the agitator

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Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists - Produced by Workers Power supporters

For a national rail strike!

From Arriva Trains Northern to Connex South East, from ScotRail to South West Trains railworkers have had enough. Enough of bully-boy victimisation, enough of penny-pinching low pay, enough of divide-and-rule differentials, enough of profiteering privatisation.

The train operators, ably abetted by the press barons at the Mail, Standard and Times, have used every trick in the book to conceal the real reasons for the disputes.

Greg Tucker, who has been demoted by SWT from driver to ticket collector because of his trade union activities, told The Agitator, "South West Trains distributed a quarter of a million leaflets to customers naming me as the sole cause of the dispute, in order to fulfil my political career. As the dispute has widened to other companies they've had to admit that it's not just victimisation but the underlying cause is low pay and increasing differentials."

Because the private operators sacked 3,000 drivers in order to boost profits, they've had to increase drivers' pay dramatically. Guards, platform staff, cleaners have all seen their pay fall behind. Cleaners have seen a real cut in pay. That's the main issue behind the strikes.

The papers make out that the RMT is not only "holding passengers to ransom" but also their own members. One scab manager told the Guardian, "They have to stay out on strike because of the RMT. Many staff wish this dispute was over now."

Rubbish — if SWT strikers wanted to end the strike now, why then have they been joined by RMT members in six other companies, all angry about the same issue? And why did 65 people pack a support group meeting to pledge their solidarity (see box)? The strike is not getting less popular, it's getting more so!

SWT are trying to starve strikers back to work. "They've cut back on overtime and sick pay — you now need a sick note from day one — you can't take leave... some platform staff have lost more through the refusal of overtime than they have through strike action," Greg told The Agitator.

Is this a political strike?

YES. Brian Souter, owner of SWT, is using the dispute to smash the union — not only on SWT but on the whole network. The Sunday Telegraph carefully leaked Souter's plan to sack all the strikers — only for a spokesman to say he was "misunderstood" (as if!) Meanwhile SWT is recruiting and training a scab workforce that may be used, in rotation, to break all the strikes across the network.

- Railworkers need a national strike to counter the bosses' national tactics. Speed through ballots. No one back till all disputes are settled.
- Co-ordinate strike days — between the rail operators to minimise scabbing, and with PCS, CWU and other strikers to maximise impact.
- Build mass picket lines to stop Souter's scabforce and to build solidarity.
- Spread the support groups. Organise demos, collections, leafleting, station occupations, publicity stunts.
- Aslef should instruct its members to walk out if scabs used as guards on trains they are driving.
- In all disputes, remember there is a workers' solution. Re-nationalise the rail network under workers' and passengers' control. For an environmentally sound, integrated, cheap public transport system.

New Labour is also up to its neck in this filthy business. Tony Blair has condemned the strikers. But his ministers and the supposedly independent Strategic Rail Authority have ignored the disregard for safety posed by the use of managers as guards. Guards are responsible for passenger safety and undergo an 8-week training course. These scabs have had two or three days' training, if that. So much for "holding the passengers to ransom"!

What is at stake in the rail disputes is not just a fair deal for RMT members. New Labour is trying to score a major victory over the unions. If the RMT go down, postworkers, NHS staff, firefighters, low-paid civil servants will be next. This is the key dispute for New Labour's second term. That is why it is vital for every worker to support the railworkers!



WHO IS BRIAN SOUTER?

Brian Souter made his millions out of privatisation. His company Stagecoach scooped up the profitable bus companies after deregulation and bid for all 25 train operating franchises. His businesses now have a £1.34bn turnover and his personal fortune stands at £565m.

Despite his "son of a bus driver" image, Souter is viciously anti-union. He cuts wages, sacks drivers and runs services on forced overtime. When the East Midlands Bus Co. T&G members imposed an overtime ban, Souter organised flying scabs and broke the union. The Monopolies and Mergers Commission has called him "predatory, deplorable and against the public interest'. This devout Christian replied, "ethics are not relevant because capitalism is based on greed".

Souter has also used his millions to undermine democracy. Instead of allowing the elected representatives of the Scottish parliament to vote to repeal the infamous Section 28, which bans teachers from discussing homosexuality in schools, he gave £1m to the bigoted "Keep the Clause" campaign. Seventy per cent of Scots refused to participate in his referendum, but Souter still demanded that MSPs retain anti-gay legislation that promotes ignorance and fear.

Build support groups

A South West Trains support group has already been set up in Waterloo. Over 60 people attended a meeting and discussed the dispute as well as similar struggles involving the tube, the post office and benefits offices. The bosses' divide-and-rule tactics were rebuffed as Alex Gordon of the RMT emphasised that he welcomed the drivers' pay rise, he just wanted equal treatment.

The meeting agreed to build for the picket lines, to raise donations for the strikers (as strike pay is not available), to invite strikers to speak to other unions and community organisations. We also drew up a model resolution and collection sheet.

This is an excellent start. The Agitator urges every RMT branch to take similar initiatives and set up support groups across the country. By networking, other unionists, anti-capitalist groups, Socialist Alliances, community groups, students can bring their own skills and ideas to help spread the message and win the dispute. Demos, occupations, leafleting estates, stunts... go for it!

BUILDING WORKERS VICTORY

Four carpenters have won a 21-month battle to secure 20 days paid holiday a year. The employers tried to duck an EU directive by claiming the chippies were self-employed.

Brian Higgins writes, "The victory was a rank and file one in every sense. The four workers with the support of Northampton UCATT branch, the London and South East Regional Council and the Building Worker Group — all lay bodies — won in the face of intimidation, coercion and threats of blacklisting."

Contact Brian on 01604-786 543 for details.

POSTAL BALLOT

CWU members at Consignia (that's what they call Royal Mail now to stop monarchists fretting about privatisation, bless) are balloting for strike action over pay and job insecurity. Threatened with 30,000 job cuts and privatisation, the most militant section of workers in Britain could soon be joining railworkers on the picket line. Let's hope so. Result due on 7th February.

STOP THE WAR COALITION

A trade union teach-in is to be held on Saturday, 9th February from 11.00a.m. to 4.30p.m. at SOAS, Russell Square, London WC1. Speakers from Aslef, FBU, Natfhe and RMT. £6 registration. Phone 07951-235 915 or visit www.stopwar.org.uk for details.

SING WHEN YOU'RE WINNING

Workers from the SINTRAEMCALI union in Colombia have occupied a CAM tower since Christmas Day demanding funding for a water purification programme. To mark the first month's anniversary of the protest, they organised a competition to see which of the 16 floors could sing the Internationale the loudest.

Meanwhile food was prepared in "Thatcher's Kitchen", workers patrolled the streets against possible paramilitary attack and unemployed blockaded the roads. The good news is that the government has given in to all the union's demands.

NEWSQUEST BRADFORD

Journalists held a successful strike against low pay on 16th January. Graduates start on just £10,500 a year. Experienced seniors earn less than trainee managers at McDonalds! Meanwhile Newsquest (Bradford) made £6m profit last year. Send messages of support to NUJ, 22 Swan Street, Manchester M4 5JQ. Make donations payable to "Newsquest Bradford NUJ Chapel".

Why is everyone in Eastenders so miserable?

The East End: for generations synonymous with large-scale immigration and grinding poverty.

Districts like Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets are among the 10 most deprived in Britain. Tower Hamlets has the largest Bangladeshi population of any local authority, while in Newham so-called ethnic minorities now make up the majority of the total population.

Clothing industry sweatshops are rife. In Hackney most of the workers are Turkish and Kurdish, in Tower Hamlets they are largely Bangladeshi. They sweat in a twilight world of long hours, filthy conditions and high injury rates. Some live in fear of immigration raids.

While local research suggests £6.30 an hour is the minimum needed to survive in the East End, wages are generally £2 lower. And if the worker is "illegal" — lower still.

The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) is an umbrella group set up to combat these appalling conditions. It campaigns to persuade local councils to pay a "Living Wage" and write it into contracts with private companies.

TELCO has mounted inventive stunts — such as a fancy dress protest outside a Canary Wharf awards dinner for top women bosses. While dominated by church and mosque, it has the support of unions like Unison and its AGM last autumn attracted nearly 1,000 people, many of them local workers. It has made an excellent start at rebuilding organisations of struggle and a community of solidarity.

But building partnerships with local authorities and shaming giant cleaning contractors like Compass, OCS and ISS will only go so far. Jules Pipe, leader of Hackney council, has signed up to TELCO's campaign with one hand — while writing off services, wages and jobs with the other. Why? Because balancing the capitalist books comes first, treating workers like humans a distant second. Contractors secure deals by undercutting each other. No matter how deep they blush, they will continue to pay shit wages — or lose to someone else who does.

That's why The Agitator proposes class struggle methods as the only way to fight back against capitalism. Only by organising independently of the bosses and threatening their ability to make a profit — through strikes, occupations, mass demonstrations — will they make real concessions. And in the process workers will learn a valuable lesson — that we don't need the bosses, we can run society ourselves.

BEST VALUE???

Dear Agitator

The only thing Best Value, a so called replacement for the Tories' Compulsory Competitive Tendering, looks like replacing is the workforce.

Best Value is supposed to be a measure of how well those who are in receipt of public money spend it compared with service delivery from other sectors and also, where applicable, with private sector companies.

Of course this can give rise to all sorts of potential scenarios. Social Services' carers can earn up to £7.50 an hour but in the private sector wages are much cheaper, £5.00 per hour. Local authorities spend more on wages than the private sector. So in a labour intensive service, it is stacked against the public sector. But what about the quality of service? What the number crunchers fail to take on board is that long service awards, better holidays, better pension schemes and better training allow those in need of the service to feel assured, safe, cared for and more importantly human. Where is the measure for this ?

In the West Midlands, they have already started privatising the duties of traffic wardens, absorbing them into the local authority, who in turn sell them on to a private company. What we now have on the streets are Sandwell are private sector workers enforcing the highway laws and receiving bonuses for the number of tickets issued and all this by an American owned firm!

Best Value, or the slow death of the public sector — whatever it is — there is one thing that you can be sure of: MURDER is being committed in the name of Best Value and the government is committing it.

An activist in the TGWU, working for Coventry City Council.

VOTE FOR BOB CROW!

Dear Agitator

The election for General Secretary of the RMT has been one of the dirtiest in recent years. The dirt has come not just from the bosses and their yellow press, but from within the labour movement itself.

A 15-page TUC document —Leadership elections in the RMT — has been circulating among activists. It puts forward a strategy for Congress House's preferred candidate Phil Bialyk against "left wing fundamentalist" Bob Crow, the activists' choice. It is McCarthyite in tone and relies on soundbite over substance:

If the "threat" is not dealt with, warns the TUC ominously, the RMT "could be marginalised, become irrelevant and end up like Scargill's NUM... The RMT's influence and credibility is already in decline among government ministers and civil servants. Relationships with employers are almost entirely hostile. And public support is plummeting as railworkers are seen as strike-happy dinosaurs."

The TUC alternative is something they style "the modernising left" who refer to themselves as "tough and militant, but pragmatic". This modernising left is in fact the bureaucratic right, always putting, in a tough, militant, but pragmatic way, government before members.

Once all the name-calling has been swept aside we are left with very little from the right wing — sorry, modernising left — other than backing for the government and co-operation with the employers. Bob Crow is attacked for being a "fanatic, a fundamentalist, an extremist" but not for protecting infrastructure and signalling jobs after the collapse of Railtrack. Not for safeguarding London Underground jobs. Not for retaining guards and not for the introduction of 35-hour weeks.

The fact is that the RMT is enjoying a revival because members' interests are being put first and new layers of activists are coming to the fore. A vote for Bob Crow is a vote to strengthen that revival.

A Bristol RMT activist

The political fund:

End the monopoly

Railworkers are taking strike action around the country. Members of PCS in the Benefits Offices are on strike over poor conditions and safety issues. The postal workers are currently balloting for action over pay.

Pasty faced commentators are wandering into telly studios and newspaper offices muttering darkly about the grim old days of union power coming back.

Things are looking up!

All of this is happening because more and more workers are angry at the Labour government. Instead of taxing the rich, investing in jobs and services and repealing anti-union laws and tackling poverty Labour, launched one privatisation plan after another, let unemployment rip in manufacturing and welcomed any boss into the party so long as they turned up to Number Ten with a wallet full of dosh.

Despite the fact that the unions are led by time serving careerists, happier nibbling canapés at business lunches than standing on picket lines, the unions are a threat. The rank and file could go beyond the limits set by the bureaucrats and this could all too easily cause problems in the Labour Party itself.

To solve this Blair would like to shut the door in the unions' face.

The problem is that the unions are a vital source of finance for the party, via the political fund. So long as Labour monopolise that fund Blair can push through his policies between elections and then turn to the unions at election time. And the union chiefs are willing dupes.

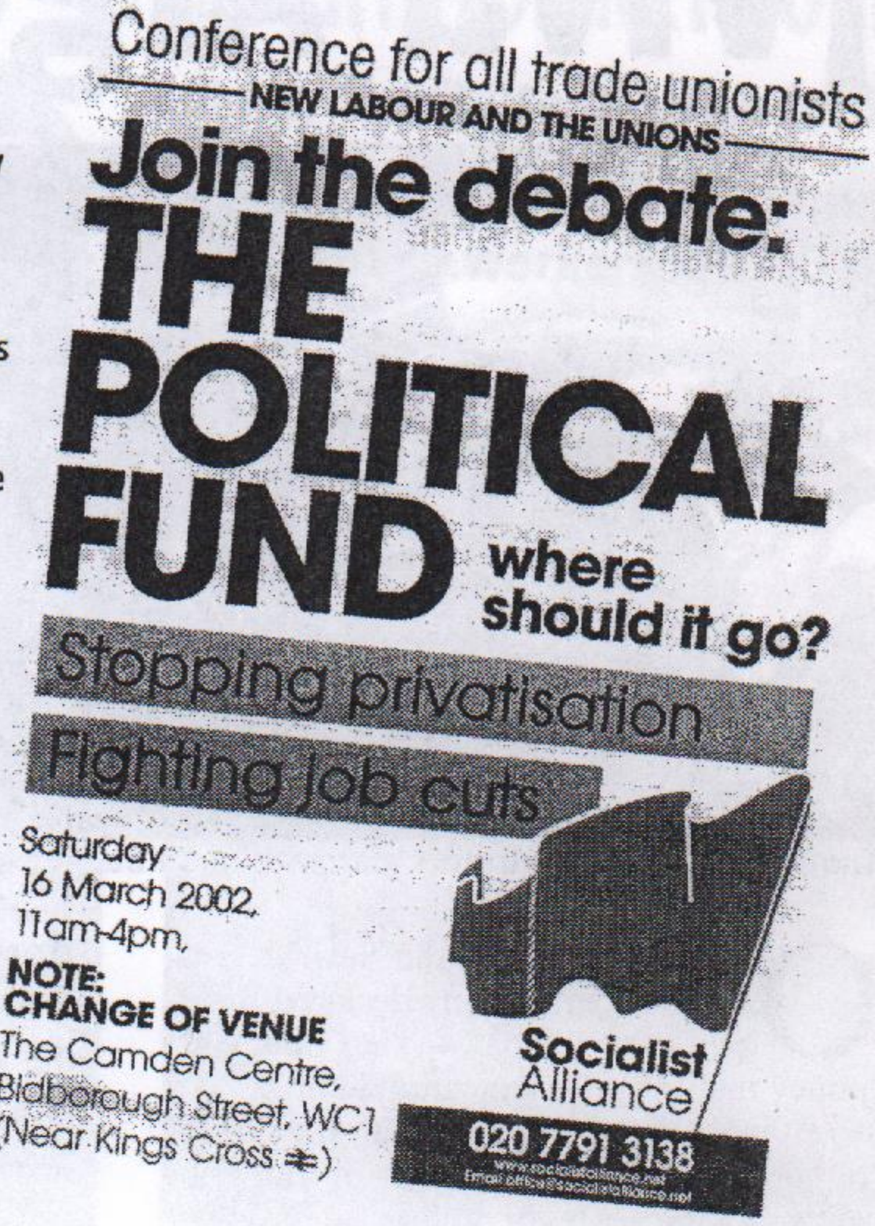
Why should union members have no say over the use of their money? Why should they pay the bill for the party of privatisers when privatisation costs them their jobs, wages and conditions?

The Agitator is quite clear. The political fund should not be automatically monopolised by the Labour Party — as is the case in many union rule books. The fund could easily be allocated to working class parties in accordance with the level of support they have within the union.

More importantly we can, in the process, start to free the unions from the parliamentary, legalistic strategy of the Labour Party where everything is geared towards winning elections and keeping middle England happy. We can pose other methods of making political gains — strikes and occupations against cuts, sell-offs and closures, councils of action to draw public service users into the fight against privatisation, direct action alongside anti-capitalists to discredit and halt the hand of global capitalism.

In other words, we can raise the need for a new kind of party, one that represents the interests of ordinary workers, not the careerist union bosses — a revolutionary party!

- **Unison's affiliated political fund hands Labour millions. It has another political fund to finance an anti-privatisation campaign. Why have one fund to oppose privatisation and another to fund the privatisers' commander-in-chief?**
- **The post workers' union, the CWU, agreed to review the use of its fund if Labour continued with its plans to privatise the post. Labour is pressing ahead, but where is the review?**
- **General union GMB is withholding £2m of its political fund unless and until Labour stops privatising. Yet it still hands over millions to the party, it still calls for a Labour vote.**
- **The FBU's rulebook commits it to struggle for socialism. Labour has cut that clause out of its rules, so why still bankroll the party?**



Mark Hoskisson, the Socialist Alliance Executive's trade union officer, tells the Agitator about the Alliance's trade union conference

"We've already had to change the venue to a bigger hall, because in the first three weeks of building for the conference we got 250 applications to attend. Union branches, stewards' and branch committees and activists from around the country are voting to support this conference.

In the FBU, the RMT, the CWU and Unison we are finding a lot of people well beyond the ranks of the Socialist Alliance saying democratising the fund is a key discussion we want to have in our unions.

And in the education and civil service unions activists are saying privatisation is a political issue, the government is our boss — we need a political fund so we can wage a political fight.

The conference is a chance for the wider left in the unions to get organised, take forward the fight to democratise the political fund, link up the sectors fighting privatisation and establish a series of networks throughout the movement.

If we are successful - and we think we will be - in getting a wide spectrum of trade union activists together, helping shape the debate taking place in the unions over the relationship with New Labour, then this could mark the beginning of a real step towards building a strong rank and file movement in the unions.

So our message is - build this conference. It will put the wind up Blair, the TUC and the bosses."

The FBU experience

Firefighter Matt Wrack moved the successful resolution democratising the political fund at last year's annual FBU conference. Speaking in a personal capacity, he told the Agitator:

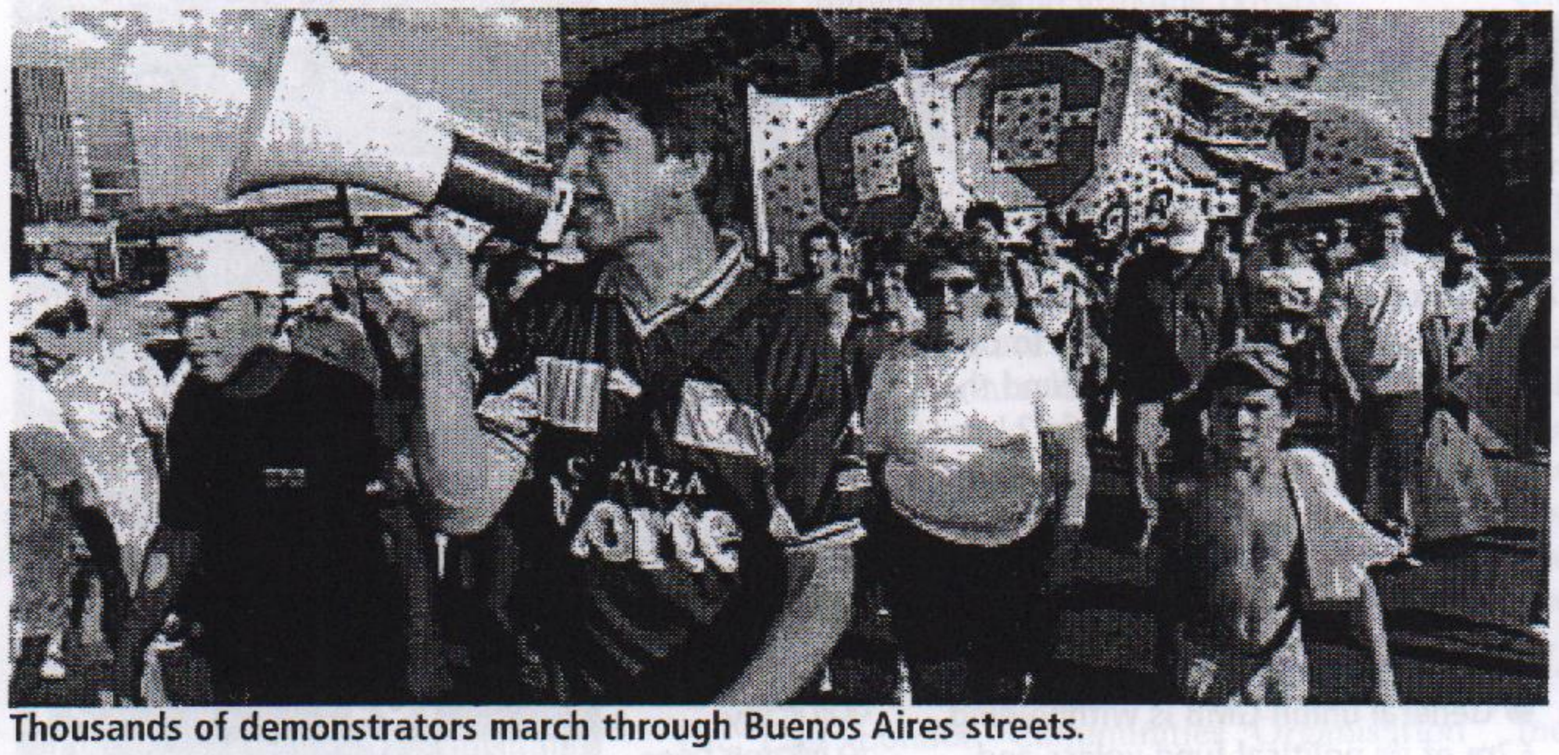
"Last year's FBU conference made an important contribution to political developments within the movement. The debate on our relationship had been building for a number of years - since at least 1996. Most of our employers in the fire service are Labour Authorities and it's against these that we have been having to fight year in and year out. So there was a growing mood to re-assess our political relationship with Labour.

The London resolution called for the political fund to be freed and democratised, and opened up the opportunity to back candidates who oppose Labour but whose policies are in line with those of the union. The motion tapped into a growing mood of hostility to Labour's attacks. Despite the strong opposition of our leadership it was agreed.

This year the Executive Council have been instructed to bring forward any rule changes that might be necessary to implement last year's decision to free up the political fund. Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, they are using the opportunity to attempt to undermine last year's decision and effectively overturn it.

So the Conference this year will be a lively one - on this and a number of other issues."

¡Viva Argentina!



Thousands of demonstrators march through Buenos Aires streets.

Over Christmas and the New Year, Argentinian workers declared their own bank holiday — they liberated money that the government and banks had stolen from them. Not only that, they took to the streets in their hundreds of thousands, night after night, and brought down two presidents, one supreme court judge, an economics minister, an IMF cuts package and a £132bn World Bank loan!

The uprising has been costly — 31 young activists have been killed by the cops. Many more languish in the jails. But the courage of the demonstrators was such that even bloody repression would not stop them.

Argentina has been in recession for four years (see box). The unions have called eight general strikes in the last two years, four in the last six months. At the same time, the unemployed have formed their own organisations, piqueteros, who block the roads and loot supermarkets so they can feed their families.

Workers and unemployed activists have supported each others' actions, refusing to scab or defend 'law and order'!

Popular assemblies have sprung up in every town and workers' district to discuss the crisis and decide on a course of action. This is how it was decided to rob the banks and distribute the money to the poor. At the same time factory committees like the one in Neuquen (see below) have started to take control of the bankrupt enterprises.

The Argentine revolution has begun!

Urgent tasks

- **Building workers' councils, based on the popular assemblies, factory committees and rank and file bodies. Through elected and recallable delegates, councils can co-ordinate a united response to the government and pose an alternative authority to the corrupt ruling class.**
- **Calling an indefinite general strike. The trade union leaders, as in this country, are tied to the government. Many of them became millionaires with kickbacks from privatisation. They called off a 36-hour general strike as soon as their man, Duhalde, got in. Workers need to demand a general strike against the austerity and organise one if the bloated bureaucrats won't.**
- **Arming the people. Already 31 are dead. The army, under General Galtieiri, has smashed people's opposition before. An armed opposition can persuade rank and file soldiers to disobey orders to clamp down.**
- **Building a workers' party. All the leaders of the unions, the unemployed, the roadblockers... are linked to the Peronist party. This bosses' party will play for time, divide the opposition and make the workers pay for the crisis. A new, revolutionary workers' party is needed. Only then can workers impose their own anti-capitalist, socialist solution.**

What's behind the crisis?

Argentina has had ten years of neo-liberal economic policies. The International Monetary Fund held it up as a model for other Third World countries to follow. The Argentine Government:

- **'pegged' its currency, the peso, to the dollar so it could produce for export markets. But this made imports really expensive. Small businesses went bankrupt, public sector workers haven't been paid for three months.**
- **sold off its nationalised industries to foreign mega-corporations. Western banks and companies now own 60 per cent of industry and services.**
- **threw workers onto the scrap heap (there is no dole in Argentina, you just starve). 20 per cent are without work and a further 20 per cent live on part-time, casual and black market jobs. 40 per cent of the people live below the World Bank's poverty line.**
- **froze people's bank accounts and devalued the currency, effectively stealing half of everyone's savings.**
- **declared a state of seige, banning the right to protest. This was the final straw. Workers, unemployed, even the middle class united on the streets to shout: "What an Idiot! Stick your state of seige up your arse!" By the end of the night, the President had fled the palace by helicopter. And the revolution had begun!**

Solidarity

Argentina could be the first of many revolutions simply because many other countries (Mexico, Turkey...) are also on the brink of IMF-imposed meltdown. That's why we must raise international solidarity. The Agitator says:

Cancel the debt!
Release all prisoners!
End police repression!

To find out more, invite an Argentinian speaker to your workplace. Contact the Argentina Solidarity Campaign:
☎ 07960–398 152
email: argentinesolidarity@hotmail.com

Zanón Ceramic workers: on the march once again

The Agitator received this press statement form ceramic workers in Argentina.

NEUQUEN, 4 JANUARY 2002.

The workers of Cerámica Zanón who have already been in conflict for 3 months have decided to put the factory into production.

Neuquen High Court has determined that Zanón closed the factory illegally. Because of this we intend to reopen it.

Zanón, on the 28 November, decided to sack all of the workforce again illegally.

The ceramic workers of Zanón have successfully got the courts to impound part of the company's stock so that our salaries can be paid.

The bosses now want to use creditors' claims to cheat the workers while they refuse to put the factory back into production.

The provincial government, having used repression against the Zanón workers on 30 November, pretend to know nothing about the matter. It has given many benefits to Cerámica Zanón for years that have cost the people of Neuquen millions. Today, as the bosses wilfully close the doors leaving more than 380 families in the street, the government does not have a single proposal.

But the workers have a simple proposal, that the factory is nationalised — we know how to run it for the benefit of the community, for a plan of public works that will serve furthermore to generate genuine work.

In our country the workers and popular sectors have said enough and gone onto the streets. In this way two governments fell in one week, De La Rua's Radical one and then Saá's Peronist one. This heroic struggle cost the lives of more than 30 young people and workers, but demonstrated the enormous force of the working people and of direct action.

The Zanón ceramic workers have decided to put the factory into production with the raw materials that exist and demand that the government reconnects the gas in order to work fully and to defend all jobs.