within the party, but would generate suspicion and resentment among non-ISM members." This article is disgraceful, representing as it does unmitigated surrender to those who expelled Militant from the Labour Party.

Would it be unreasonable to suppose that the Welsh windbag has exacted revenge on the Labour Party's 'parasites' by organising Kinnockite entryists into Scottish Militant Labour? Probably. Yet Peter Taaffe's supporters in Scotland (Phil Stott, Harvey Duke, etc) ought to be preparing for being witch-hunted out of the SSP by those who were, along with them, witch-hunted out of the Labour Party.

CWI members have on paper, for the moment at least, overwhelming strength inside the SSP. All area organisers are CWI fiefdoms. The industrial organiser is a CWI member. The editor of the paper is also. And our elected Glasgow city councillor and MSP, Tommy Sheridan, is a CWI member. Their preponderance at the SSP's founding conference was such that they withdrew their motion on the single currency. Not because they feared they would suffer humiliation. On the contrary, they did so because they had the numbers to get it passed, and did not want to alienate Hugh Kerr, the party's European parliamentary candidate, Allan Green, the national secretary, and Bill Bonnar, the editor of the party's magazine - all of

British imports

Leon London (writer), Lisa Goldman (director) **Leave to remain** Battersea Arts Centre, box office 0171-223 2223, until December 12, £8 (£5 concessions)



Riz Meedin and Abigail Ramsay: their characters are not safe cardboard cut-outs

This is a play of searing realism set in a rundown west London refugee hostel. Sarah Blenkinsop's functionalist set conveys the soulless grime of decaying 1960s interior architecture perfectly.

Typical of post-Thatcher Britain, the hostel is run by a cash-strapped charity. The regime is Spartan. No sex, no alcohol, no keys, no privacy, no

smoking in the single-sex dorms, and no paid work. The food is awful. The unremitting boredom is broken only by occasional fights and squabbles. Expected to survive on £2 a day, the refugees endlessly wait for home office interviews, judgements and appeals in this bleak, institutionally imposed version of purgatory. Refugees, says Jack Straw, must not be

given an easy time. Others must be discouraged. Welcome to Blair's Britain.

There are seven characters in the cast. Sulita, the hard-pressed black British hostel worker (Abigail Ramsay) and a motley collection, self-selected from around the world's trouble spots. Algeria, Iraq, Kosova, Ukraine, Iran. They have been

brought to Britain by civil wars, persecution, economic meltdown and the hope of making a new life. For the British state such flotsam are a nuisance. Bombarded with complaints, Sulita indiscreetly crosses the line of New Labour political correctness by saying what authority really thinks but never dares say: "No one asked you to come." It is a defining moment.

Leon London has not drawn safe cardboard cut-outs, approved of by blinkered liberals and brittle left reformists. Such types can only bring themselves to oppose racist immigration controls and advocate the rights of those genuinely seeking political asylum. London's refugees are authentic and therefore complex. Victims there are. Most obviously the traumatised Iraqi Kurd, Jamil (Riz Meedin). By the way, showing pig ignorance, *Evening Standard* reviewer Nick Curtis calls him one of the "Arabs" (November 29). Saddam Hussein's torturers have scarred and broken more than his body. But there are also rogues, survivors, opportunists and the apparently downright bloody awkward.

London, it should be noted, worked in a refugee hostel. Here the play has its origins. After the script was completed 18 months of honing and workshops organised by director Lisa Goldman followed. What is more, the actors carried out extensive research into the social and political backgrounds of their own characters. The Kurdish Cultural Centre, the Refugee Council, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and a host of others gave help and advice. The fact that many cast members have personal experience of being migrants into Britain undoubtedly strengthened the ensemble as a whole. The peculiarities and difficulties of speaking English as a foreign tongue. Dealing with the frustrations of the home office. Culture shock.

Perhaps the central dynamic is

Bashkim (splendidly played by Alex McSweeney). He is a Kosovar and former combatant in the Serbian army during its campaign of mass terror and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Bashkim makes a virtue of amorality. Often a form of mental self-defence, an alternative to collapse, passivity and despair. He refuses to be a victim. Rules are for breaking. If you know how the system can be milked. Evidently London admires his creation and presumably its enigmatic source.

As soon as he strides into the hostel Bashkim causes a storm. Within no time he is acting as pimp for the attractive and quietly worldly-wise Tasha (Marlene Nicole Kaminisky). She has a young son in the Ukraine and is desperate for money. Incidentally Tasha featured in the recent Channel 4 short film *Fugie girl* which was developed from the *Leave to remain* script. Fellow Kosovar Arben (Peter Stead) too becomes a willing participant in the black economy. He runs drugs and does small-time thieving for Bashkim.

Spreading around ill-gotten largesse, Bashkim establishes his dominance. The other refugees can, it seems, do nothing about it. They are powerless. The devout muslim Djaffar (Huseyin Poyras) fights back. He is no match for Bashkim. Physical strength and flaunted amorality win. Interestingly it is Leili (Layla Savi) who effectively stands as the moral opposite of Bashkim. She wants Arben and is determined to make it in Britain by learning English, getting educated and jumping all the bureaucratic hoops. Though it is never explored by London, she fled Iran for political reasons.

Director Lisa Goldman has done a great job. Scenes flash forward in a series of snapshots and things never drag. The language question is handled well too. We are given a combination of broken English, as the refugees struggle to communicate across the fog of incomprehension, and straightforward English, albeit with an accent, as for example when the two Kosovars - Bashkim and Arben - speak to each other. Far from being confusing, the device gives insight. Firstly, it shows that behind the halting sentences there is wit and intelligence. Secondly, although for the authorities all the hostel residents are uniformly categorised as refugees, they define themselves, and are defined by others, according to their difference in nationality and language.

London's play lifts the lid on a side of life unknown to the mass of the population. How the British state treats migrants - who come here for political and economic reasons - like criminals is shameful. Straw's draconian Asylum and Immigration Act will make matters far worse. London offers no political solutions. As an artist why should he? He has done what we should expect from a playwright. He has honestly told the truth as he sees it.

Precisely because of that, whatever London's subjective intentions, *Leave to remain* is an indictment of establishment politicians and national chauvinism in general. Only those incapable of empathy will be unmoved by the incompetence, squalor and indignities perpetrated by the immigration system. But his characters challenge conventional leftwing sensibilities too.

They refuse to neatly fit into the allotted role of victim. Like the rest of us they are human ... and human beings, whatever their shortcomings and faults, should have the right to move and settle anywhere on this planet.

The sheer will to live, the tears, tragedies and bitter disappointments, the hope and energy of Leon London's characters point to the rational way forward for me. The only way to overcome the inhumanity of humanity is through humanity ●

Jack Conrad

Don't blame the mirror

David Fincher **Fight Club** USA 1999

This film, starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, is the latest one to inspire a shrill conservative cultural backlash. For example, the London *Evening Standard's* commentator Alexander Walker wondered back in September whether Rupert Murdoch (the owner of the company that released it) realised what kind of film *Fight Club* would be. It was "anti-capitalist" and even "anti-god", Walker shuddered.

This is a revealing comment on the stupidity of conservative reviewers. Up to a point, pillars of the system like Murdoch are willing to put out socially subversive films or TV shows, as long as they turn a profit.

The director, David Fincher, told *Empire* magazine's December issue that one of the main characters of the film, its narrator (Edward Norton), knows that there is something wrong with the world we live in and does not want to simply accept it as it is. In fact, one of Fincher's previous films, *Seven* (1995), is set against the backdrop of a world which is far closer to hell than heaven.

The film opens with Norton's character, an alienated office worker, hanging around self-help groups (the terminally ill, men with testicular cancer, etc). (Incidentally, there are a lot of alienated office workers in recent films, and this must be of some sociological significance.) He does this because he is trying to overcome his own alienation. Then he meets Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) who asks the narrator to hit him.

They start fighting and this turns out to be a form of recreation. Eventually they set up bare-knuckle (men only) boxing bouts in the cellar of a bar and this takes off in a big way. There are a lot of men out there wanting to let out their aggression. In fact fight clubs spring up everywhere as a sort of mass movement.

Tyler also goes in for other subversion: working as a movie projectionist, he splices pornographic images into 'family' films; he sells expensive soap made out of the fat liposuctioned from the bodies of rich women; he replaces airlines' safety cards with ones of his own design which depict passengers panicking

and fighting to get to the exit, and so on. Meanwhile, the bone-crushing boxing matches go on. Then *Fight Club* develops into 'project mayhem', a kind of anarchist assault on corporate America. To reveal more would probably be to reveal too much.

This is a flawed film: it runs out of energy in the last half hour or so, and none of the characters are depicted in any depth. For example, the only major female character, Marla (Helena Bonham Carter), is mainly there to counteract the film's strong homoerotic overtones.

Weekly Worker readers who want to see *Fight Club* should be prepared for a film with violent imagery and sound and a darkly comic view of the world we live in. It does not offer a solution, but it is pitiless about the dystopia of life at the end of the century. It is this that makes the Alexander Walkers who defend this system apoplectic. As the Russian proverb has it, "Don't blame the mirror if your own mug is crooked" ●

James Robertson

Same method

The CPGB turnaround on Livingstone is based on the vulgarisation of Marxist tactics by the SWP and the rest

Michael Malkin was puzzled about the uncertainty expressed by the Labour Party selection panel - after the first meeting with Livingstone - about Ken's stance on the manifesto. Michael thought it was rash of the panel to conclude that Livingstone was not clear on the manifesto, since it was clear "he could not and would not stand on a platform that includes a plan for privatisation of the London underground" (*Weekly Worker* November 18).

But it was Michael's comment which was rash. Livingstone did not take the opportunity to stand independently of New Labour on a platform against the privatisation of the tube. Before the second interview he was asked by John Humphries on Radio 4 this question: "So you are going to fudge the issue of the tube?" "Yes," said Ken. "I believe that is the way forward. The Labour Party has dug itself a big hole and I hope to dig us out of it."

And so it turned out. He rescued New Labour from the mess it had got itself into. But let 'Red Ken' speak for himself: "Let me spell it out. If selected as Labour's candidate for mayor, I will stand on the manifesto agreed by the Labour Party, as must every candidate." The manifesto will be decided by the leadership of New Labour. Blair has ruled out a membership ballot on the issue, so the odds are the manifesto will not contain any opposition to the so-called public-private partnership (privatisation).

Even if the manifesto contained Livingstone's financial proposals to raise money by issuing bonds, this is not part of a left reformist or socialist proposal for state intervention against the market or against Blair's presentation of the Labour Party as the party of business. Nor is it part of an attempt to build an independent anti-capitalist movement against Blair or his supporters. Ken has stated over and over that Frank Dobson (the hammer on healthworkers) and Glenda Jackson (useless to the working class) would make good mayors. Even Jack Conrad knows, "Livingstone is effectively standing on a New Labour programme" (*Weekly Worker* November 18).

But the CPGB turnaround or unacknowledged change of line on Livingstone is based on, and is in agreement with, the vulgarisation of Marxist tactics by the SWP, Workers Power, Socialist Action and the rest. In the past the CPGB always stood out from the ranks of auto-Labourism. Now Jack Conrad and his supporters have adopted the same opportunist method. Their attitude to a vote for Livingstone is indistinguishable from the dogmatic critical support for New Labour of the SWP and Workers Power. The CPGB's previous principled position is denounced as hopeless sectarianism. The very charge made against the CPGB in the past by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the others.

Jack Conrad used to understand that the tactic of critical support depends on politics. The CPGB majority once taught the 'vote Labour' opportunists the Marxist ABCs. Communists do not support one side or the other in an organisational dispute in New Labour. Socialists do not support one personality against another in an election campaign. More to the revolutionary point, in the Livingstone campaign Leninists do not see Livingstone as the lesser evil. Lenin did not simply give critical support to the Labour Party to get a hearing from workers, but to persuade those workers inspired by the Russian Revolution and the classless society, who were not already fighting for socialism in their councils of action, that soviets were necessary and there was no parliamentary road to socialism.

Nor do Marxists crudely merge

with the spontaneous movement and consciousness of the workers. In the phraseology of *What is to be done?* Mark Fischer accuses his critics of using tactics to belittle the spontaneous movement. But the CPGB is passively adapting to spontaneity. Revolutionaries do not start from the mentality or illusions of the workers. As Trotsky explained to the American SWP, we begin from historical needs of workers and an overall analysis of class relationships. The political task is to develop the consciousness of the workers to find a bridge to the workers' republic.

This is why until recently leading comrades in the CPGB argued that socialists could not support Livingstone unless he stood on a socialist or democratic minimum programme (depending on the *Weekly Worker* writer). Independently of Blairism. All this is now regarded as hopeless doctrinairism by Conrad (*Weekly Worker* November 18). But where is the self-criticism and the honest accounting for the change of position? The comrade owes this to his members as well as the readers of the *Weekly Worker*.

Now the *Weekly Worker* carries phrases and arguments straight out of the Brenner/Matgamna cookbook of tactical recipes. Michael Malkin writes with all due seriousness that as long as the Labour Party "retains its mass base in the working class and its reliance on workers' votes, these class forces can and will make themselves felt". Very mysterious. But how do we get from Conrad's depoliticised, non-socialist working class in a reactionary period, with the left at an historical low point, to the class asserting its hegemony or collective interest?

When the working class does engage in mass anti-capitalist struggle it will not necessarily do this through the Labour Party or by voting Labour. Indeed, given the historical decline of reformism or Labourism, it is unlikely. New Labour voters are not reformists, nor are they voting for reformism. Nor is New Labour reformist. As Conrad concedes, the bourgeois aspect of the bourgeois Labour Party is becoming dominant. The timeless schemas of orthodox Trotskyism which underpin Michael's comments are lifeless.

Workers do not always turn to their traditional political organisations or the Labour Party, as the poll tax and other issues show. The link with trade unionists is indirect, via the trade union bureaucracy. Any mass socialist involvement by trade unionists would entail a break with the bureaucracy. Historically and certainly in today's reactionary climate the pressure in the trade unions and the Labour

Party has been from the top down - bourgeois pressure. It was not for nothing that Trotsky once wrote that the two pillars of the bourgeois order in Britain were the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

When the CPGB denounced orthodox Trotskyists at the last general election for their tailism for 'critically' voting Labour, the orthodox response was to insist that, whatever the reasons for workers voting Labour, these did not matter, since whatever the illusions it was somehow a socialist step forward. Mark Fischer has adopted the same position. Writing in the *Weekly Worker* (November 11), he pontificates that, "Whatever foolish notions cluttered their [Ken's supporters'] heads, they would be registering a left protest against the government." So why did Mark not vote for Blair, shoulder to shoulder with New Labour voters, in the general election? After all he argues that the Livingstone campaign can become a focal point for millions and we must merge with any movement that might result from it.

The implication of these comments is the SWP 'idea' of the crisis of expectations. If Ken wins the nomination, Mark tells us, "In its own distorted and inarticulate way this will at the same time be a manifestation of the mass discontent and disillusionment with the Labour government" (*Weekly Worker* November 11). Comrade Malkin has a more radical version, stating that the Livingstone campaign "creates the possibility that a mass working class movement independent of Labour could rise and take very different political forms from the past".

How can the Livingstone campaign, which is not independent of Labour, create a new socialist movement? And how can backing Livingstone's campaign, dependent on New Labour, result in a mass break from Labour? This is pure fantasy. Recently 'Red Ken' has been cultivating his links with capitalists, agreeing the market is key for the British economy, supporting the bombing of Yugoslavia and arguing that bonds for the tube are sensible business proposals.

Ken had his best opportunity to stand independent of Labour at the second interview. All he had to do was say: 'No, I will not stand on a manifesto for the privatisation of the

tube.' Ken's fear of standing independently of New Labour was as great as the fear of the Blairites that he would stand independently. Even if Ken eventually gives Londoners the right to vote for him as an independent mayor, which now seems less likely, this bourgeois democratic right does not have socialist conclusions.

Michael says the democratic right of millions of Londoners to elect Ken as mayor and the democratic right of London Labour Party members to claim back their party (*Weekly Worker* November 4) is the central issue. This empties workers' democracy of any revolutionary content. Why did Michael not make the democratic right of New Labour supporters to vote Labour the central issue of the CPGB general election campaign? As for the right of London Labour Party members to claim back their party, this is to repeat the SWP/AWL theme that old Labour is still strong and the Labour Party has not or is not going through dramatic historical changes and that old Labour reformism has not really declined. Part of the crisis of expectations 'theory' was the notion that old Labour would rise again and had never been really defeated.

But let us allow Michael to take up the Alex Callinicos argument: "New Labour as an ideological construct remains an amorphous, superficial and largely elitist phenomenon, lacking any deep roots in the Labour Party and the Labour movement in general" (*Weekly Worker* November 4).

So we must have imagined the scrapping of clause four, the successful attacks on democracy and accountability in the party, the ditching of any kind of reformist, let alone socialist, politics. The leaving of the party by socialist activists. The support for the Blair project by the trade union bureaucracy and the adoption of partnership or class collaboration by the big unions.

But enough. For some years the *Weekly Worker* has stood out against the ranks of political opportunism, tailism and general adaptation to the Labour Party. Not any more. Mark says: "Round one to Livingstone" (*Weekly Worker* November 25). Actually it is round one to the Labour Party. Why does the left not stand its own candidate to attempt to merge the communist programme with the masses? ●

Barry Biddulph

Fighting fund

Partyism

An SWP comrade writes: "Lenin said, 'The workers' newspaper is the workers' forum ... the workers should raise here, one after another, the various questions of workers' life and of working class democracy in particular.' The *Weekly Worker* is filling that role today and I enclose £50 in support. This was the money I had put aside to put towards the *Socialist Worker* appeal."

The comrade has understood Partyism in its true sense. His donation has helped to send our No-

vember total way over our £400 monthly target. Congratulations to all who contributed to the magnificent £515, including comrades CM (£25), JD (£20) and CM (another one!), who gave £5.

Let's end the year on a high note by matching last month's total in December ●

Robbie Rix

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- 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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Not one bullet

The long-stalled peace process has taken a quantitative step forward this week with the formation of the Northern Ireland executive.

Less than five months before the two-year deadline for the completion of the terms of the Good Friday agreement, the disjointed administration that should have been set up more than a year ago is to start work. Of course this is no 'government' in the normal bourgeois sense, where individual ministers are supposed to work in concert as part of a united whole. In fact, as everybody knows, Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds, the two representatives of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, will refuse to sit in the same room as their Sinn Féin counterparts, Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brun.

The peculiarities of the de Hondt system allowed each of the four main parties to choose a ministry in turn. Without the IRA handing over a single bullet Sinn Féin was able to snap up education. For revolutionaries, democrats and anti-imperialists the reaction of unionism and British reactionaries at the thought of Martin McGuinness, a 'terrorist', presiding over the schooling of Northern Ireland children was a source of wry amusement: "The appointment is the political equivalent of child abuse," raged *The Daily Telegraph* (November 30).

The *Telegraph* leader-writer perfectly expressed the impotence of a section of rightwing Tory-unionist opinion at the consequences of the deal brokered by former US senator George Mitchell on behalf of the British, US and Irish governments - ie, the new world order.

Those championed by the *Telegraph* just cannot bring themselves to accept that the British state - for all its MI5, SAS, its overwhelmingly superior weaponry, its no-jury courts, its manipulation of the media, its huge tax revenues, its parliamentary bipartisanship - was unable to defeat the IRA (it is exactly 10 years since the then Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Brooke, first admitted as much, so setting the initial steps of the peace process in motion). For the intransigent wing of the establishment and Paisleyite loyalists the presence of SF in the executive represents the depths of humiliation for their beloved queen and country.

The same paper gave space to Boris Johnson, editor of *The Spectator*: "This process has been morally flawed from the start," he wailed. "It is a protracted capitulation by democrats to terror. First we said we wouldn't talk to them on principle ... Then we said that formal negotiations couldn't begin unless the IRA began to decommission ... Then we said that there could be no deal ... unless the IRA handed in some weapons ... we made the men of violence a final of-



Martin McGuinness, minister of education: helping to run the Six Counties statelet

fer. We would not spring them from jail unless weapons were decommissioned ... Then we said there was absolutely no way, no way, the IRA - or its representatives in Sinn Féin - could expect to be included in the new devolved government, unless some weapons were handed over ..."

The pathetic alternative, as far as Johnson is concerned, is simply to carry on as before with Britain's failed strategy: "Nothing will really work unless we stick to our guns and make the IRA give up theirs." Quite how he proposes to "make" the IRA toe the line is unelaborated. Jeffrey Donaldson, the leading UUP oppositionist, was equally bereft of ideas: "The alternative is to go back to the negotiating table" was the best he could come up with.

However, for the more realistic sections of the British and unionist establishments, the question of arms, while obviously important, is not paramount. The central issue is the gradual establishment of stability under the evolving politico-economic convergence of the European Union superstate. The complete and final ending of the armed struggle, its replacement by 'normal' politics under the EU, is the aim. The fact that the ceasefire has held for so long is regarded as vital; the IRA's arms can be left to rust in their dumps, as has occurred with the weaponry of successive waves of Irish republicanism in the past.

But the arms question was certainly the stumbling block for the rank and file unionists in the British-Irish community. That is why David

Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, felt compelled to make prior decommissioning the bottom line: "The party policy is, and will remain, quite simply 'no guns, no government'," he told the UUP youth wing only last month. After all the previous shifts listed by Boris Johnson, Trimble had a big job on his hands to get his party to accept the truth of the matter: IRA disarmament just could not be achieved. Yet, if the peace process can be kept on track, he believes, the future of Ulster and of unionism could be secured.

Trimble explained his thinking to *The Daily Telegraph*: "Structurally [Sinn Féin] are operating the institutions of Northern Ireland. We all know this is a partitionist agreement and they're working the agreement. Now, they may still say that they're pursuing a strategy of seeking a united Ireland and being 60s radicals. We'll hear shortly that they're taking a long march through the institutions - though we all know where that ended!" (November 18). He is, of course, putting a unionist gloss on the British-Irish Agreement. It could equally lead (eventually) to a safe, bourgeois all-Ireland state. Nevertheless, in the short term he is correct: SF is helping to run the Northern Ireland statelet.

So Trimble - fully supported by Northern Ireland secretary Peter Mandelson - had to pull out all the stops. Managing to win over one of the most influential hardliners, John Taylor, who had claimed to be "undecided" right until the last minute but "persuaded" by Mandelson's assur-

ances, and waving his postdated letter of resignation - to be implemented if decommissioning is not underway by February 2000 - the UUP leader was able to secure 58% backing for the setting up of the executive. Mandelson's ploy of awarding the George Cross to the Royal Ulster Constabulary played no small part in the battle for the minds of the party membership, as did dire warnings about the danger of a forthcoming bombing campaign on the British mainland by "extremist terrorists" (as opposed to the more reasonable variety in SF/IRA presumably).

Thus, according to the Mitchell formula, "Devolution should take effect, then the executive should meet and then the paramilitary groups should appoint their established representatives, all on the same day, in that order." If arms have not been handed in by February, the recalled UUP council could in theory authorise the withdrawal of Trimble, together with UUP ministers Reg Empey, Michael McGimpsey and Sam Foster, from the executive - but as things stand now it is unlikely.

There will of course be many difficulties for Trimble ahead. The DUP has openly admitted that it is taking up its ministerial entitlements only in order to sabotage the whole deal. And the defection of just one or two anti-agreement unionists from Trimble's party would mean that the assembly could be paralysed, formally needing as it does a majority for any major decision from both self-designated 'unionists' and 'nationalists'. However, from the point of view of Britain, the

USA and Ireland, the main thing is that devolution is up and running.

It is, of course, uncertain whether decommissioning - meaningful or otherwise - will actually occur. As Martin Ferris, a senior SF negotiator, pointed out (to the embarrassment of Gerry Adams) to supporters in the USA, "If IRA guns are silent, the executive is up and doing business, the assembly is up and doing business, why on earth would Blair collapse all of that over the non-decommissioning of guns that are silent anyway?" Why indeed. Such a move would be "sheer lunacy", in the words of another leading SFer, Pat Doherty, who also poured cold water on the idea of the IRA handing over its guns. It is now clear that the refusal to decommission has gained SF/IRA much ground. A well timed token surrender of outdated arms could, if necessary, still be enacted to allow Trimble to argue for the continuation of the executive.

Adams and McGuinness now look set to advance their own influence, together with that of Sinn Féin, not only in the Six Counties, where SF can be expected to replace the SDLP as the leading catholic-Irish party in the short term, but in the South too. Here the organisation is taking rapid strides forward, building on the prestige of its central role in the unfolding settlement. Their ambitions stretch far beyond a couple of toy ministries in Northern Ireland: they see themselves playing a central role in the government of a future united Ireland.

Does this mean that the deal is a step forward in the interests of democracy and the working class? Clearly not. We are communists, not nationalists. A united Ireland imposed from above - not least against the will of the million British-Irish in the north - would not advance our cause by one inch. The fact that Trimble and Adams are being praised to the sky by Blair and Mandelson should tell us whose interests are being served by a deal which *institutionalises* sectarian divisions. The revolutionary situation that gripped the Six Counties for three decades, and occasionally threatened to spill over into the republic too, has been successfully negated.

But the new situation opens up new possibilities. Tension remains high and the Tories could yet seek to take advantage of loyalist discontent in the British-Irish community to provoke a crisis for Blair - using extra-parliamentary methods. More importantly, there will be new opportunities for communists. Our central aim in Ireland remains working class unity - and that can only be achieved voluntarily.

We are for a united Ireland from below. This means forging in these new conditions a strategy capable of winning the British-Irish population from Trimble, Paisley and Hutchinson, and the catholic-Irish population from Ahern, Hume and Adams ●

Jim Blackstock