



weekly worker

**Where next for Cuba? Maciej
Zurowski interviews Circles
Robinson of 'Havana Times'**

■ London Student Assembly
■ Communist Students
■ SWP conference
■ Cancún failure

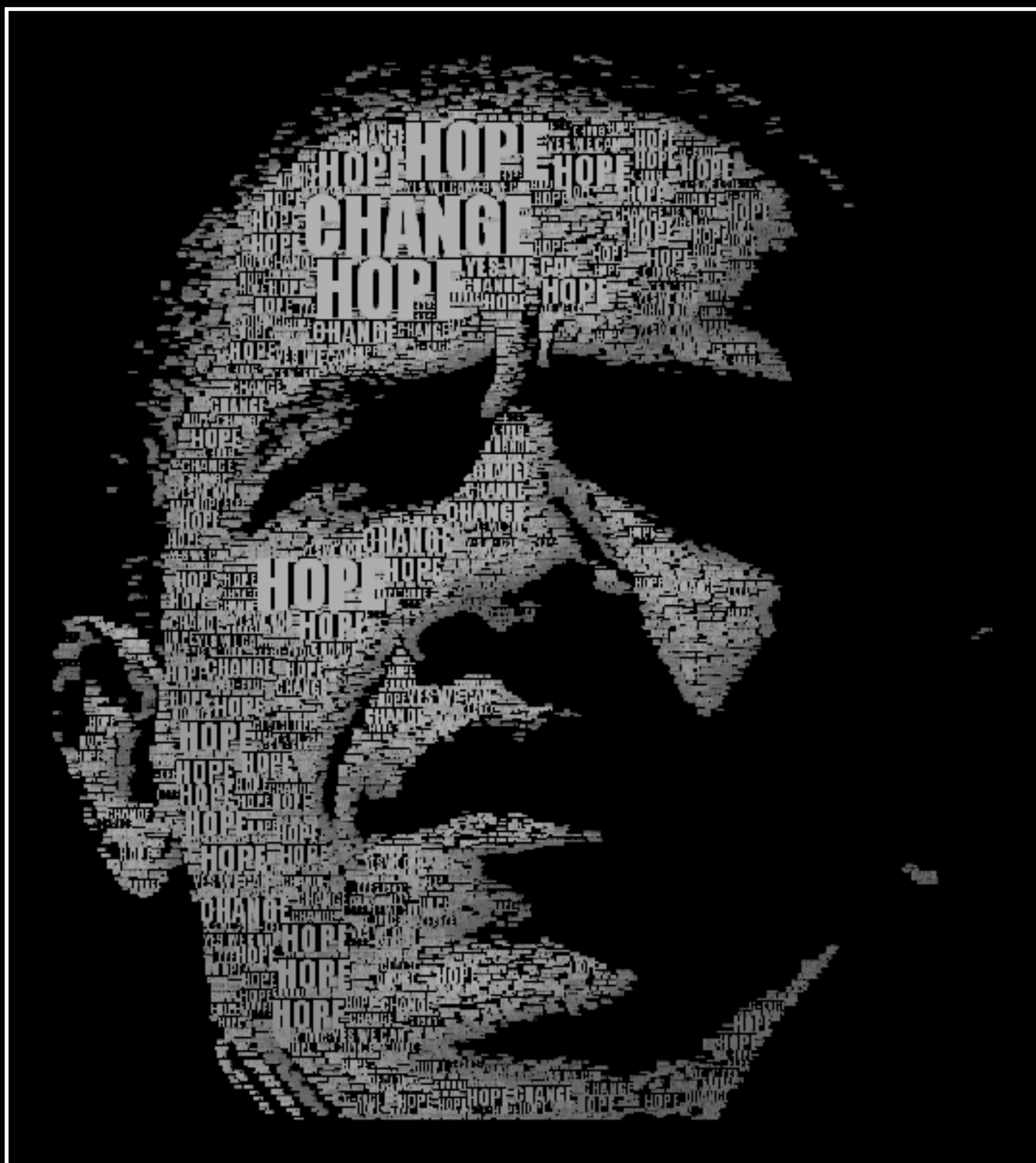
No 848

Thursday January 13 2011

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

www.cpgb.org.uk

£1/€1.10



NO CHANGE, NO HOPE

Following the Democrats' defeat in the US mid-term elections Barack Obama has surrendered to Congressional Republicans and the renewed ruling class offensive

LETTERS



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

Scab stab

I draw your attention to quotes from articles by Mike Macnair (2006) and from Sarah McDonald (2011) respectively:

"If the allegations are substantially true and Sheridan has simply lied ... in court, then he would have abused the legal process of the capitalist state to give himself a false reputation and smear his opponents in the [Scottish Socialist Party] leadership ... This would amount, as the [United Left majority faction in the SSP] argues, to a gross breach of proletarian morality and a scab attack on the party he co-founded. If this is the case, he should be driven out of the workers' movement.

"If the allegations are substantially false, then by making and retaining a minute of the November 9 executive meeting which included the statement that Sheridan had admitted to a part of the *News of the World's* allegations, the executive majority committed themselves to support for an attack by the Murdoch press on the SSP's most prominent leader. If they deliberately followed this course of action for factional reasons, then they are scabs and should be driven out of the workers' movement" ('Sheridan wins first round', August 10 2006).

"The verdict in the Tommy Sheridan case should be seen as a blow to the workers' movement and a victory for the long-running campaign against a prominent working class leader ... But he should not have labelled those on the SSP leadership 'scabs' for telling the truth when they were forced to - after all, why would anyone perjure themselves over someone else's sex life? ... Sheridan was targeted by the *News of the World* for his role as a working class leader - and that is why we side with him against News International, the police and the state, irrespective of his own foolishness and irresponsible behaviour" ('Scabs and vengeance', January 6 2011).

So Mike Macnair in 2006 took the view that, if Sheridan was shown to have lied, then he would have carried out a "scab attack on the party he co-founded", while Sarah McDonald in 2011 still sees Sheridan as a "working class leader" targeted by the *NotW* who still deserves solidarity despite (untruthfully) branding his former comrades as liars and scabs.

And, according to Ms McDonald, George McNeillage is the worst villain of the lot: "... demanding £250,000 for helping News International to nail Sheridan. Again, the SSP failed to take action. McNeillage should have been expelled for his blatant crossing of class lines (the significant financial gain making the whole thing even slier), but the leadership refused to take any action because it was 'not in their culture'."

Sorry, I don't get it. Sheridan lied and tore his party apart. He forced people to go to court and tried to morally blackmail them into perjuring themselves to protect his reputation as a good, decent, Scrabble-playing, family man. When people refused to perjure themselves, he and his supporters (including the Committee for a Workers' International and Socialist Workers Party) called them liars and scabs. Sheridan and his supporters did everything they could to destroy the lives and reputations of people who had told the truth (see, for example, 'Sheridan trial shame has left my life in ruins' *The Observer* August 13 2006). After the initial libel 'victory', Sheridan and his supporters also put people at risk of being taken to court

and charged with perjury.

As far as I'm concerned, those SSP people at risk of being charged had no choice except 'collaborating' with the police, as a perjury inquiry had been initiated by the judge at the end of the libel case. And McNeillage's tape, in the end, helped expose Sheridan for the liar that he is.

While not being a supporter of the SSP myself, I took an interest in this case, as many of my family and friends in Glasgow had gone from being Labour supporters to strong SSP voters. The SSP gave them hope and some optimism for the future. That hope has just gone down the drain because of the actions of Sheridan, the CWI, the SWP and the motley crew that make up Solidarity.

So, when the various factions who saw it worthwhile to smear honest socialists ask for support in various 'fights against the cuts' and 'building a new workers' party', pardon me if I can't believe a word they say. When push came to shove, they stabbed the SSP in the back.

John Rogan
email

Guilty fascists

It is remarkable that contributors to this newspaper persist in trying to present the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as in some way 'socialist' or progressive.

The latest example is Andrew Northall's letter (January 6). Northall justifies Stalin's purges of the 1930s on the grounds that they were effective in destroying a "fascist fifth column". If this had survived, it would have weakened the Soviet war effort against Germany and compromised the future of socialism. It was therefore necessary to arrest and execute 700,000 fifth columnists. Unfortunately, "a number of innocent people died", but "the great majority were guilty".

Northall proves the guilt of these fascist infiltrators by appealing to the authority of Oleg V Khlevniuk, a senior research fellow of the Russian Federation. He does not discuss the methods that Khlevniuk is supposed to have used to establish the guilt of this great majority. Nor does he mention any critical scholarly debate of a controversial opinion he attributes to Khlevniuk. Instead he states that interpretations differing from his own are forms of "cold war and Trotskyist conspiracy theory".

What is striking about Northall's argument is that it minimises the extent of the barbarity of Stalinism by ignoring the deaths of people through torture and beatings, people worked to death in labour camps and those who died as a result of forced collectivisation. It presents a world war that could have been avoided if German communists had allied with social democrats to prevent fascism as a victory for socialism. Moreover, it assumes that the regime's justifications for its inhumanity deserve to be supported and admired.

As a Stalinist, Northall rejects Marxist approaches to understanding the purges. These start from Marx's assumption that the key to understanding a social formation is to examine the mode of its surplus extraction. The Soviet purges can be understood as a means of consolidating forms of control over the alienation of workers' labour-power. In the absence of an exchange with capital, alienation was achieved through force. Controls included police surveillance and the arbitrary arrest of workers. These served to atomise them and prevent collective opposition to the bureaucratic elite benefiting from their exploitation. The purges destroyed any possibility of internal criticism of the regime, especially from the left.

Northall's argument assumes that the former USSR was socialist because it had a nationalised economy. The regime needed to exterminate a section of its population in order to protect nationalised property relations from fascist and therefore capitalist and imperialist influence. Nationalisation is, however, only a necessary condition for socialism, not a sufficient one.

Nationalised property is compatible with capitalist social relations both nationally and globally. The recent nationalisation of banks is an example of national compatibility. Fascism or 'national socialism' is another. Stalinism is an example of global compatibility. Any so-called 'socialist' justification for oppressing workers to protect nationalisation has therefore no theoretical, empirical, political or moral foundation.

Paul B Smith
email

Rule of iron

By their own admission, the Socialist Party of Great Britain is not and cannot become the political leadership of the working class in the struggle for socialism in Britain.

In complete opposition to Alan Johnstone and Stuart Watkins (Letters, January 6), I will put forward what can be called the 'iron law of leadership', as far as the struggle for socialism is concerned. This law simply states that leadership is inevitable and cannot be abolished or circumvented. The inevitability of leadership arises from there being different levels of political understanding, ability, motivation and commitment in the working class.

Also, it is important to recognise that leadership may have deeper psychological roots. Human beings have always followed leaders, be it in politics, religion, scientific ideas or even fashion. So I am not going to place any bets on the wisecracks of the SPGB being able to get rid of it in the working class.

Those who are fighting against the idea of leadership in the working class are seeking to behead the proletariat, with a guillotine operated by the SPGB. However, Johnstone is right to point out that the validity of any idea can only be determined by practice, or "concrete developments on the ground". Defending the scientific method may indicate that he is upholding the SPGB's anti-leadership theory in a less dogmatic manner. The problem for Johnstone is that historical experience has already dismissed his anti-leadership ideas.

Finally, people who are fighting to destroy leadership in the working class are really opposing formal leadership structures where the leadership is open and accountable, as far as this is made possible by political conditions. While concealing themselves behind anti-leadership rhetoric, they replace open leadership with informal, secret and unaccountable leadership cliques. Unable to escape the iron law of leadership, they opt for informal leadership, behind the backs of the working class.

Tony Clark
email

Trust

I applaud the trade union leaders who are mobilising workers to fight against the government's cuts. It is with sadness that I learnt this week that Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services union, has issued redundancy notices to all fixed-term contract staff, some of whom have worked for PCS for over four years.

Mr Serwotka has repeatedly said in public that there should be no job losses and repeatedly defends workers'

rights. Is he following Nick Clegg's example of getting elected by saying one thing and in practice doing another?

John Buxton
email

Nothing wrong

Aside from the second to last paragraph, which justifies the existence of the Zionist state, and is so jarringly at odds with the rest of the article that it seems spliced in, comrade Eddie Ford's article, 'Don't give in to the slurs' (January 6), is excellent.

Apart from some clumsy formulations, did Clare Solomon say anything wrong?

Gino Molinari
CCRFI supporter

Nuke refute

Mike Macnair's article, 'Pause for thought' (December 16), on the rule of law was well written, but I do have a concern for something that's missing in the discussion: civil disobedience.

Even the reformists of the Second International supported illegal actions like peaceful sit-ins or strikes, so long as it didn't descend into violence proper (and by this, I mean the real violence of smashing windows, burning buildings, etc). It's like an axis of legal-illegal on the horizontal and peaceful-violent on the vertical.

The Marxist tradition has it wrong on 'Peaceful means where possible and violent revolution when necessary'. It should be: 'Legal means where possible and illegal means when necessary, with the bourgeois authorities determining the level of peace or violence', emulating more the US civil rights movement under Martin Luther King Jr than the British anti-poll tax action.

I'd also like to ask comrade Macnair personally, or any other CPGB comrade familiar with law or legal history, this question: if we're going to scrap the ever-bourgeois idea of rule of law and the slogan 'law and order', this means replacing words and processes like legislation. Do we replace this with mere rules and rules-making?

On the unrelated topic of my letter about Iran's nuclear weapons (December 9), Laurie McCauley writes: "He is also guilty of glossing over the truth when he says that nuclear weapons are purely external deterrents. Do Hiroshima and Nagasaki ring any bells? In fact, they can be and have been used as offensive weapons when seen as a quicker option for the nation using them than a protracted air, sea and ground campaign" (Letters, January 6).

I just wanted to clarify by re-emphasising the word "external". Hiroshima and Nagasaki were used against civilian populations, but not against domestic civilian populations. I was referring to nukes being used against their own population.

Jacob Richter
email

Depravity

While many non-Iraqis have welcomed the return of Muqtada al-Sadr from his self-imposed 'exile' in Iran, there are some who can see beyond his phrases of "peace" and "resistance". I can understand that some on the left do like to cheer the four horsemen of the apocalypse, but al-Sadr's anti-US rhetoric is given greater prominence than his declaration about wanting to "eradicate" the "depravity" of Iraq's LGBT community.

Equally as unlikely to grace the British media is the fact that al-Sadr's Mahdi army, in areas such as Basra, has imposed a ban on such deviant behaviour as listening to music or, worse

still, having a non-religious ring tone. And nothing is more offensive to al-Sadr than the sight of men wearing shorts - his issue of a fatwa in 2005 banning such garments resulted in the murder of a coach and two members of Iraq's national tennis team, while a further fatwa denounced football as "evil" and "sacrilegious", with sports in general being described as part of an "Israeli conspiracy".

So, while some may agree with al-Sadr that the US and UK are the "common enemy", it needs to be remembered that he and his band of marionettes were only ever given their job of 'forming a government' in the presence of an ongoing occupation.

Hussein Al-alak
email

Free speech

Where do we draw the line between religious freedom and free speech on the one hand, and public order and the protection of minorities on the other hand?

Christian street preacher Dale McAlpine last month won £7,000 in damages, following his arrest and detention by the police in April 2010 for saying homosexuality is a sin. He had expressed his beliefs to passers-by in Workington, Cumbria. As a result, he was charged with making "threatening, abusive or insulting" remarks, contrary to the Public Order Act. The court case was dropped and instead he was offered an apology by the chief constable, and compensation.

As a campaigner for gay rights, I disagree with Mr McAlpine's intolerant views. But, as a defender of free speech, I endorse his right to express them. Indeed, I had offered to testify in his defence, had his case gone to court. He did not incite violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. Mr McAlpine's views - although they are misguided and offensive - caused no injury or damage to anyone. His intolerant views should be challenged, but he should not have been arrested.

Contrast his case with my experience. In 1994, the Islamist fundamentalist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), held a mass rally at Wembley Arena. Its members advocated killing gay people and "unchaste" women. They heaped hatred and abuse on Jews and Hindus. Together with five of my colleagues from the gay rights group, Outrage, I staged a peaceful, lawful counter-protest. It was six of us against 6,000 of them. Some members of HT threatened: "We will track you down and kill you." Despite these criminal incitements to murder us, they were not arrested. We were. Our free speech was denied. We were charged under the Public Order Act. In contrast to Mr McAlpine's case, the police did not drop the charges and apologise, let alone compensate us. It took nearly two years of lengthy, costly legal battles for me to finally win an acquittal.

A free society depends on the free exchange of ideas. Freedom of speech includes the right to criticise and mock, and to say things that many of us find offensive. Just as gay people should have the right to criticise religion, people of faith should also have the right to criticise homosexuality.

Peter Tatchell
email

Obsessed

Perhaps the *Weekly Worker* and CPGB would be better off trying to build their own party rather than being so obsessed with the internal workings of the SWP. After all it is easy to stand back and be critical of others when you don't do anything yourselves.

Geoff Hay
email

STUDENTS

Wider and deeper

On Sunday January 12 around 150 student activists attended the fifth London Student Assembly at the University of London Union

Numerous interventions came from seasoned left activists belonging to groups like Counterfire, the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party in England and Wales, Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Workers Power - and also newer comrades who have been drawn into the inspiring struggles of the last few months. Most encouraging in this sense was the militant enthusiasm witnessed in speeches from the floor. Many spoke of the need to step up the struggle, to link up with sections of the organised workers' movement and to bring down the co-alition government. All good stuff.

Also positive was that the London Student Assembly, which was formed in November last year, actually *votes* on proposals coming from the floor and takes *majority* decisions. This is in favourable contrast to the emphasis on (anti-democratic) 'consensus' decision-making, which has been all too prevalent on the left in recent times. In a meeting of this size proceedings can occasionally get out of hand. But with an able chair this is a necessary price to pay for an open exchange of ideas, and certainly preferable to hiving people off into separate 'workshops'.

Presidium volunteer Simon Hardy of Workers Power introduced the meeting by talking about the need for a discussion on "what the movement is about and where it is going" - a more than necessary starting point for what promises to be an exciting year ahead. The problem, however, was that the lively and animated discussion largely restricted itself to simply organising actions, interspersed with personal impressions and/or reports. This meant there was far too much focus on uncontroversial organisational details - meeting points for demos, leafleting for such actions, canvassing union branches, etc - which could be finalised by an accountable leadership. Thus "where the movement is going" often amounted to discussing the logistics of events such as the 'Save the education maintenance allowance' day of action on January 26 or the national demonstrations against cuts in Manchester and London on January 29.

What was lacking above all was a strategy to win backing in schools and colleges and imbue these with politics. There certainly was talk of the necessity of *broadening* our support, but this tended to oscillate between the left's view of winning over "organised sections of the class" (Daniel Randall, AWL) or "the unions and the NUS" (Fiona Edwards, Student Broad Left) and a more anarchistic focus on 'direct action' (banner drops, 'teach-outs' at train stations, etc). I was not called in the discussion due to the sheer number of people wanting to speak, but it strikes me that the development of a plan for London-wide mass leafleting of students and the organisation of meetings and branches in colleges and universities *between* stunts and demos is of some urgency. Perhaps without any effective leadership (see below) this is currently impossible. Yet with such a coordinated plan there is no reason why the assembly could not strike deeper roots and perhaps soon move towards delegated meetings and sessions.

For now though, the SWP and Counterfire in particular (I initially thought one SWP activist actually *was* an anarchist!) seem to be focussing on 'marching on parliament' and bringing 'the spirit of May 1968' to Britain - all of which was pretty much 'common sense' for most of those in attendance.

Some controversy did surface, however. It appears that the January 29 cuts demonstration in London, initially called by the AWL/WP-backed Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, clashes with a demonstration in Manchester called by the Trades Union Congress Young Members and the National Union of Students.

Members of SPEW (not that they deemed it necessary to declare their affiliations) argued that the TUC had been dragged "kicking and screaming" into action through the hard work of activists in the PCS and other unions. We should use this demo, they argued, to gradually build for a general strike. One SPEW comrade said it was problematic to canvass branches of the RMT or CWU for a London demonstration when the TUC would be simultaneously mobilising members to go to Manchester. A good point, of course. But she then rather sloppily declared that the TUC was an "official structure, a massive force who we cannot argue with", which elicited some amusement amongst those present.

Michael Chessum, Education and Campaigns Officer at the University College of London sabbatical officer and a leading light in the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, pointed out that it was "absolutely feasible" to have two demonstrations at the same time - having a London demonstration was not opposed to one in Manchester. Pointing out its hideous role in the fight against cuts, he suspected ulterior motives on the part of the NUS leadership. Comrade Randall also alleged that the "national bureaucracy is hardly mobilising" for the Manchester demo. University of London Union president Clare Solomon then suggested a compromise: that the LSA send a "delegation" of "one or two buses" to Manchester under the slogan of 'Bring Millbank to Manchester'. This was narrowly passed.

The only other potential source of controversy was avoided. SPEW had issued an unsigned motion calling for the election of an LSA steering committee to "coordinate motions going to the student assembly, help to organise meetings, etc, as well as give a direction".

In addition to the call for this committee to be composed of 10 directly elected people from the assembly, it also called for two representatives from the national anti-cuts campaigns - Youth Fight for Education (the recently renamed SPEW front that was formerly Youth Fight for Jobs), Education Activist Network (SWP) and NCAFC. No mention of other campaigns like the Coalition of Resistance, Communist Students or the Student Broad Left's Progressive Students. But it got worse, with the motion also calling for the committee to be composed of those "with elected positions in the student movement, NUS NEC, LGBT and other liberation campaigns, local

students unions and ULU".

Clearly this would be a *block* on the ongoing dynamism of the student revolt. A rather crude attempt to put SPEW into a leading position, from where it can do backroom deals with its beloved left trade union officialdom. No, instead of looking to the past, to bureaucratic fronts and people elected to routine positions, we must look to the energy, creativity and anger of the student revolt itself. For the moment then we must avoid *premature institutionalisation*.

As it was, this SPEW motion was deferred until the next meeting - not the first time this has happened either. As this motion had fallen off the agenda again, controversy then ensued about when precisely it would be tabled during the next meeting. In the end we were assured that it would be the first item on the agenda. This is only appropriate. Effective action on the part of the LSA requires a thorough discussion of how it should organise. Clare Solomon was sceptical though: "Whether we agree with the motion or not," she warned of the danger of people being scared off by such discussions. Highlighting the dwindling numbers towards the end of the meeting, she questioned whether tabling such a motion first would lead to more people disappearing even earlier.

She is not wrong. Getting 150 activists along on a Sunday is good. But that surely also shows the huge task we have in front of us. Winning the majority, not just the militant minority. Ad hoc working groups or committees for this or that particular job will surely work perfectly well at this stage. Meanwhile the LSA needs to be kept open for all who want to fight the cuts and the coalition. Students, schools students, teachers, trade unionists ... everyone should be welcomed. Indeed one key task must be to spread the example of the LSA downwards and outwards. Each college, each campus, each school needs its assembly. Then we can begin to talk about elected and recallable delegates (not automatic places for this group, that front, etc).

Parallel but separate to this should be the fight for the unity of the student left. The CPGB and Communist Students have consistently argued that the student left, or at least the student left that considers itself Marxist, should unite as Marxists. So it is patently obvious that, as well as helping to organise actions, we also need to be having a serious debate about where the student left is going. How do we bring down the coalition? What should we aim to replace it by? Are we content to remain disorganised in numerous small groups? Can we form a single student Marxist left? Can we unite on a pro-partyist basis?

Anyhow, it was an inspiration to see a real organisational expression - however embryonic - of the anger that exploded on to streets last year. Communists look to build on that anger and link it with the working class movement. To that end students must be mobilised from across the country to support the TUC's March 26 demonstration in London against the cuts. We must want to see it mass, we want to see it militant ●

Ben Lewis

ben.lewis@weeklyworker.org.uk

ACTION

Communist Forums

London:

Sunday February 6: 'General strike - then what?' Proposed debate between CPGB and The Commune. Venue and time to be confirmed.

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast of commentary on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.podbean.com>. Communist Students

For meetings in your area, contact info@communiststudents.org.uk or check out www.communiststudents.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesdays, 6.45pm to 9pm, St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden tube).

January 18: 'Jack and the beanstalk in three continents'. Speaker: Chris Knight.

January 25: 'Song lines' (Aboriginal Australian mythology). Speaker: Chris Knight.

Rebuild Labour

Saturday January 15, 10am-4.30pm: Labour Representation Committee AGM and conference, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (Holborn tube). Speakers include: Tony Benn, Jeremy Corbyn MP, John McDonnell MP and Matt Wrack (FBU).

Organised by the LRC: www.l-r-c.org.uk.

Speak out against racism

Saturday January 15, 12 noon: Open microphone rally, Monument Mall, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Organised by Tyneside Community Action Against Racism: tynesidecarn@yahoo.com rachel_foyster@msn.com.

No academies

Saturday January 15, 1pm: Anti-Academies Alliance AGM, Canterbury Hall, Cartwright Gardens, London WC1.

Organised by AAA: office@antiacademies.org.uk.

Rally for Gaza

Tuesday January 18, 7pm: Rally, Conway Hall, Holborn, London.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign, CND, Stop the War, British Muslim Initiative, Friends of Al Aqsa, Palestine Forum in Britain and Viva Palestine: info@palestinecampaign.org.

Birmingham against the cuts

Tuesday January 18, 7pm: Meeting, Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B3. 'Stop the education cuts, defend public services!'

Organised by Campaign to Retain Our School Services: <http://crossbrum.weebly.com>.

Picket Blair

Friday January 21: Demonstration outside Chilcot inquiry, Queen Elizabeth II centre, Broad Sanctuary, London SW1 (nearest tube: Westminster). Further details to be announced.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk.

Stop fees and cuts

Saturday January 22, 12 noon to 6pm: Conference, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1.

Organised by National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts: againstfeesandcuts@gmail.com.

Manchester against the cuts

Saturday January 22, 10.30am: Conference, Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester M2.

Organised by Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils: 01706 913698.

Tusc and local elections

Saturday January 22, 3.30pm: Conference, St Pancras Community Centre, 30 Camden Street, London NW1. Speakers: Owen Herbert (RMT executive), Michael Lavalette (SWP councillor), Clive Heemskerk (SP). Chair: Dave Nellist (SP councillor).

Organised by Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition: www.tusc.org.uk.

Keep the post public

Saturday January 22, 12 noon: March, Fairfield Recreation Ground, Kingston upon Thames.

Saturday January 29, 11.30am: March, Victoria Square, Birmingham. Speakers include: Billy Hayes (CWU) and Jack Dromey.

Organised by CWU: info@cwu.org

Rising against the cuts

Monday January 24, 5pm: Meeting, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

Organised by Black Communities Rising Against the Cuts and South East TUC: info@tuc.org.uk

Bloody Sunday anniversary

Monday January 31, 7.30pm: Meeting, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (nearest tube: Holborn). 'Political status for Irish republican prisoners - free all the world's political prisoners'.

Speakers include: Martin Ag Meehan (Republican Network for Unity), Lee Jasper (National Assembly Against Racism), Michael Holden (Irish Republican Prisoners Support Group).

Organised by Irish Republican Prisoners Group: gerdowning@btinternet.com.

CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

INTERVIEW



More glasnost, less perestroika

Maciej Zurowski interviews **Circles Robinson** of *Havana Times*, a web magazine that features critical writing from Cuba

Ever imagined a post-revolutionary scenario where *Socialist Worker* becomes the only widely available source of information? Well - that vision is very much a reality in Cuba, where *Granma*, the organ of the Communist Party since 1965, relentlessly hammers home the central committee's line with little regard for discussion, controversy or stimulating thought. Fidel Castro's increasingly surrealistic editorials might lift *Granma* a notch above the drabness that plagues its cousins *Trabajadores* and *Juventud Rebelde*, but many would argue that the paper's relationship with the truth is ambivalent at best.

Publications that serve the cultural needs of the country's intelligentsia do contain some critical thought. *Cine Cubano*, for instance, is a glossy film magazine that takes the liberty of castigating the "artistic straitjacket of socialist realism",¹ while enriching its reviews and discussion pieces with eclectic quotations, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Slavoj Žižek. But beyond the three officially approved national dailies, there has been a distinct lack of critical everyday reporting and analysis of Cuba's political, economic and social spheres throughout the country's 50-odd year revolutionary history.

In 2008, a group of Cuban residents founded *Havana Times*,² an internet magazine that prides itself on "open-minded writing from Cuba". A Cuban news and opinions website that neither consists of sycophantic Castro apologetics nor of its mirror image - the rabid anti-communism peddled by Florida-based Cuban exiles - will come as a surprise to many. Broadly socialist in its outlook and critically supportive of the revolution, it gives a voice to those who are not content to let untouchable leaders do the thinking.

As we interview the editor of *Havana Times*, Circles Robinson, a wind of change is blowing through Cuba, though hardly the wind of progress. Raúl Castro has announced massive layoffs, employing rhetoric that eerily echoes David Cameron's talk of a 'big society', while paying limp lip service to the paternalistic 'socialism' of the past. Meanwhile, foreign investors have been touting

Cuba as a potential new emerging market for some time. Against the background of growing class divides and a bureaucratic Communist Party (redefined as the "party of the Cuban nation" rather than a "party of the working class" since 1991), it is high time that Cuban workers began the fight for independent political organisation to defend and advance their interests.

In our interview with Circles Robinson, we spoke about the *Havana Times* project, the imminent changes in Cuban society, and the Cuban revolution more broadly.

Please tell us in brief the story of *Havana Times*. I understand that you used publish it from mainland Cuba, but have emigrated to Nicaragua more recently. What were the reasons for your move?

Havana Times began in Cuba when I, a US citizen, was still working at ESTI, the Cuban government's official translation and interpretation agency. My job was to translate and revise materials for the official Cuban online media into English. As a member of the Cuban Journalists Association (UPEC), I took part in numerous meetings and workshops to discuss the status of Cuban journalism and ways to improve its credibility at home and abroad, as well as its visibility.

After taking part in the July 2008 UPEC Congress as a voting delegate and studying my notes of what had been discussed, plus certain recommendations the Communist Party had not long before given the Cuban media, I decided to start *Havana Times* (HT). The idea actually dated back about three years, but it finally seemed like the right moment to launch the website. For nine months I edited the site from Havana. Really, that was an ideal situation despite the slow internet connections in Cuba.

Subsequently, I had a major conflict at work resulting from some of my co-workers and myself openly questioning the unethical conduct of our immediate boss. To get me to support his behaviour he threatened to make a case against me using *Havana Times* and the fact that I had started it "without permission", though this was done in my free time. In the end, they

simply refused to renew my yearly work contract. While no reason was given, I never felt that HT was the main issue in this.

Since my residency in Cuba was dependent on the job, I was given a month's notice to leave the country. My family is from Nicaragua and I had lived there for many years before coming to Cuba, so we decided to return there. My commitment to the site remained firm, and having a decent internet connection helps in keeping it updated on schedule. I have returned to Cuba three times for a few weeks each since leaving in June 2009. During those stays I was able to update the site and meet with the HT writers with no problem.

Is it risky for those who live in Cuba to write for *Havana Times*?

After initial pressure placed on two HT writers, the contributors have thus far been able to continue without further problems. State security has questioned some of them for matters more related to their environmental or community activism, although the topic of HT has been present. **Information about Cuba falls into two main categories. You get bourgeois anti-communist sources on the one hand, and uncritical pro-Castro websites on the other. Because *Havana Times* is neither, I suspect that both friends and enemies of the Castro regime are wary of it.**

Your suspicion is correct. Extremists on either side don't like the site. I've been accused of being a senior Cuban government agent on the one extreme and attacked for having stopped supporting the Cuban revolution on the other. As an online publication I am trying to promote a combination of conventional and new-style reporting, as well as commentary that reflects critical support for the Cuban revolution, which is not necessarily synonymous with its leaders.

This involves seasoned writers and people from different walks of life who want to share their opinions. We try to present a balance and let the readers make up their minds on the different issues. We try to present different aspects of the situation in Cuba, breaking away from both the official monologue and the ill-intentioned im-

perial discourse.

Though the extremists criticise us, I truly believe that most people who visit Cuba will find their perceptions and observations more closely reflected in *Havana Times* than in any of the other online publications at this time. **When I visited Cuba, most young people I spoke to had a low opinion of Fidel Castro, while at the same time holding Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in very high esteem. Do you feel that there is continuity between Che's and Fidel's politics, or do you think they had radically different visions?**

Che's life in Cuba was during the time of great feats: the toppling of Batista, turning the country's institutions upside down and starting over, and the most intense attempt by the US to destroy the young revolution. It was a time when most youths in Cuba were inspired and more than willing to give their best to forge a country radically different from that of the past. Che was/is seen as a symbol of that period, and as a selfless hero and visionary. The study of his politics takes a distant back seat and the complexities of his thought and vision are not required reading. I think that he continues to be seen in a favourable light.

Fidel, on the other hand, has been in the driver's seat for over 50 years. Young Cubans are bombarded with his past and present speeches and writings, which are cited like others would cite from the *Bible*. He carries with him the weight of both the good and bad decisions made over that long period, and many young people put greater emphasis on the latter since they did not experience the former. A large percentage of young people in today's Cuba do not feel positive about their present and much less the future. This is a huge difference from their counterparts in the 60s. Therefore, I would agree that Fidel, while publicly receiving massive support, is not quite as popular these days in private - especially among the youth.

Working class people in Cuba have been subsidising the country's bureaucracy for decades. Their efforts have received little reward, and since the 90s their salaries have been insufficient to meet even basic needs. Raúl Castro has said this in different words, and the economic changes occurring

in the country today are supposedly geared to reversing the situation.

Some claim that the Cuban revolution was not genuinely socialist because a minority of guerrillas substituted themselves for the working class. What is your view - can socialism be passed down to the working class from above?

Socialism is power in the hands of the people themselves. I personally do not believe that socialism can be achieved through intermediaries. And time has proven, not only in Cuba, that supposedly 'short-term intermediaries' do not end up seeing themselves as short-term and are prone to entrench themselves at the expense of the working class.

Apparently, one million public sector workers will be dismissed over the next one or two years. What are your thoughts about the economic liberalisation - is this only a temporary measure comparable to Lenin's New Economic Policy, or is it the end of Cuba's socialist project?

The mass layoffs are the kind of move that makes a company's share values shoot up on stock markets. President Castro and his lieutenants are telling people that unlike the liberalisation measures taken in the early to mid-90s, which were touted as being temporary, this time they are designed to remain in place.

The government and party have even summoned the main workers' confederation, the CTC, to be the main supporter of the layoffs and the main persuaders of working class people that such a move is positive for the revolution and for a socialist Cuba.

What can Cuban workers do to defend themselves?

With the leadership of the only trade union in Cuba totally behind the layoffs and reforms, I would say that workers have been left orphaned without any defence. The CTC leadership has for a long time advocated government policies as the best way to defend workers' rights. The notion that a given government/party policy might be ill-advised is almost never considered.

A great example is that just two years ago the CTC was given the task

of convincing workers that it was a good idea to raise the retirement age by five years (for men to 65 and for women to 60). The justification was the ageing of Cuban society and the need for people to stay on the job longer due to a lack of workforce replacements. Now, two years later, the same government and its main advocate are saying there are inflated payrolls with huge numbers of excess workers who need to be laid off as soon as possible.

This does not mean that new forms of worker defence will not emerge, but at this time it is hard to predict.

Likewise, allowing greater opportunities for self-employment and a limited number of small businesses that can hire non-family labour make sense, as the government concentrates on the major industries where there are plenty of problems to resolve.

Nonetheless, if this shift is to succeed, the people who embark on a livelihood outside the state payroll will need assistance for their start-up investments and stocked wholesale markets where they can buy at reasonable prices the products they need. The government says some cooperative businesses will be allowed, but a law that regulates such activity is still forthcoming.

There are those who blame Raúl Castro personally and consider him a traitor to ‘socialism’. Others say that all nationalist-socialist countries inevitably end this way. Our writer, James Turley, concluded in a recent article that “at the end of the day, socialism in one country is socialism in one country - however long it takes, it will only end in tears”. Which view do you agree with? Is it possible for Cuba to be socialist in a capitalist world?

Highly centralised, top-down state-socialism has proven a failure in the long run, while capitalism - despite its longevity - has bred inequality and exploitation and the destruction of our planet. I personally think that Cuba needs to work toward a form of socialism ‘from below’, one that its people consciously decide upon and participate in. Attempting to incorporate aspects from other countries and being creative in both new policies and untried ‘old’, truly socialist ones is where I see most hope.

What are your thoughts on Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian movement - do you think the Venezuelan connection and Chávez’s oil might save Cuba’s economy?

Venezuela and Chávez’s Bolivarian movement is another very different scenario. I have only been there for two weeks in 2006, so I do not have the practical day-to-day experience that I have had in Cuba and Nicaragua. I do support the effort to spread some of the national wealth around to benefit social and economic programmes for the majority population. At the same time, I also have my reservations about too much authoritarianism. There is a tendency to speak in a monologue of absolute truths that sometimes prove false, or to speak in half-truths.

As to Venezuelan oil and the Cuban connection, the big danger for Cuba would be if Chávez loses the next presidential election or something was to happen to him. I remember during the 2002 coup attempt, the first statement by the *de facto* president, Pedro Carmona, was that not one more drop of Venezuelan oil would be sent to Cuba.

Such an event would be a huge economic blow to Cuba, just like when the Soviet Union folded or maybe worse. Remember, Cuba pays for much of the oil through in-kind professionals who work in Venezuela. If it had to purchase the same oil products elsewhere, it would be on a cash basis and the country is already saddled with a

tremendous debt and liquidity crisis.

When I visited Cuba, I noticed some evidently wealthy Cubans, especially in certain parts of Havana, and striking poverty in other parts. Although the official unemployment rate in Cuba is only 4%, it looked as if half of Havana was jobless. The streets were crowded with *jineteros* (hustlers) attempting to latch on to the tourist industry by selling black-market cigars, rum or drugs. Prostitution was widespread near hotels and tourist-frequented restaurants. What I saw looked like a class society with vast differences of wealth. Is this a development that only began with the advent of tourism? And do you think that the introduction of the convertible peso (the ‘CUC economy’) was a mistake?

I think the downside of the tourist industry, as well as the allowing of family remittances from abroad, has played a big role in the inequalities that you saw.

Years before coming to live in Cuba, I was always impressed with the revolution’s ability to survive the exceedingly difficult times of the early to mid-90s - far more difficult than the early 30s in the USA, for example. One of the possible reasons for survival was implementing the dollar economy (only more recently it became CUC-based), allowing joint ventures to obtain investment capital, as well as turning to foreign tourism to generate revenue. So I would not call it a mistake. The Cuban economy did lift itself up from the ashes. However, the lasting mid-term effects of what was supposed to be a short-term survival strategy have proved quite demoralising to most Cubans. Many of the *HT* contributors write about the growing inequality in the country. **Do high-ranking Communist Party officials accumulate personal wealth in a way comparable to politicians in capitalist countries?**

That is a difficult one to answer, since there is no real investigative journalism allowed in Cuba. What one can say is that numerous high-ranking officials have been dismissed in the last few years for unexplained reasons, although many people believe these were related to corruption, influence trafficking and other types of malfeasance. The details have never been made public and the Cuban press is not allowed to delve into the issue.

One of your guest writers, college student Daisy Valera, wrote an article about Leon Trotsky.³ Do you think that Trotsky’s ideas might offer a way out of Cuba’s political and economic crisis?

I would say that the writer believes that Trotsky’s ideas should be studied by Cuban students, especially his critique of bureaucratic, non-participatory socialism. She thinks they may find some solutions or ways of implementing socialism that differ from the course taken thus far by the Cuban leadership.

I would like to quote from the words of the late Celia Hart from an interview in which she answers the question: Why does Trotsky’s theoretical contribution seem so important to you?

“In Cuba anti-Stalinist feeling has always existed, because people thought that communism was the Stalinism of the Communist Party. And the Communist Party was one of the last to join the revolution ... But, when Fidel announced in 1961 the socialist character of the Cuban revolution, people said: ‘If Fidel is a communist, you can sign me up too’.

“I always felt that there was something missing in my thinking about

the revolution. That’s what I’ve found through reading Trotsky: I discovered that social justice and individual freedom were not contradictory and that we weren’t condemned to choose between them, that socialism could only be built by walking on both feet.”

Trotskyists hold the view that countries such as Cuba are ‘deformed’ or ‘degenerated’ workers’ states. They advocate a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy, but keep the planned economy intact. But there are no avenues in bureaucratic socialist countries through which workers might organise such a political revolution. What do you feel must be done in order to establish workers’ power in Cuba?

The Cuban revolution has achieved much in terms of social justice and a sense of some rights. A sustained push for real participation in a more horizontal decision-making process in the workplace and community, the acceptance and encouragement of critical thought, outlets for freedom of expression and space for new forms of organisation would go a long way to creating the conditions necessary for workers to take the reins of their workplaces and the country.

As the “historical leaders” are now well into their late 70s and 80s and a bureaucratic administrative mechanism is well in place to the exclusion of democratic participation by workers, my greatest concern is that we will see a repeat of what occurred in eastern Europe ... that we will see the repeat of history.

Can you tell us if there exists any workplace democracy? Are Cuban workers involved in planning and decision-making? And what rights do workers have when in dispute with the company leadership?

Cuban workers are rarely involved in planning and decision-making. They are informed of centralised planning and decisions made from above, but their voices are rarely taken into account. From what I could see at places where I worked, and in those of friends and colleagues, Cuban workers are pretty much defenceless in disputes with the administration.

The union usually takes the company position against the worker. There are cumbersome channels to appeal, but the success rate is very slim and the worker is usually told by friends or family that it is not worth the trouble to protest with the deck stacked against them. Without support from the union, the worker is pretty helpless to defend what he/she believes is an injustice.

Can workers express their opinions about company matters without the fear of being disciplined?

I myself was surprised that my boss routinely sat in on our union meetings in our office. Workers in most workplaces are extremely cautious about expressing their opinions on company matters if they differ from the party/management/union line. Time has told them they could be the victims of reprisals or have their opportunities for advancement cut short.

Is it easy for the management to sack workers?

It used to be more difficult to fire a worker and if that occurred the government was committed to finding them another job. Today, with the coming massive layoffs, that will no longer be the case. Fear of getting fired has become a new reality for Cuban workers.

Castro apologists outside Cuba are enthusiastic about the democratic election system, whereby Cuban workers stand their own candidates. What can you tell us about this?

The Cuban electoral system looks far

better on paper than it does in practice. Virtually no campaigning is permitted: the posting of candidate résumés is as far as it goes. Moreover, candidates have to go through an initial party screening process that is seldom discussed.

How much influence do the elected candidates have over government policies?

Those who are finally elected have relatively little influence on policies and in the case of the nation’s parliament the 600-plus legislators meet for only two very brief sessions a year, during which time they are presented with figures and explanations by the different ministers and the top leaders. Many appear to simply go along with what is put forward out of trust in the revolutionary government.

There is the widespread belief that the Cuban bureaucracy is a lot less repressive towards its people than was the case in countries such as the USSR, Poland, East Germany and China. What can you tell us about the levels of political repression?

I never had the opportunity to visit the USSR, China or the eastern European countries before or after their change of systems. I did recently have a long conversation with a Romanian acquaintance who has travelled to Cuba many times. To her, the controls and repression that existed in her country were far greater than what she sees in Cuba. We agreed that this may be one of the reasons that the revolution and its leaders have survived such difficult times.

The rest is pretty much common knowledge ... Cuba is a one-party state with official-only media (except for cracks in the internet blogosphere) and a highly vertical decision-making apparatus increasingly dominated by ageing, white, military men. Those who do not support the party or who question decisions by the leaders do not have much public space in society. The level of repression depends on how vocal an individual is. Speaking out at work, school or in neighbourhood meetings or trying to organise a group that differs from the official line can lead to reprisals at work and even affect the families of the individuals involved.

Do you think that Cuban Marxists should work inside the Communist Party of Cuba or organise outside it?

I think Cuban Marxists should do both. For some, depending on their positions and sphere of influence, the best thing they can do is to work from within. Others, whose space has been cut from under them, are better off expressing themselves and organising outside the party.

To what degree is there freedom of expression within the Communist Party?

I was never a party member, so I am not an expert on the freedom of expression within it. What friends and colleagues have told me is that dissenting opinions and the questioning of the top leaders’ ideas or policies is not well received.

I noticed that bookshops in Cuba were packed with Fidel and ‘Che’ anthologies, as well as José Martí and Napoleon Bonaparte biographies - but the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin were nowhere to be seen. I wonder if young people study Marxist theory at school. Or is socialist consciousness in Cuba limited to nationalism and following infallible leaders?

Yes, students are required to study Marxist-Leninist theory, but it is taught from the old Soviet manuals that go in one ear and out the other. The lack of debate or diversity of ideas makes these classes totally boring for most students. I think your last

question says it all.

Poland, where I am originally from, had a very bad experience with ‘socialism’. The Communist Party was widely perceived as a party of bureaucrats and liars - arrogant and patronising at best, tyrannical and corrupt at worst. The long-term effect is such that the majority of Poles will not touch anything that resembles socialism in any shape or form - even though the turn to free-market capitalism did not do the country any good. Can you see the same happening in Cuba, or would Cubans choose socialism today?

I would like to give you an analogy from Nicaragua, which like Cuba used a rationing system during its attempt to move toward socialism in the 80s, when it too was under a blockade from the United States. Statistics show that most of the country’s very low-income majority received more basic foods from the ration system than they can buy today on the open market. However, if you ask people if they would prefer to go back to rationing, the vast majority would say no.

After 20 years of especially hard times, I believe many Cubans are at best either tired of hardship - even if it is blamed on the blockade and US aggression - or they do not believe in the system’s ability to solve the country’s serious problems in food, housing, transportation, wages, etc.

The question of what would happen in a hypothetical vote on socialism today I prefer not to answer because a discussion on ‘What is socialism today?’ would need to happen first and involve the population. Socialism is far vaguer, since there are few examples and maybe none that apply to Cuba and its characteristics. Likewise, many of the Cubans I know are aware that not all of the countries that embraced capitalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall are exactly thriving. **Finally, could you tell us what role you would like Havana Times to play in Cuban society and what developments in Cuba you would like to support with the publication of your paper?**

Havana Times is an effort to present some of the many different facets that make up the Cuban reality. We give a voice to people usually excluded from the existing media, as well as those wanting to put forth proposals for progressive change. There is also room for those supporting existing policies.

I believe that Cuba, as a country that has invested heavily in tourism, needs media outlets that can serve the information needs of visitors, potential visitors, people following the developments in the country from around the world, as well as locals. We are trying to fill a portion of that void.

Those writing for *HT* also want the publication to play a role in the debate over where Cuba is today and how the country can move forward out of its present state of stagnation and ‘institutional sclerosis’.

I strongly feel that over the years Cubans have shown a great ability to rebound from difficult situations. It is a society with a generally well educated population and we want to give them a sounding board for their descriptions of daily life and their constructive ideas on making it better ●

Notes

1. Then again, Cuba always stood out among bureaucratic socialist countries for its rich and diverse visual arts. Though Cuban artists have never been put in a stylistic “straitjacket of socialist realism”, there are however certain limitations to their freedom: “There is freedom of artistic creation as long as its content is not contrary to the revolution,” states the constitution of the Republic of Cuba in chapter 5: ‘Education and culture’.
2. www.havanatimes.org.
3. www.havanatimes.org/?p=27884.

DISCUSSION

Students debate the L

The decision by the Communist Students executive to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee has provoked a heated debate. Below we reprint three representative contributions. The first is from a more or less openly leftist tendency. Here, clearly put, are the politics of movementism and purity. Then comes the reply written by James Turley putting the classic Leninist position. Finally what might appear at first sight to be a middling, equivocating position, but which in reality also adheres to the politics of movementism and purity

No support for Labour, no support for LRC

At a Communist Students executive meeting on December 13, a decision was made to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee.

The driving force behind this was Ben Lewis of the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB, which has recently adopted a set of theses on the Labour Party.¹ Some points of which would get support within the ranks of the LRC - for example, the democratisation of the Labour Party.² Crucially important, though, for the issue at hand is the dangerous conception of a permanent united front between communists and the Labour Party contained within the theses. Where the CPGB's contradictory perspective of simultaneously organising a political force independent of social democracy and at the same time trying to transform the Labour Party into a 'real party of labour' and putting the

Labour Party into office in order to expose its leadership, is made.

The LRC was set up in 2004 to act as a pressure group within the Labour Party; It now boasts 150 affiliated organisations, including six unions and 1,000 members. It is clear by the noises that it makes that it seeks to "rebuild" the party.³ The LRC is committed to "restore [sic] the operation of a fully democratic Labour Party", "encourage people to rejoin Labour" and the "election of a Labour government".⁴ Membership is barred to all those who belong to a party which stands candidates against Labour.⁵ Communist Students should not support any of these aims and, by joining the LRC and accepting its constitution, we are not helping to win workers away from social democracy, but doing the opposite - implying that there is something worthwhile at the root of left Labourism and reinforcing its politics. Worse still, we are con-

tributing to the socialist cover that the LRC provides.

Those who support affiliation argue that Marxists should use the LRC to argue for communist politics, as they have attempted previously.⁶ This is a typical position taken by the *Weekly Worker*, that of an orientation towards 'the left'. Those present at LRC conference will either be members of various socialist groups or similarly committed followers of social democracy. While it is necessary to win people away from such politics - it is idealist to think this can be achieved through work within the LRC, because it fails to understand that its membership corresponds to particular ideas and consciousness that express the politics of a certain section of the labour bureaucracy.

In response to our opposition to LRC affiliation we are characterised as taking a sectarian position, not wanting our revolutionary creden-

tials to become muddled by mixing with the dirty reformists of the LRC. However, this treats affiliation and engagement with LRC members as mutually exclusive. The LRC members who are most likely to be won to Marxism are those whom we shall meet on demonstrations or work with in anti-cuts groups. LRC affiliation does not affect our contact with these layers.

The CPGB thesis implies that the Labour left wing is an ally.⁷ This is an error. LRC councillors in London have already admitted that they will by implementing the cuts agenda. This clearly shows that the Labour left wing is not an ally in the struggle against all cuts.

For a group of such meagre resources, affiliation to the LRC sends out a message about our priorities and orientation. The LRC makes up some of the working class, but not all of it. Our immediate aims should be to

engage with our peers and work colleagues, newly politicised students on demonstrations and workers on picket lines. Affiliation to the LRC is at best a distraction from this struggle ●

Mark Harrison (CS exec)

Ronan McNabb (CS

Manchester)

Sebastian Osthoff (CS

Manchester)

James O'Leary (CS Manchester)

Notes

1. 'Draft theses on the Labour Party' *Weekly Worker* October 21 2010.

2. *Ibid* point 18.

3. D Lewis, 'Good start made' *Weekly Worker* July 8 2004.

4. Labour Representation Committee rules and constitution: www.l-r-c.org.uk/files/constitution_0809.pdf.

5. *Ibid*.

6. At the founding conference of the Socialist Youth Network (youth section of the LRC) CS was able to pass a motion calling for 'open borders'.

7. 'Draft theses', point 24.

Against the politics of purity

A number of comrades - including some self-identified left communists - have raised objections to the decision of the Communist Students executive to affiliate CS to the Labour Representation Committee, a grouping of leftists operating in the Labour Party, but open to affiliates and individuals who are not LP members.

This is in fact a relatively minor tactical matter - in practice it amounts to a decision on whether or not to send delegates to the upcoming LRC conference. There will be no three-line whip to get comrades to London to do so, although they are encouraged. Yet the underlying argument is an important one, and indeed an old one - the issue of Labour Party affiliation was the principal sticking point in the debates that led to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. Unfortunately, the comrades' statement on the issue falls at all the same hurdles as left communism always has, and attempts to dig its way out of this predicament with logic-chopping and diversions.

The comrades see as an animating force in the executive's decision the adoption by the CPGB of a number of theses on the Labour Party at a recent members' aggregate (not without

controversy). This is only half-true - Communist Students was an affiliate of the Socialist Youth Network, the short-lived youth section of the LRC, throughout its existence. CS members Ben Lewis and Nick Jones even sat on that organisation's leading body. It was an SYN motion to LRC conference that won the latter to affiliate to Hands Off the People of Iran, among other things.

That said, affiliation to the LRC is in line with the CPGB's approach to the Labour Party and engaging with other currents on the left more generally. We argue that standing aside from organisations of even the most craven opportunists amounts to the 'politics of purity' - all that is achieved by such a stance is a state of splendid isolation, untroubled by the need to win other comrades over to the politics of the left.

The opposition argue that this is to conflate engagement with affiliation - it is quite possible to engage with others without becoming members of their organisations, which supposedly implies political support. Indeed, it is possible - however, what refusing to countenance affiliation amounts to is reducing considerably the range of approaches and tactics available to us in doing so. An LRC affiliate body, for example, can move motions at LRC conferences, opening up debates and with them the potential for greater influence. Without the political will to hold our noses and go into opportunistic political formations, the only manner in which we can realistically engage with opportunists is haranguing them on demonstrations, or occasionally cajoling them into organised debates.

As for affiliation amounting to political support, it simply is not true. The CPGB - and, one hopes, CS - have certain aims in common with the LRC *vis à vis* the Labour Party. We share the aim of ousting the current, entrenched rightwing leadership and transforming Labour into an organisation that will fight for the interests of the working class. We have very, very different ideas as to how to do this, it is true. The same is

true, however, of the Stop the War Coalition, for example. The CPGB has been an affiliate to that body since its inception - throughout its innumerable and very public political errors, from adopting the slogan 'Time to go' (as if there was a time when troops should have been in Iraq!), to building up illusions in the institutions of 'international law', to cosying up to odious apologists for reactionary regimes ...

Are our opposition comrades seriously suggesting that our criticisms of these errors were hampered or compromised by the fact that we paid a nominal fee to STWC central office, or indeed that we pushed to get CS and Hands Off the People of Iran affiliated? The question answers itself. We said - and continue to say - to STWC that if they are serious about stopping war they need to go about it in a different way. Why can we not do the same in the LRC - or, indeed, Labour itself?

Other arguments fall in exactly the same way; thus the comrades write: "Those present at LRC conference will either be mem-

bers of various socialist groups or similarly committed followers of social democracy. While it is necessary to win people away from such politics - it is idealist to think this can be achieved through work within the LRC, because it fails to understand that its membership corresponds to particular ideas and consciousness that express the politics of a certain section of the labour bureaucracy."

Pessimistic

I fear that they do not realise how pessimistic a conclusion this really is. After all, every ideology has some material basis - from the 'average Joe' who believes that radical change is impossible to the Stalinist hardliner who believes that Trotsky really was a spy for Hitler, ideologies are sticky things, and if it is impossible to convince left and far-left Labourites of the errors of their ways, *mutatis mutandis*, it is equally impossible to convince anyone else. There is little left for us to do except, as the saying goes, go home and dig our gardens.

Instead of adopting this grim outlook, it seems our comrades believe some shelter can be found from the corrupting influence of the labour bureaucracy elsewhere: "The LRC members who are most likely to be



Breaking through the state: anti-cuts movement can't do it by itself

Labour Party question

won to Marxism are those whom we shall meet on demonstrations or work with in anti-cuts groups. LRC affiliation does not affect our contact with these layers.” Which demonstrations will these be, then - the March 26 TUC march, perhaps? The recent student demos, which have been organised in part by the University and College Union, the National Union of Students and various student unions? As for anti-cuts groups, would this be the Coalition of Resistance, headed up by various union tops and Labour grandees, propped up by the willing lieutenants of Counterfire and the Communist Party of Britain - or perhaps its junior competitors, Right to Work and the National Shop Stewards Network, even more reliant on and desperate for the patronage of union bureaucrats? Even local alliances are reliant on trade unions, trades councils and, often, local Labour figures.

In any case, it seems to have escaped the comrades’ notice that the LRC is an anti-cuts group. Its forthcoming conference, which our oppositionists are so keen to avoid, is titled ‘Resist the cuts, rebuild the party’. The labour bureaucracy’s hand weighs heavy on its shoulder, yes - so what else is new?

Against this, the comrades allege that London LRC councillors plan to roll over and “implement the cuts agenda”. No source is cited for this, although it would not particularly surprise us or change the fundamental issues at stake. The principled conclusion to draw from this would be to make a stink about it in the LRC, which certainly does not fancy itself in command of the butcher’s knife. It would be a very good subject for a motion to LRC conference. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the subject being avoided, given the significant numbers of Marxists and other far-leftists involved in the LRC.

The conclusion the comrades

draw, however, is very different: “The CPGB thesis implies that the Labour left wing is an ally. This is an error.” Here, we should be with Trotsky - it is quite permissible to ally with the devil, so long as one does not portray him as an angel. If the comrades are serious about going on demonstrations, as they no doubt are, they will have to reconcile themselves to marching with the Labour left - and not so left. Likewise with anti-cuts groups. These amount to limited alliances around particular goals. It is perfectly permissible to ally with the Labour left in order to overturn bans and proscriptions in the Labour Party, and to oust - and eventually expel - the openly pro-capitalist wing. These are matters of mutual interest, and there is no point in refusing such united actions because they are, like all alliances, shaky and temporary at best.

The opposition statement, however, seems somewhat concerned that the CPGB is not simply operating in its usual critical manner with regard to the Labour Party, but instead has adopted some variant of soft Labourism. The authors rather peculiarly interpret the CPGB theses as recommending that we “[put] the Labour Party into office in order to expose its leadership”. This is not anywhere in the document - though there is a certain history, going back in some ways to Lenin, of leftist ‘exposure’ in this manner, it is clear that illusions in social democracy do not go away unless people are won to communism, as they are generated by the very existence and social role of the labour bureaucracy.

What we are proposing is a root and branch reconstruction of the Labour Party that will allow it to serve the purpose it claims to uphold, but betrays at every turn - to be a genuine united front of all working class partisans. This does not entail going soft on Labour, or rewriting history in such a way as to imply it was ever

truly working towards this aim. Quite the contrary - it means breaking the Labour left’s illusions in its own history and its present, and transforming Labour into something utterly different from its existence hitherto.

Class

There is another underlying dispute of some significance. The comrades write: “Those who support affiliation argue that Marxists should use the LRC to argue for communist politics, as they have attempted previously. This is a typical position taken by the *Weekly Worker*, that of an orientation towards ‘the left’” (original emphasis). They conclude: “The LRC makes up some of the working class, but not all of it. Our immediate aims should be to engage with our peers and work colleagues, newly politicised students on demonstrations and workers on picket lines. Affiliation to the LRC is at best a distraction from this struggle.”

This points to a significant strategic difference between the CPGB and most other currents on the left - while most consider it a prime duty to go directly ‘to the class’, and build support among the broad masses as a matter of priority, we consider the divisions and disunity among the left to be a serious obstacle which needs to be overcome before the Marxists can truly punch at our weight. This means we prioritise, as the opposition statement rightly points out, an orientation towards the left - though we see no need to put self-aggrandising scare quotes around ‘the left’.

In practice, of course, one has to walk and chew gum. CS turns out at freshers fairs to recruit directly; CS and the CPGB produce materials for demonstrations targeted at a broader audience than the existing far left; and so on. But the perspective of orienting towards “our peers and work colleagues, newly politicised students

on demonstrations and workers on picket lines” *without* the perspective of serious engagement with other left tendencies is wrong-headed for two reasons.

Firstly, nobody is “newly politicised” in a vacuum. If a student is not talked into activism by an existing group (many of which have a far more extensive recruitment apparatus than we do), then they will be provoked into it by the dominant ideas in society. These include the ideas of the labour bureaucracy and other bourgeois forces; breaking the *existing* militants from these forces reduces the latter’s power, and enables us to fight for communism more successfully. There is no short cut to doing so; only long-term and determined struggle will do the job. Taking principled politics to LRC conference is a very small part of this larger fight. If we counterpose throwing ‘everything and the kitchen sink’ into anti-cuts work, strike solidarity and so forth to winning over the existing militants, including in the Labour Party, then it will be our slender forces against the state, the capitalist class, the labour bureaucracy and every faulty notion entertained by existing left groups. To imagine we will win that struggle certainly *is* idealist.

Secondly, the existing left - and more broadly, trade union militants and so forth - is, for all its faults, the best and the brightest of our class. Its revolving-door roster of student recruits aside (for the most part), the Socialist Workers Party is an organisation of militants steered in the class struggle. The same is true of Unite, PCS and so on - and the LRC. This experience is tragically misused, but it need not be. Winning the vanguard of the class is not a precondition to *ever* recruiting the newly politicised, strike solidarity and so on. It is, however, a precondition for doing it on a scale that will take us measurably

closer to revolution. (It is certainly a precondition for the strategy marked out in the CPGB theses on Labour to have any large-scale success.)

“In response to our opposition to LRC affiliation,” the comrades complain, “we are characterised as taking a sectarian position, not wanting our revolutionary credentials to become muddled by mixing with the dirty reformists of the LRC.” Unfortunately - both in its implicit denigration of seriously orienting to the existing left and its reticence about using *all* methods of engagement in relation to the LRC and Labour - the logic of this statement is, precisely, sectarian. Communists should not be afraid to get their hands dirty - in Labour, as in anywhere else.

Nor should we be afraid to play the long game. In the end, overthrowing capitalism for good is the work of mass communist parties - numbered in the millions of members in Britain, and hundreds of millions in the most populous countries. These will not be built overnight, and they will not be built primarily through the primitive accumulation of ones and twos. We need serious, long-term, strategic approaches to the major material obstacles we face on the road. In Britain, Labour is just such an obstacle.

The CPGB theses are an attempt to produce such an approach. There is certainly the possibility that they are wrong. To establish that, however, the oppositionists will have to do more than counterpose strategic political work to the immediate tactical tasks of fighting the cuts here, there and everywhere, and instead produce some indication of an alternative *strategy* for overcoming Labourism. There is certainly no way *around* Labourism, as the history of the last century attests ●

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Getting our priorities right

This statement is a response to the article by James Turley and the statement by Manchester comrades. It is part of the debate in the lead-up to our conference in March that will decide our perspectives for the year ahead.

It is important to place the current debate in Communist Students in its proper context, politically and organisationally. The decision to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee is a small tactical issue which comrades on both sides would do well to remember not to elevate into a principle. The change is being made in order to move CS in line with the political shifts of the CPGB majority.

We need to be careful to ensure that CS is not simply an appendage of the CPGB, as implied by the way the affiliation was rushed through. It is also important to remember that members of the CPGB within CS are not united on this issue. Currently CS has no policy on Labour work and has sporadically worked with Labourites since our formation in 2006. What is being proposed is completely new: an orientation to Labour as something that can be won *for* Marxism. Some comrades want us to fight for Labour to become a “permanent united front”, with Labour general committees playing a role akin to soviets. This is the argument of Jack Conrad and his supporters within the CPGB. For CS this must be an issue to be decided on by

the autonomous conference of CS and not just an automatic reorientation in line with the CPGB.

In their quest to legitimise this turn some comrades have resorted to denying this reorientation. ‘*The party line has not changed, comrades; this has always been the party line.*’ It is not true that LRC affiliation and subsequent work is nothing new. The recent adoption of new theses on the Labour Party by the CPGB represents a political and organisational reorientation on the part of that group. The theses are deeply flawed and inaccurate, and yet out of this vague text our organisation is stepping up Labour work in a direction never undertaken by either the CPGB or CS.

Just as in the CPGB, the comrades for a reorientation to Labour work seek to place themselves in the tradition of the early Communist Party, but then only tell half of the story. It is common on the left to have learned about Lenin’s advice to Marxists in Britain and the decisions by the Second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern): to try to affiliate to the Labour Party, expose its leaders and win workers in Britain to a socialist programme. A united front was proposed to defend the interests of the working class. The preconditions of such an approach were spelled out by Lenin, Trotsky and the Comintern: there must be complete liberty of agitation and organisation within Labour

and a unified communist organisation of serious numbers to carry out the work. Democracy is a distant memory in the Labour Party and CS is a small organisation with few resources which must choose its priorities wisely. It is a mistake to listen to only half of the lessons and advice from our history. Just as a serious, active intervention within the ranks of the Labour Party is not possible for today’s CPGB, it is even less likely to be so for CS.

No section of this debate is seeking to isolate CS and to not have comrades engage with Labourites and the left generally. The same comrades who produced the opposition statement opposing affiliation to the LRC have also worked with Labour Students in anti-cuts committees and are part of a branch that backed Labour Students members who were against cuts in students union elections.

The pro-affiliation comrades are conflating engaging Labour members and organisations, and working within Labour. Understanding the Labour Party as a site of struggle does not automatically lead to work inside Labour. We must consider the preconditions stated above, the balance of forces, what can be gained and, most pertinently for our organisation, where best to expend our energy and devote our time. The Manchester opposition statement mistakenly confuses joining the LRC with accepting and fighting for Labourism. Under some circum-

stances it is permissible, even advisable, to work within Labour. There is nothing necessarily unprincipled about doing so.

“The LRC is an anti-cuts group,” we are told by our pro-Labour comrades. But it seems to have escaped them that the LRC is not *just another* anti-cuts group. These comrades note that the LRC is holding its conference under the slogan ‘Resist the cuts, rebuild the party’ and yet neglect to comment on the second half of the formulation. The LRC is a campaign to defend and strengthen working class political representation *through the Labour Party*. It is a group which, according to its constitution, is “committed to the election of a Labour government” - ie, another government of cuts. This does raise political questions for CS to decide upon. Are we for a Labour government, or do we contest this aim of the LRC? What forces are there within the Labour left that will be open to our ideas? Can comrades both work within Labour and promote communist organisation? Do we think the Labour Party can be won for Marxism?

The comrades who are for a reorientation to Labour also claim that it is simply a matter of CS doing more than one thing. A simple division of labour. Yet they have stated that they hope this will be part of a long-term engagement without providing any plan beyond affiliation to the LRC

and an intervention at its upcoming conference. We must not fall into the same trap as many left groups: trying to do many things whilst failing to do any of them well. It makes sense that our organisation puts most of its forces where we can gain the widest audience and suffer the least censorship.

We have been part of many successful interventions and actions over the past year and our organisation has produced twice as much material as previous years (including a campus-based bulletin for workers and students called *Educator*, which was snapped up by hundreds in Manchester). Our orientation should be, as agreed at our last conference, primarily towards the burgeoning anti-cuts movement. Within this movement we need to be unambiguous in our promotion of communist ideas and organisation ●

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Chris Strafford (CPGB and Manchester CS)

Dave Isaacson (CPGB and Oxford CS)

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To find out more about Communist Students go to <http://communiststudents.org.uk>.

SWP

Extended rally gives leadership free rein

The central committee brushed differences under the carpet at the Socialist Workers Party annual conference. **James Turley** reports

If Ed Miliband were to be pressed into stepping down from the Labour leadership and the shadow cabinet announced that the top job should go to Alan Johnson, one would expect Labour Party members to be told why the leader of the opposition was quitting.

In fact, one would expect broader layers of society, especially those concentrated in the media and politics, to take a keen interest as well. After all, the direction and policies of the Labour Party are of national importance; they set the parameters of debate in parliament, they affect millions of people governed by Labour councils, and factor into the decisions of voters come election time.

One wonders what the enormous difference is between Labour members and the comrades who make up the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP, though small by the general standards of British politics, is a big fish in the tiny pond of the far left. When it changes leaders or political directions, the impact is felt throughout the left. Since, moreover, the SWP is nominally a democratic organisation, its membership is supposed to exercise some kind of control over the whole process.

Yet the decision to remove Martin Smith as national secretary was buried at the very end of the final *Pre-conference bulletin* (December 2010), with no explanation, just a couple of weeks before the organisation's January 7-9 annual conference. In a tiny box headed "Central committee responsibilities", there was a list of the jobs CC members are allocated. Comrades who took any notice and bothered looking down the list would see that the national secretary is now Charlie Kimber, while comrade Smith is down for 'industry' and 'anti-fascism'. Members were not even informed that these "responsibilities" had just been changed following comrade Smith's demotion and a subsequent reshuffle.

Socialist Worker, in its coverage of the SWP conference, casually refers to comrade Kimber as the "new national secretary", and then makes a point of quoting comrade Smith's speech in support of the CC's main motion on recruitment, as if to show that the leadership is entirely united and has simply agreed so swap posts around to give comrades a change.¹

However, if the 600 delegates plus observers were concerned about all this, very few showed any sign of it. There again, for the most part the event had the atmosphere of an extended rally rather than a serious discussion of policy and perspectives. Led off by *numero uno* Alec Callinicos, CC members, including comrade Smith, urged comrades to "seize the time" following the recent student upsurge against increased fees and cuts and ensured that student speakers were given priority. Several of these had been amongst the 360 the leadership claims it has recruited since the demonstrations began in November. These members of, at best, a few weeks' standing had managed to get elected as delegates. Fair enough, but the end result was not likely to enhance the quality of debate or make for a considered exchange



Alex Callinicos: numero uno

of views.

Not only do most SWP members seem to accept their leaders' monopoly on genuine debate and their right to keep quiet about their own differences. Some interpret every external attempt to make sense of SWP developments as some kind of vicious, sectarian attack. The first public reference to the move against Smith came on the Socialist Unity blog, run by Andy Newman - an ex-SWP member who has, in the time since his membership, plunged dramatically into the Stalinist milieu. His original posting was slight, to say the least, hinting at behind-the-scenes funny business.²

Cue the inevitable flood of comments - including many from SWPers ranging from the snide to the hysterically hostile. One poster, 'Ray', asked: "What is the difference between you posting this gossip and the *NotW* gossip about [Tommy] Sheridan? How can you claim to have solidarity with Sheridan when you post gossip on a public blog about the internal affairs of the SWP?" (Quite apart from being an absurd overstatement of the case - as far as I am aware, comrade Newman does not intend to hound Smith until he is thrown into jail - this little diatribe backfired, alerting other visitors to the sexual nature of allegations against the erstwhile national secretary made in some quarters, irrespective of their accuracy.)

Michael Rosen, noted poet and SWP member, also swung by - initially to leave a more mild-mannered and ironic comment about an affair between Smith and Bruce Forsyth, and ultimately to compare discussions among the left on the internal matters of the SWP to cold war Kremlinologists' wild theories about ructions in the former USSR.

The problem with comrade Rosen's comparison, of course, is that - like the Kremlinologists - anyone interested in the affairs of the SWP (and everyone on the left should be) necessarily bases their information on whatever leaks out in dribs and drabs. The proprietorial culture the comrades operate lead them to view their affairs as theirs in the bourgeois sense - something over which they have total ownership. In reality, this ownership is exercised by

the leadership rather than the organisation as a whole.

There is something therefore astoundingly hypocritical about accusing others of speculation when your organisation does absolutely nothing to dispel speculation, but on the contrary encourages it by treating matters of broader interest as if they were official secrets.

Failure

Obviously the SWP 'notification' to members, if you can call it that, of the change begs several questions. In addition to comrade Smith, the CC includes members whose sole responsibility is industrial organisation (Michael Bradley) and anti-fascist work (Weyman Bennett). So it seems comrade Smith is second-in-command in both departments. True, the "post-conference special" of the internal *Party Notes* informs comrades: "Due to health reasons, Weyman will be working part-time", so comrade Smith, who doubled as Love Music, Hate Racism national coordinator during his time as SWP national secretary, will now be more heavily involved with Unite Against Fascism. Is LMHR such a runaway success that it recommends him for more work on that front? And why would any serious left organisation want the genius behind last May's Acas invasion debacle to be given more responsibility for industrial work?

The only plausible explanation for Smith losing the top post is that he has not done a very good job. The SWP, which has come to see its leadership of 'the movements' as both divine mission and divine right, is faced with the reality that its former leader, John Rees, has outflanked it. His new outfit, Counterfire, has managed to put together an SWP-style 'united front' against cuts - the Coalition of Resistance - which has made a far stronger start than the SWP's troubled Right to Work campaign.

In part, Rees is simply more catholic in his liquidationism. He is prepared to rope in all kinds of forces into his rainbow coalition, whereas RTW is orientated primarily towards union and Labour figures. Nonetheless, the history of RTW is a catalogue of errors, starting with the misleading name (Right to Work implies an anti-unemployment campaign, whereas it is a catch-all anti-cuts and economic struggle front), continuing through the aforementioned invasion of talks between British Airways and the Unite union, and now capped off with an inability to challenge Labour councillors implementing cuts.

To admit all this, however, would be to admit that RTW - the cornerstone of its work in the coming period - has hardly hit the ground running, in comparison to COR. But the *Party Notes* post-conference special tries to explain why Right to Work is a totally different kettle of fish. COR is "being built as the 'overarching united front against the recession'. This means it can pull off big events like its London conference, but at its heart there is an enormous contradiction. The leader of the Unite union, Len McCluskey, spoke at the COR conference - great, but what happens if Len pulls back

from action at BA or over pensions? It is necessary to be able to work with such forces and against them, not simply to accommodate to them."

By contrast, "Right to Work ... has a unique approach. It is a broad campaign involving national trade unions (PCS, UCU, CWU), Labour MPs and campaigning organisations. It has delivered thousands onto the streets on an anti-austerity protest on budget day and its 7,000-strong protest at the Tory Party conference in Birmingham. It is a militant campaign that doesn't simply move at the pace of the trade union leaders."

It has to be said that if the SWP is now prepared to work with "and against" union left bureaucrats, that will be a huge departure from the way it has previously handled itself in its 'united fronts'. In fact the SWP's approach is virtually identical to that of Counterfire - Rees and co simply took the practice of *popular frontism* to its logical conclusion and renounced their formal commitment to the organisation of revolutionaries in a party.

In other words, the huge exaggeration of RTW's influence, together with claims of its "unique" commitment to working class principle, acts as a substitute for examining its failure. The CC cannot admit that it has made serious mistakes, even on its own sectarian terms. After all, if serious mistakes had been made, that would have required a serious and searching debate at SWP conference. Far preferable to skip the whole process by simply pretending nothing much has happened.

Revolving door

The motion to which comrade Smith was speaking claims the SWP has made 1,184 recruits in 2010, amongst whom are the 360 students who "have joined or expressed an interest in joining" since November. This is "the highest level of recruitment we have seen since 2003". The unanimously agreed motion then went on to admit that "Some comrades are nervous about the possibilities of mass recruitment. They believe this has led to a 'revolving door' syndrome - one where comrades join on protests and leave after a short period because they have not been integrated into the organisation."

The motion added: "We don't believe the problems associated with past recruitment drives should be an impediment to launching a recruitment drive in 2011. However, we do believe we have to address some of the mistakes made in the past and put in place measures that will give the SWP the maximum opportunities to grow in this exciting period."

Part of this will allegedly involve being a little more cautious before new recruits are considered "registered members". According to the motion, "Every SWP membership form we receive at the moment from the student demos is treated as if the person is asking for more information. Each person is then sent a letter urging them to join, information about their local branch and a copy of *Socialist Worker* and the *Socialist Review*. These contacts are then followed up by an email and calls from organisers and the local mem-

bership secretary urging them to get involved. Anyone who pays a [direct debit] or gets involved in their local group/branch or responds confirming they wish to be a member will be registered as a party member."

So all those dozens of people who were urged - and agreed - to fill in a membership application form are now being contacted and asked, 'Do you really mean it?' When you consider that conference agreed to set a target of 2,000 recruits in 2011, this will involve a huge amount of bureaucratic effort. But the leadership is trying to square the circle of what it calls the "open door recruitment strategy", whereby anyone who fills in a form is declared a member, irrespective of their level of political understanding or commitment.

Democratic

One *Socialist Worker* headline reads: "The democratic involvement of members at heart of conference." But the members were totally unable to hold the CC to account - the whole CC was re-elected unopposed without the majority having to explain where it thinks it went wrong under Martin Smith.

Ordinary SWP members must realise that they have no interest in their leaders pulling this kind of trick. It is they who have to take the organisation's political lines - correct and erroneous - into their communities, into real living political work with others on the left and broader sections of society. They risk ostracism and isolation if the line is sectarian, or even state repression if it is irresponsible or voluntaristic.

Yet they do not own the politics of the SWP, as they surely should. Rubber-stamping a CC slate and motions at annual conference does not amount to anything. Factions worthy of the name are not permitted; criticisms are deflected as they arise by concentrating on getting the grunt work done. Dissident members are isolated by an apparatus of full-timers effectively designed for that purpose - and they slowly drift out of the organisation altogether.

The SWP, despite the recruitment claims, is in reality stagnating. The 2000s were a bruising decade for it - high excitement surrounding the Stop the War Coalition's heyday gave way to the Respect disaster, and finally acrimonious disputes between Rees and the CC majority. Behind the starry-eyed rhetoric about the growing movement against cuts, the SWP does not seem to have anything like a purpose.

It will continue to stagnate until its culture radically changes. It is not enough to pay lip service to the creativity and fighting spirit of the masses - only a truly and militantly democratic organisation is able to harness that energy and give it direction. It is time for SWP members to take their organisation in hand, and begin a real examination of political priorities in the coming period •

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Notes

1. *Socialist Worker* January 15.
2. www.socialistunity.com/?p=7456.

USA

No change, no hope

Jim Creegan reports on Barack Obama's surrender to Congressional Republicans and the renewed ruling class offensive following the Democrats' defeat in the US mid-term elections

A few weeks ago, the media abounded in speculations that Barack Obama was fast losing political momentum and may turn out to be another failed, one-term president like Jimmy Carter. Now, in a reversal typical of a profession known for mercurial opinions, the 'mediocracy' - from Washington news-programme pundits to editorial writers for *The Guardian* and *Le Monde* - are outdoing one another with encomiums to the president's new-found 'realism' and political finesse.

Obama is said to have got his second wind from a spate of legislative victories scored in the outgoing Democrat-controlled Congress during its final ('lame-duck') session (held following a Democratic rout in the mid-term elections of November, but before the new Congress was sworn in). With the strong support of his own party and a fluctuating number of Republican votes, the president in December managed to secure the passage of an 'economic stimulus' bill, an arms control treaty with Russia (Start), a measure permitting gays to serve openly in the military (repealing the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy adopted under Clinton), and a bill granting federal medical assistance to 9/11 'first responders' (firefighters and first-aid workers) disabled as a result of their often selfless rescue efforts at the World Trade Center.

In fact, Obama's 'finesse' consisted in nothing more than submitting to an act of extortion. Like Bill Clinton before him, he realised that progress on his legislative agenda could only be purchased at the price of handouts to an increasingly recalcitrant ruling class. The *quid pro quo* that made his victories possible was arrived at during negotiations over taxes and government spending.

Obama first went to Congress months ago requesting a 13-month extension of unemployment insurance for the country's 6.3 million long-term jobless (out of work for at least 26 weeks), which now account for 42% of the country's 15 million unemployed. He also proposed to reinstate expiring Bush-era tax cuts for two more years. But, following up on a campaign pledge to end his predecessor's largesse toward the rich, Obama would have excluded part of the income of the top two percent of earners from the proposed reductions. For them, the first \$200,000 earned by individuals, and the first \$250,000 by families, would still have been taxed at the new, lower rate. Only income above these amounts would have been assessed at pre-Bush levels (39.6%, as opposed to the current 35%, for the top income bracket).

Republicans, supported by the crucial votes of a few rightwing 'blue dog' Democrats, opposed both these measures with arguments too self-contradictory to conceal their class motives. On the one hand, they blocked the unemployment extension, denouncing it as another example of the administration's profligate spending. On the other hand, the 'deficit hawks' held out for an extension of the Bush tax cuts to 'everyone': ie, the wealthiest two percent. This gift to the rich would deprive the public purse of approximately \$700 billion in future revenues, an amount roughly equal to the entire bank bailout of 2008. But, however transparent their hypocrisy,

the Republican-blue-dog axis had the votes to filibuster Obama's proposals in the Senate.

The president responded characteristically: with a few disapproving noises, followed by total capitulation. He had already signalled his willingness to accommodate the Republicans at the end of November, just as negotiations with Congressional leaders over the tax bill were getting underway. Then, Obama proposed a two-year freeze on the pay of the country's 2.1 million federal government workers - a move that netted the government negligible savings, but telegraphed his agreement with the Republican aim of reducing the deficit at the workers' expense. He next announced his willingness to allow tax cuts for the rich to continue for another two years. In exchange, the Republicans agreed to release emergency unemployment funds.

But this was not all they demanded in return. They also got a two-year extension of a Bush-initiated reduction in taxes on the profits of capital (the capital gains tax, lowered by Bush from 20% to 15%), and a completely new provision that exempts the first \$5 million of inherited wealth (instead of \$1 million, under the previous law) from any tax obligation at all, and lowers the levy on fortunes exceeding that amount from 55% to 35% for the next two years - a reduction that will help no-one but the upper three tenths of the top one percent of income earners, and cost the government an additional \$68 billion. Business owners will also be permitted to take a deduction in the year of purchase on 100%, as opposed to the present 50%, of new capital invested in equipment. The administration likes to emphasise that these giveaways are temporary, and will be up for another vote two years hence. But, sanctioned as they were by a Democratic president and a solidly Democratic Congress, what is to prevent them from being renewed the next time by a Congress the

Democrats are less likely to control, or from being made permanent, which is what the Republicans really want?

Apart from the unemployment-insurance extension, only one provision of the bill actually put more money into the pockets of wage-earners: a two percent reduction in the payroll tax for a period of one year. These pay deductions, however, go to finance social security and medicare (retirement pensions and healthcare for the elderly). The effect will be to aggravate the alleged shortfalls in future funding for these programmes, routinely invoked as a rationale for trimming or privatising them. In addition, the bill makes social security - viewed since its inception under Roosevelt's new deal as sacrosanct - into another budget item, to be adjusted (almost certainly downward) according to short-term political vicissitudes. The 'payroll tax holiday', moreover, replaced another tax credit beneficial to the working poor. Those earning under \$20,000 a year will actually end up paying slightly more.

With its total price tag of \$857 billion, this legislation greatly increases government indebtedness. It thus gives the lie to professions of urgency about the deficit coming from politicians of both parties. Where the pocketbooks of the rich and the profits of capital are concerned, all talk of shared sacrifice goes instantly by the board. The 'difficult choices' Obama sanctimoniously urges on the country are obviously reserved for workers and the unemployed. More than mere double-talk, running up the deficit is part of a Republican strategy known as 'starve the beast'. It consists of moves to increase government debt today through military spending and tax giveaways, and then counting on the woefully short political memory of Americans to plead poverty tomorrow, when funding for social spending comes onto the legislative docket.

Obama's surrender was so abject that it could not but give rise to howls of indignation from some Congressional

Democrats, even among the party leadership. But, as pressure from the White House mounted - including a press conference at which Obama railed against the 'purists' of his party's left wing, whom he said were "making the perfect the enemy of the good" - anger gave way to resignation. All but 13 Senate Democrats fell into line for the final vote. In the House, where opposition was stronger, 112 Democrats voted against the bill after a few desultory attempts to amend it, with 139 Democrats casting their votes in favour. Not without some internal misgivings, the Democrats once again fulfilled their function of putting a liberal imprimatur upon an act of institutionalised class robbery. Most were shamefaced, pleading in mitigation that surrender was the only way to get relief for millions of long-term unemployed. This was true under the immediate parliamentary circumstances. But the circumstances, as we shall see below, were part of a situation largely of the Democrats' own making.

False compensation

Obama's further legislative successes (Start, gays in the military, aid to first responders) came close on the heels of the tax bargain. Although these bills did not involve the direct horse-trading surrounding the latter, Obama's cave-in on taxes no doubt went a long way toward buying the good will of at least a minority of Republicans.

Particularly useful to Obama in keeping liberals on board was the repeal of the infamous 'don't ask, don't tell' (DADT) policy regarding gays in the military. Adopted as a compromise measure after Bill Clinton failed to open the military to gays in 1993, this rule forbade the armed forces from enquiring as to the sexual orientation of recruits, but also prohibited homosexuals from openly revealing their identity. Thirteen thousand were expelled for doing so.

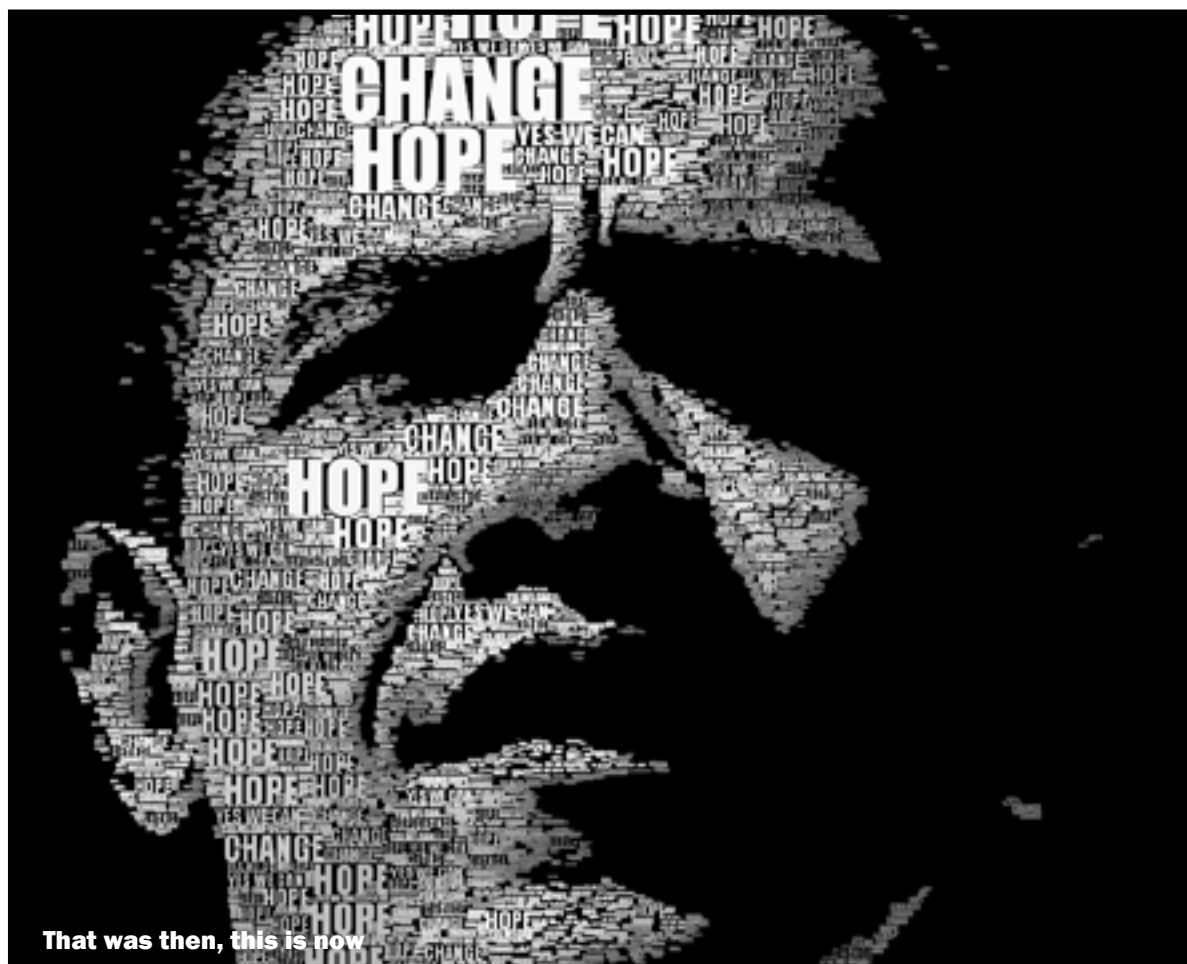
This time, when the Democrats introduced a bill permitting gays to serve openly, the usual political calculus in the Senate was reversed. Instead of a Democratic minority joining a unanimous Republican bloc, as is usually the case when it comes to economic issues, eight Republicans defected to vote with a unanimous Democratic majority, allowing the passage of the legislation, to the elation of gay and liberal activists.

Ending discrimination against gays in the armed forces, or anywhere, is an elementary democratic gain. Yet the support it surely deserves should not stand in the way of understanding how so-called cultural issues often function in the bourgeois political arena. Sexual orientation is class-neutral; there are proportionally as many gays among the ruling class as there are in other classes, and opinion on this question is therefore just as divided at the top as elsewhere in society. And, while anti-homosexual demagoguery has indeed been useful to the bourgeoisie in diverting public attention from its core class agenda (in addition to the fact that some members of the ruling class, as well as many backwater politicians who serve them, are bigots themselves), such hate-mongering is becoming somewhat less serviceable, as tolerance regarding sexual orientation gradually gains ground in society at large, despite the horrific acts of anti-gay violence that still take place.

It is symptomatic of changing attitudes that, when Bill Clinton attempted to admit gays to the armed forces 17 years ago, virtually all of the military brass, headed by Colin Powell, lined up against him, whereas Obama and the Democrats proceeded to undo the tawdry DADT compromise with the support of Mike Mullen, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Robert Gates, the secretary of defence appointed by George W Bush, and, this time round, of Powell himself.

The mounting offensive of capital against the wages and welfare of the working population over the past 35 years has been accompanied during roughly the same period by another trend: greater social equality for gays, women and the members of oppressed racial and national groups fortunate enough to have risen into the middle class (Barack Obama being a prime example). The second trend has bulked larger in American popular consciousness than the first, partly due to the fact that it has been seized upon by politicians. The social fissures opened up by the progress of women and minorities have given both capitalist parties a convenient way to conceal their common support for ruling-class attacks behind a spectacle of mutual opposition that is ultimately superficial. The Republicans typically appeal to status anxiety and fear of change among white males and society's more backward and provincial layers, while the Democrats play more often to the egalitarian sentiments of the women, urban professionals and minority voters who form a large part of their base.

Some on the left, from sectarians to social democrats, tend to regard conflicts over 'social issues' as a diversion from the class struggle. Such a view is profoundly mistaken. The oppression of women and minorities is real and deeply rooted, not a contrivance of the ruling class to keep the workers divided: social reaction is a



That was then, this is now

USA

potent and potentially lethal menace, to be combated by socialists with all the force they can muster. Yet these particular struggles can be divisive, if not conceived as part of a larger movement for human equality whose goal is socialism and whose agency is the working class. Class solidarity is the most powerful force for equality in society - and the class struggle the strongest antidote to social reaction.

The identity politics that emerged in the 70s, and continues to cripple the US left, substitutes loyalty to one's particular oppressed group for class-consciousness. Instead of recognising the sale of labour-power as the universal condition to which the majority is necessarily subjected under capitalism, and therefore seeing the fight of workers in their own name as an encompassing unity of all the exploited and oppressed, identity politics, at best, treats workers as one oppressed group alongside the rest, and is inclined to regard the advancement of one's own sector - at the expense of others if need be - as the principal gauge of progress.

Thus a measure like the repeal of DADT can be viewed through an identity-politics lens as an adequate counterweight to bipartisan class attacks, and permit the Democrats to burnish their liberal credentials among their base just as cynically (if not as perniciously) as the Republicans conceal their class intentions by stoking obscurantist prejudice. The capitalist class, on the other hand, is much less confused than the left about what is essential to its interests. Even a minority of Republicans are beginning to realise that gay-bashing and 'right-to-life' rhetoric are slowly losing traction, and can be usefully traded in for more important things, like the multi-billion-dollar windfall just handed them by Congress.

Media pundits are now extolling the 'realistic compromises' of the departed lame-duck session as another triumph for the 'triangulation' pioneered under the administration of Bill Clinton (although Obama, fearful of diluting his own brand-name, has banned the use of this term by his staff). The strategy consists of placing oneself at the apex of an equilateral triangle, above and equidistant between the two base points of right and left. The pundits see triangulation as the template for future cooperation between the White House and Capitol Hill.

Democrats fail mid-terms

The mid-term elections that preceded the budget deal were, in Barack Obama's phrase, a "shellacking" for the Democrats. They managed to hang on to a slim majority in the Senate, where only a third of the seats were in play. But in the House of Representatives, where all seats were contested, the Republicans gained 60 seats, giving them control of that chamber. It was the biggest gain in the house for either party in more than half a century.

Although some of the more outlandish Tea Party-backed candidates, like Carl Paladino of New York, Christine O'Donnell of Delaware and Sharron Angle of Nevada, lost to Democrats, five of the six new Republican senators and most new Republican Congresspersons were endorsed by the Tea Party. All of the traditionally Republican (so-called red) states that went over to Democrats to give Obama his 2008 victory went back into the Republican column, along with several critical swing states.

A leading Republican representative from California, Darrell Issa, immediately followed up his party's victory by sending out a letter of inquiry to 150 trade groups, businesses and corporate lobbyists. It asked them which

regulations on business they would like to see ended. The new speaker of the House of Representatives, a Republican congressman from Ohio named John Boehner, spends a good deal of his leisure time acquiring his trademark sun tan on lavish holiday junkets with members of the army of corporate lobbyists that surrounds him. He was once observed handing out cheques from the tobacco industry to his colleagues on the floor of the House.

It would be incautious, however, to read these election results as indicating a pronounced rightward shift in public opinion. A *New York Times*/CBS poll of registered voters found their mood to be troubled, but politically amorphous. One issue is conspicuous by its absence: almost none of the respondents mentioned either the war in Afghanistan or the continuing occupation of Iraq among their main concerns. Foreign policy was a virtual non-issue in this election.

The survey registered a mood of widespread dissatisfaction and anti-incumbent feeling, with the economy as its leading cause. Forty-eight percent disapproved of Obama's performance, against 45% who approved. Only a minority listed the budget deficit as their main worry, and a majority (53% to 38%) approved of Obama's original proposal to withhold tax cuts for families earning over \$250,000 a year.

The chief economic issue on the minds of an overwhelming majority of respondents was jobs. And, while those surveyed expressed a growing distrust for politicians of both parties, 63% felt this in respect of the Democrats, while 73% said they did not trust Republicans. Democrats were deemed more likely to "help the middle class" than Republicans by 55% to 33%, and 44% thought the Democrats were a better bet for creating jobs, with 38% favouring the Republicans. Only on issues to which voters assigned lesser importance - immigration and combating terrorism - did the Republicans come out on top. Forty percent echoed Republican talking points to the effect that Obama had "expanded the role of government too much". But 35% thought that the size of government was "about right"; taken together with the 18% who opined that government was not doing enough, the results amounted to a repudiation of the Republican position by an 18% margin (*The New York Times* September 16).

The above survey was one among many, but did not differ dramatically from others conducted at the time. The poll suggests that the widespread mistrust of politicians it discovered among voters did not automatically translate into a groundswell of Republican support. If anything, respondents seemed to lean toward the Democrats. How, then, do we explain the Republican victory at the polling booth? Part of the answer suggests itself when we heed the advice of Deep Throat, Bob Woodward's famous Watergate mole: follow the money.

Right turn on Wall Street

The rightwing corporate funding behind the Tea Party - from the Koch brothers and Freedom Works - has been described in an earlier article ('Tea Party tempest' *Weekly Worker* March 18). A more recent development is the flow of Wall Street cash from Democratic to Republican campaign coffers in the months before the mid-term elections.

Andrew Ross Sorkin of *The New York Times* writes: "Less than two years ago, Democrats received 70% of the donations from Wall Street; since June, when the financial regulation bill was nearing its passage, Republicans were receiving 68% of the donations" (August 31). Sorkin also reports that Daniel S. Loeb, one of the street's

most influential hedge-fund managers, and a prominent backer of Obama in 2008, wrote a letter in August that was "forwarded around the circles of the moneyed elite, from the Hamptons to Silicon Valley". Loeb wrote that "Washington has taken actions over the past months ... that seem designed to fracture the populace by pulling capital and power from the hands of some and putting it in the hands of others" (*ibid*).

Loeb's sentiments were echoed by other one-time Obama supporters like Jamie Dimon, the head of the leading commercial bank, JP Morgan Chase. A hedge fund manager named Anthony Scaramucci confronted Obama at a 'town meeting' in September, saying, "I represent the Wall Street community. We have felt like a piñata. Maybe you don't feel like you're beating us with a stick, but we certainly feel like we've been whacked with a stick" (*The New York Times* October 2). High finance's hostility toward Obama reached near fever pitch when Stephen Schwartzman, CEO of the Blackstone Group, compared the president's efforts at financial regulation to Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939.

Expanded opportunities for big business to increase its already enormous influence on elections were opened at the beginning of last year by a landmark Supreme Court decision called 'Citizens United'. By a majority of five to four, the court, now dominated by Republican appointees, allowed corporations (along with unions) to engage directly in political advocacy, overturning all previous laws forbidding them to produce and market campaign advertising. The decision also gives corporate donors a convenient way to avoid still-binding laws requiring them to disclose all direct contributions to political parties. Since the court extended freedom of advocacy to profit and non-profit corporations alike, it became possible for firms to set up political front groups in the form of non-profits, which are not required to disclose their funding sources. The campaign thus saw the proliferation of non-profit advocacy groups handsomely backed by anonymous contributions. The most well known of these corporate cash receptacles is Crossroads, headed by the master Republican strategist, Karl Rove.

Wall Street's sudden disenchantment with Obama presents something of a puzzle, given the persistent efforts of the president and his party to reassure the financiers of their loyalty. Not only did Obama appoint two well known friends of Wall Street - Timothy Geithner and Lawrence Summers - to his administration's top economic posts, but Democratic politicians also worked effectively behind the scenes to make sure that the regulatory legislation coming out of Congress in the wake of the 2007-08 meltdown would leave the most vital interests of the money men untouched.

The crisis of two years ago was caused most immediately by banks and investment houses that were threatened with bankruptcy as a result of their ruthless speculative activity, and then came running to the government to bail them out with taxpayer money. The government complied out of fear that their going under would pose a risk to the entire financial system: ie, that they were 'too big to fail'. Any serious attempt at financial reform would therefore have entailed reducing their size, requiring them to come up with their own future bailout fund, and/or curbing their speculative activities. The regulatory legislation ultimately voted by Congress - the Dodd-Frank bill - did nothing to reduce the size of giant financial concerns, and proposals for the banks to ante up a \$19 billion emergency fund bit the dust early on. Provisions to limit speculation were half-hearted at best.

Authentic proposals were indeed made at the beginning of the legislative process, in the spirit of the Roosevelt-era Glass-Steagall Act - abolished by Bill Clinton - which forbade commercial banks from engaging in financial speculation. A bill was introduced containing the so-called Volcker rule, which would have prohibited banks from undertaking proprietary trading: ie, speculation with their own funds (as opposed to trading accounts for customers, which is still permitted). Another proposal would have forced banks to sell off their derivatives-trading divisions. Neither of these proposals came out the other end of the Congressional meat-grinder in its original form. They were eviscerated by a series of manoeuvres too Byzantine to describe here. But Mike Taibbi, a reporter for *Rolling Stone*, captures the essence of the process:

"... Throughout the debate over finance reform, Democrats had sold the public on the idea that it was the Republicans who were killing progressive initiatives. In reality, Republican and Democratic leaders were working together with industry insiders and deep-pocketed lobbyists to prevent rogue members ... from effecting real change. In public, the parties stage a show of bitter partisan stalemate. But, when the cameras are off, they fuck like crazed weasels in heat" (August 6).

The very sponsors of the legislation, Democratic representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts and Democratic senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, conspired to weaken it. The end result was a bill that exempted insurers, mutual funds and trusts from the proprietary trading ban altogether and still allowed banks to gamble with three percent of their assets. "In practice," writes Taibbi, "it will be up to future regulators to define how that limit will be calculated - and one can only imagine how banks like Goldman Sachs will manage to stretch the loopholes in what's left of the Volcker rule" (*ibid*). Banks were also allowed to keep their derivatives desks by moving them into subsidiary units. Whole classes of derivatives, moreover, are exempt from even this watered-down rule. All in all, experts agree that the Dodd-Frank bill will at best have only a marginal effect on the business practices that led to the

crisis of 2007-08. Bankers themselves boasted that they had dodged the regulatory bullet.

There was, however, one provision of the bill that liberals counted as a gain: the creation of a consumer financial protection bureau, a watchdog agency for the financial industry. Its intended purpose is to prevent the kinds of deceptive lending practices that led to the threatened financial collapse. But the bureau was deprived from the outset of any independent authority, and placed instead under the control of the Federal Reserve, a prime mover behind financial deregulation in the first place. The agency was, moreover, the brainchild of Elizabeth Warren, a Harvard law professor known for her unsparing exposure of the 'liar loans' used to inflate the housing bubble. Her record made her the liberal left's favourite to head the agency, and the bane of the bankers, who lobbied against her appointment from both outside the government and on the inside through their man at the treasury department, Tim Geithner.

Obama addressed the problem with a signature sidestep: he appointed Warren not to head an independent agency, but as an advisor charged with helping to set up the bureau, with her main detractor, Geithner, as her boss. Thus was Warren given a title, and deprived of any real power. While it is true that she would have required Senate confirmation to head the bureau, which she was unlikely to get, Obama had the option of avoiding a confirmation fight by installing her temporarily by means of a recess appointment, a device George W. Bush did not hesitate to use for putting in place his appointees against the wishes of a hostile Senate. Obama, of course, declined to employ this option.

So, once again, why, in spite of all these genuflections, did Obama, in the run-up to the November elections, become Wall Street's hate object?

The answer is that finance capital has ruled the roost for so long without hint of a challenge that even the mildest flourish of populist rhetoric from elected officials, or a few marginal changes in the rules of the financial game, can drive them into paroxysms of fury. When queried as to the reasons for their hostility toward Obama, many seemed mortally offended by the mere suggestion that they be held

Fighting fund

Bank on us

So Stephen Hester of RBS is in line for £2.5 million bonus, Eric Daniels of Lloyds is looking at £2 million and good old Bob Diamond of Barclays has "not yet decided" whether to accept whatever sum comes his way.

Last year some 2,800 bankers received £1 million or more as a bonus - on top of the millions they received in their regular salaries and expenses, but David Cameron regretfully explains that it would be undesirable to "micromanage" their income. We just have to accept that 'the system' depends on their role in keeping the economy moving, don't we?

Well, I know for a fact that readers of this paper don't share Cameron's appreciation of the bankers. Just like I know that most of them won't see the kind of money the likes of Hester, Daniels and Diamond pocket each year in the whole of their working life. But that doesn't stop them giving financial support to the *Weekly Worker* - in the shape of a rather more mun-

dane £10 or £20, of course.

Last week CM and FR both added £10 to their subscriptions, while GJ sent me a fantastic £50 cheque and IR contributed a comparatively modest £7. I also received a total of £107 in standing orders, plus the £5 each that EJ and JL donated via PayPal. Mind you, we had 12,954 online visitors last week, so I only wish rather more than two would consider showing their support for the paper they are so keen to read - Thursday and Friday is when most people drop by our website and the total gradually falls as the week wears on.

Some extra online donations would come in very handy right now - our January total stand at only £359 and our £1,250 target seems a long way away. Anyone want to offer us a bonus?

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

liable in any way for the events of 2007-08, and were particularly incensed by the president's reference to 'fat-cat bankers' (for which he immediately tried to make amends) on *60 Minutes*, a popular Sunday evening news programme. Far from being grateful that the regulatory legislation passed by Congress left their essential operations intact, they were enraged that the subjects of tighter regulation, higher taxes and reduced bonuses had been raised at all. They are determined to avoid paying even a fraction of the cost of the crisis.

In the pre-neoliberal era, the ruling class tacitly understood that politicians needed a certain latitude in which to strike an occasional populist pose for their constituents. Obama tried to remind a meeting of disgruntled bankers of this traditional prerogative in March 2009, when, after hinting that some people might feel a trifle put out by their swindling, added that "My administration is the only thing standing between you and the pitchforks" (*Politico* April 3 2009). Having become unaccustomed in recent decades to the sight of pitchforks, the bankers would have none of it.

The Republican and Democratic parties serve the same masters, but they are not identical. There is a division of labour between them. The Republicans specialise in actively advancing the interests of the ruling class; the Democrats excel at preventing the working class and its potential allies from fighting back. The Republicans mobilise ruling class opinion; the Democrats demobilise everyone else.

The Republicans are the preferred party of the bourgeoisie. Only when the latter's image is tarnished by economic crises and/or foreign disasters, as it was by both in the Bush years, are the Democrats called upon to refurbish the image. The Democrats can only perform this service because their base includes those groups most likely to become disabused. But, once the storm clouds have passed, as they have now that profits have rebounded and bonus cheques are bigger than ever, the oligarchs become increasingly uncomfortable with the ascendancy of a party that may have to make concessions to its base in order to get re-elected, and return to their party of first choice. This is what accounts for the shift in the opinion, and the financial contributions, of Wall Street between 2008 and 2010.

Party without a message

The Democrats were decisively outgunned in the mid-terms, financially and politically. Flush with Wall Street contributions, and aided by a Tea Party generously supplied with corporate cash in its own right, the Republicans were able not only to energise their traditional base, but deploy a government-bashing rhetoric to channel the growing discontents of a crucial slice of independent voters. Exit polls showed, for instance, that most voters who opposed the bank bailout cast their ballots for Republicans.

For their part, the Democrats were unable to mount an effective counter-mobilisation, not, as the pundits say, because they failed to 'communicate effectively', but because they had no unified message to communicate. They mostly confined themselves to recalling the failures of Bush and denouncing the refusal of Congressional Republicans to cooperate with them in passing legislation. Their candidates around the country sought to distance themselves from a president whose support in the opinion polls was sinking steadily, and concentrate instead on local issues.

The Democrats' ineptitude was due to the abiding contradiction of their politics. Their party relies for votes on unions, blacks, Hispanics, youth - all the groups at which the Republicans are pointing their political knives. The only thing that could unite these varied constituencies, and infuse them with a passion comparable to that of the Tea Party, is a clear-cut appeal to their class interests. Yet this is an appeal that the Democrats, fearful of biting the corporate hands that feed them, can never make on any consistent or sustained basis. Hence, a politics that wants to appear in some sense 'progressive', but is always ambiguous, half-hearted, equivocal; hence senators

and congresspersons who take the immediate voting arithmetic of Congress as the outer limit of what they can accomplish rather than using Republican intransigence to stoke public anger in hopes of a bigger majority in the future; and in turn nothing to stand on at the hustings but the record of retreats and half-measures compiled during the past two years in power - a record that could almost have been deliberately designed to demoralise Democratic voters.

And so it did. Although voter turnout was about average for a mid-term election (around 40% of eligible voters), it was decidedly lacklustre among the very groups that trooped so enthusiastically to the polls to put Obama over the top in 2008: down from 18% to 11% among those under 30; down from 13% to 8% among blacks, and roughly the same for Hispanics. (*Zogby International*). Figures on the number of trade union voters who turned out are harder to come by, but the remarks of Patricia Elizondo, the president of a big machinists' local in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, probably give a good indication of the mood of many: "People have been unemployed for two years, and they're unhappy that the healthcare bill was not as good as they expected ... Two years ago, I had many members going door to door to campaign. Now they're saying, 'Why should I? We supported that candidate, but he didn't follow through'" (*The New York Times* September 18).

By thus creating an 'enthusiasm gap' between themselves and the Republicans, the Democrats managed to accomplish their own defeat in the mid-terms, even in the absence of any broad rightward movement amongst the electorate. Their loyalty to the existing order sometimes comes at a certain electoral price, but one they would rather a thousand times pay than contemplate the alternative.

Rallies without demands

Democrats, however, continue effectively to occupy the political space in which a counter-mobilisation could take place. This is their enduring value to the ruling class. They attempt not to fan the flames of discontent, but to extinguish them.

They act to manipulate the base through dense intermediate layers of union bureaucrats, NGOs, think tanks, journalists, academics, media personalities and other middle class professionals. To these individuals and institutions grants are disbursed, government consultancies handed out and White House invitations tendered, endowing the intermediaries with the prestige of high office in the eyes of those below, and giving them the illusion of being political players. In return for these emoluments, the intermediaries raise funds for the Democratic Party and continue to tout it as the party of progress - or at least as the lesser evil, which from their standpoint, it certainly is. Republicans as a rule prefer to shun the go-betweens and rely exclusively on the counsels of their corporate underwriters.

Neither the fact that Obama, almost the minute after he was elected, dropped any real support for the AFL-CIO's main legislative cause, a bill to make it easier for workers to unionise called Employee Free Choice Act, nor his mounting attacks on teachers' unions, nor his wage freeze for government workers, deterred the federation's president, Richard Trumka, from stumping tirelessly for the Democrats in the months before the election, or from spending \$50 million and fielding 1,500 full-time campaign workers to get the party's candidates elected in 26 states.

The absence of any political edge, let alone class theme, was evident at the two bigger leftish events of the campaign season. The first was the October 2 'One nation working together' rally on the Washington mall - an event whose politics are evident from its title. The gathering was intended as a riposte to the rightwing 'Restore honour' rally called by the unofficial Tea Party spokesperson, Glenn Beck, in August, and held at the same spot. It was endorsed by over 400 'progressive' organisations, and contained a small 'socialist contingent' supplied by, among others, the social democratic Democratic Socialists of America and the International Socialist Organization, the

American orphan of the British Socialist Workers Party. The major funding and biggest contingents, however, came from the AFL-CIO and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the country's largest black advocacy group).

Although the event was not officially in support of any political party and featured only one minor elected official, it was obviously intended as a pep rally for the Democrats. The speakers' list contained two unelected black Democratic politicians, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, as well as the Democrat-loyal labour chief, Richard Trumka. There was a lot of very general talk in the speeches about justice, jobs and the need for federal aid to education, but no specific demands were made of the administration, and the only utterance resembling criticism of Obama came not from the politicians and bureaucrats on the platform, but from the venerable calypso singer and activist, Harry Belafonte, who, without mentioning the president by name, called for an end to the Iraqi occupation and the Afghan war.

No official political endorsements were made, but in the speeches given that day there was only one villain: the Republican Party. When repeated denunciations of the latter were combined with lectures on the importance of voting in November, the message was more than clear. The turnout, estimated by some at 175,000, equalled or exceeded that of the earlier Glenn Beck rally, but observers also commented on the gathering's ritualistic atmosphere, and an understandable lack of enthusiasm among the crowd.

The second event was far quirkier: the 'Restore sanity' rally that took place on October 30 in the same location, also called to counter the Glenn Beck-Tea Party event. It was called by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, two political satirists whose irreverent television send-ups of rightwing politicians have earned them a quasi-cult following among youthful viewers, for many of whom Stewarts *Daily show* and *The Colbert report* are the principal source of news. Upwards of 65,000 flocked to the capital in response to the summons of the two comedians, many perhaps hoping for deadly comic thrusts against the right. Any such hopes were rapidly dashed. While comic routines were acted out on stage, what the audience got in the end was a serious and heartfelt plea from Stewart for political moderation. He appealed for a toning down of the supercharged rhetoric from both the right and left, exhorting politicians and Americans in general to be more cooperative and reasonable with one another. Throughout, Stewart posited an equivalence between fanatics of the right and fanatics of the left, comparing the Tea Party to such groups as Code Pink, a leftish group famous for staging theatrical protests in Washington and elsewhere.

The Stewart-Colbert rally was not tailored to the specific electoral purposes of the Democratic Party, like the 'One nation' event earlier in the month. It was, however, representative of the mentality of the mid-level layers upon which the Democratic leadership leans for support - a mentality in which right-left conflict is a matter of political tone and not opposing material interests.

The results of the Democrat-inflicted paralysis of all the forces that could resist capitalism's mounting austerity drive were swift in coming. On January 5, an emboldened Republican majority took their seats in the House of Representatives vowing to repeal Obama's already pathetic healthcare reform and slash the federal budget by \$100 billion, leaving no doubt at whose expense. Taking their cues from Washington, state governors across the country, Republican and Democrat alike, are seeking to lay the blame for continuing economic distress on public workers' unions, which they are pledging to curb or even eliminate.

The Obama White House has responded by moving even further to the right, just having appointed William Daley, the mid-western head of JP Morgan Chase, as chief of staff to replace Rahm Emanuel in an unmistakable bow to Wall Street. The so-called progressives who sold the Democrats to the people in 2008 and again in 2010 have sown the wind. Now they, and millions more besides, are reaping the whirlwind ●

What we fight for

■ Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but there exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be ready to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.

■ Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

■ All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.

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weekly worker

Climate change and Cancún failure

Not in capital's interest

If the failure of the national leaders attending the United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen in 2009 (COP15)¹ was insufficient to show that capitalism cannot mend its ways in despoiling the environment, last month their minions trooped over to Cancún to reiterate this fact at COP16. As well as president Barack Obama, the high-profile US team at Copenhagen had also included secretary of state Hillary Clinton. In contrast the low-key US delegation to Mexico was headed by Jonathan Pershing, deputy special envoy for climate change at the department of state. This downgrading of representation was perhaps reflected in the lack of concrete agreement reached in Cancún.

Bolivia's ambassador to the UN, Pablo Solón, broke with diplomatic protocol when he outlined why his country's delegation had not voted for the accord at the end of the proceedings. (Technically, since unanimity is necessary under UN rules, this means that the accord is void.) In an article published soon after, he said: "The text replaces binding mechanisms for reducing greenhouse gas emissions with voluntary pledges that are wholly insufficient. These pledges contradict the stated goal of capping the rise in temperature at 2°C, instead guiding us to 4°C or more. The text is full of loopholes for polluters, opportunities for expanding carbon markets and similar mechanisms ... that reduce the obligation of developed countries to act." He went on to declare: "The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has found that, in order to have a 50% chance of keeping the rise in temperature below 1.5°C, emissions must peak by 2015. The attempt in Cancún to delay critical decisions until next year could have catastrophic consequences."²

Cancún is supposedly going to lead to greater transparency concerning emissions, forestry investments that are no better than the bribery of poor countries' elites, a World Bank-run green climate fund and as yet undefined transfers of technology for renewable energy. Plus the pious hope that somehow there will emerge an overarching strategy to produce legally binding protocols. But the real story of Cancún was that its delegations were prepared to prioritise the rights of capital over protecting the environment from anthropogenic climate change. And there is no way around the fact that non-binding commitments (aka voluntary 'pledges') to reduce emissions by 15% by 2020 will fail to stabilise temperatures at a level that can avoid catastrophic changes.

Indebted African states are being wooed via the blandishments of the UN scheme for Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (UN-REDD),³ accruing benefits to their elites. After all, there are plenty of examples of bribery that show it works well for the leading capitalist polluting states. Indeed, EU climate action commissioner Connie Hedegaard met secretly with Jonathan Pershing on February 11 last year to cook up just such a suborning stew. As exposed by Wikileaks, the cable reports that she "suggested the AOSIS



Hot air won't stop global warming

[Alliance of Small Island States] countries 'could be our best allies', given their need for financing." She was mostly concerned that \$30 billion already designated 'climate' aid from 2010 to 2012 came in the form of loan guarantees rather than grants (ie, not good enough bribery). Also, the cable noted, "Hedegaard said she does not have high expectations for COP 16 in Mexico and that we must avoid the expectations that it will resolve all of the unanswered problems from Copenhagen."⁴ Further cables suggest that Hedegaard and the US delegation were instrumental in cobbling together the final, rushed accord that almost all Cancún participants accepted.

Setting a notional 2°C limit rise in atmospheric mean temperatures is considered inadequate by some senior climate scientists - the point is to curb carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions in order to tackle global warming concretely. After three decades advising US governments, professor James Hansen began issuing public calls to reduce CO₂ levels in the atmosphere from the current 390 parts per million (ppm) to below 350ppm. He was recently quoted as saying that, "Two degrees Celsius is guaranteed disaster."⁵ Cancún chose the 2°C aspirational limit in preference to the harder 350ppm figure. In a paper published on his Columbia University website, Hansen and others have suggested the possibility that reduced Arctic sea ice is affecting weather patterns and produced the cold air that Europe just experienced in November and

December: "Because Hudson Bay (and Baffin Bay, west of Greenland) are at significantly lower latitudes than most of the Arctic Ocean, global warming may cause them to remain ice-free into early winter after the Arctic Ocean has become frozen."⁶

Loss of sea ice in the Arctic due to global warming has, seemingly contradictorily, had the effect of sending extremely cold air into northern Europe, leaving parts of north Canada warmer in winter. "The extreme warmth in north-east Canada is undoubtedly related to the fact that Hudson Bay was practically ice-free. In the past, including the GISS base period 1951-1980, Hudson Bay was largely ice-covered in November. The contrast of temperatures at coastal stations in years with and without sea ice cover on the neighbouring water body is useful for illustrating the dramatic effect of sea ice on surface air temperature. Sea ice insulates the atmosphere from ocean water warmth, allowing surface air to achieve temperatures much lower than that of the ocean. It is for this reason that some of the largest positive temperature anomalies on the planet occur in the Arctic Ocean, as sea ice area has decreased in recent years."⁷

A recent study by geophysicists Vladimir Petoukhov, Vladimir A. Semenov and AM Obukhov shows that abnormal decreases in sea ice concentration has unexpected repercussions: "Our simulations ... demonstrate that lower-troposphere heating over the seas in the eastern Arctic caused by the sea ice reduction may

result in strong anticyclonic anomaly over the Polar Ocean and anomalous easterly advection over northern continents. This causes a continental-scale winter cooling reaching -1.5°C, with more than three times increased probability of cold winter extremes over large areas, including Europe. Our results imply that several recent severe winters do not conflict the global warming picture, but rather supplement it ..."⁸

Should Greenland's ice disappear, as will happen if current trends continue, sea levels worldwide would rise by around seven metres, inundating large areas of seaboard land. This would, for example, place much of the shore of the Thames Estuary and parts of the Sussex and Kent coast under water and massively increase the size of the Wash. In fact, the current sea level rise has been accelerating due to global warming from a mean rate of 1.8mm per year over the last century up to 3.1mm (satellite measurement 1993-2003). Were Antarctic ice to melt together with all Arctic ice, then the sea level rise would amount to 10 times the rise caused by the melting of Greenland's ice alone.

Even on a national level, within the UK, the Con-Dem coalition is doing its bit against the environment by planning to privatise all or most of the 635,000 acres of woodland currently held by the Forestry Commission in England. Scotland's and Wales's devolved authorities will no doubt be encouraged to do likewise. In verbal evidence to a House of Lords select committee, Jim Paice, minister of state for agriculture and food, stated baldly the coalition government's position that "we wish to proceed with ... very substantial disposal of public forest estate, which could go to the extent of all of it".⁹ The main bidders already lining up to take these woods off the government's hands are, unsurprisingly, logging companies. It would be bizarre in the extreme, not to say against shareholders' interests (paramount under company law), were these companies not to realise these assets. And the most straightforward way to do that will be to turn trees into timber. What

else are they going to do? It is not as if planning requirements stand in their way: the Localism Bill going through parliament will dismantle planning structures and procedures that hamper capitalist profit-seeking.

It is capital's burning, unrelenting drive to create surplus value that underlies the production of greenhouse gases. It also results in a tendency to pollute the air, soil and water - the elements of our world regarded as a 'free gift' and without cost to its grubby balance sheets. Knowing the price of every commodity without knowing the worth of life's essentials is the essence of capitalism. Its depredation of the earth and our environment will not be brought to an end by attempts to tame its excesses: capital's excesses are what keep it in business.

The proletariat is the only class that has no interest in the destruction the planet; the only class whose interest lies in the emancipation of all humanity and thus the defence of the world it inhabits.

Jim Gilbert

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Notes

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9. House of Lords select committee on the European Union, agriculture, fisheries and environment sub-committee November 24 2010: www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/eu-sub-com-d/forestry/ucEUD241110ev1.pdf.

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