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workers POWER

New Labour attacks the poor, not poverty

TIME TO BUILD A FIGHTBACK

Support the lobby of Labour Party conference 26 September Bournemouth March: 3pm, Meyrick Park Bradley Road



Demonstrators march to lobby last year's Labour Party conference. This year's lobby should be used to start a fightback against New Labour

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TEENAGE SEX

Our morals and Blair's

TWO 12-year-old girls in South Yorkshire - one has just given birth, one is pregnant. Tony Blair is "appalled" but he is not sure what to do about it. So he blathers about "a new moral purpose in Britain".

But it is quite simple, Tony. Here are three easy steps to reduce teenage pregnancies and births:

1. Provide comprehensive sex education in schools

2. Provide free contraception and confidential advice

3. Change the law to ensure free abortion on demand.

Why can't Tony see this? Well for a start, preaching about morals costs less and has the added advantage of blaming everyone except the government.

■ It's the parents' fault: "parents have got to take responsibility for their children. 12-year-old kids should not be on the streets at night".

■ It's the social services. Blair sternly reminds local authorities that he's already given them the means of tackling teenage delinquency - in the form of curfews and anti-social behaviour orders. Look what happens when they don't use them.

■ Above all, of course, it's the kids fault. Sex education should "make youngsters aware of the undesirability of having sex at the age of 12".

Let's talk about morals.

Is it morally right to force single mothers to live in hostels as a bizarre kind of punishment for sexual "promiscuity" reminiscent of the Victorian era?

Is it morally acceptable to tolerate such levels of poverty and deprivation that some young women, as one of the South Yorkshire teenagers admitted, have sex in order to get pregnant to "have something to love"?

Does Tony Blair sleep soundly at night knowing that his policies on education and low-paid jobs have made thousands of young people so depressed about their future that a Sheffield sexual health worker believes that "ambition is the best contraceptive"?

We should be appalled. Appalled at Blair's creeping-Jesus moral bigotry. His sermons are a diversion from all the real problems that so many of us face - poverty, ignorance, over-work, oppression and a total lack of control over our own lives at home and at work. We need to fight back - against moral reaction and against every attack New Labour launches on our jobs, wages, services and rights.

IN BRIEF

ANTI-RACIST campaigners are pushing for a full public inquiry into yet another death in police custody. In early August Sarah Thomas, a 34-year-old student, was arrested by two plain clothes officers outside her partner's North London flat. Less than 72 hours later Sarah lay dead in Homerton Hospital. Police had taken her to the notorious Stoke Newington police station, where she supposedly suffered a convulsive fit. Sarah is the seventh person to die in Stoke Newington police custody since the early 1970s – all seven were from ethnic minorities.
In the absence of a coroner's report the police have been claiming that "very high levels of cocaine" killed Sarah. The Police Complaints Authority has parroted this line.
But her partner, Paul Doyle, saw her on life support and reported that she had suffered serious bruising. Paul is backing the campaign, which called a 200-strong demonstration outside Stoke Newington's station on 21 August. For further information, contact Inquest on 0181 802 7430.

MANCHESTER FIREFIGHTERS will be voting in a strike ballot from 13 September over the local fire authority's plans to axe 21 jobs and cut spending by £700,000. The bosses' attack comes amid similar threats to fire services elsewhere in England.
Meanwhile, the Government is preparing for a showdown with the firefighters' union, the FBU. A leaked Home Office memo shows that New Labour is on the brink of banning strikes in the service.
FBU leader Ken Cameron is absolutely right to denounce this threat "to remove our democratic right to take industrial action", but has still not called a strike ballot against the erosion of national bargaining rights after three months of fruitless talks.

CWU MEMBERS in the Royal Mail have rejected a pay and conditions deal despite union leaders' efforts to win acceptance. The 55 to 45 per cent vote in a high turn-out is a blow to "left" Deputy General Secretary John Keggie, who put himself at the head of the "yes" campaign. It also shows the persistent anger of postal workers, fed up with low pay and widespread casualisation, and still prepared to stage wildcat stoppages.

TENS OF thousand dead and injured; many more homeless. Turkey's earthquake was a natural disaster made far worse by official corruption and unbridled capitalist development. Support the Turkish and Kurdish workers' appeal. Cheques payable to: Day-Mer Migranet 2, c/o Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre, Former Library, Howard Road, London N16 8PR.

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GM CROPS by Pete Aston

Food bosses sow fear

THE CONTROVERSY over genetically modified (GM) food is growing as fast as the crops themselves. So too are the attacks on field trials. The most high profile of these was Greenpeace's destruction of a GM maize crop on a Norfolk farm, led by the improbable "eco-warrior" Lord Melchett.

His lordship spent time in the cells as a result, and still faces sentencing. Greenpeace justified their action by arguing that the government had refused to listen to public opinion. At present the polls show 80 per cent would back a ban on the sale of GM products.

The Greenpeace action was not an isolated incident. A smaller, newer group called Genetix Snowball trampled over a field trial at a farm in Oxfordshire soon after. There have been many more, less well-publicised direct actions. For the anti-GM campaigners August was the key month to destroy the crops as they were about to flower and hence "genetically pollute" the surrounding land via their pollen.

So, why is public opinion in Britain, and worldwide, so opposed to GM crops? There is widespread suspicion about food safety in general and for good reason. After the BSE scandal and ever more regular outbreaks of E coli and salmonella, there are fears about invisible horrors being unleashed – a time bomb, a "mad" scientist's new monster. It seems uncontrollable, once new genes have been introduced into one species what is to stop them spreading elsewhere?

While recognising these genuine concerns, socialists must take a consistently scientific approach in determining whether or not GM crops are sufficiently safe or unacceptably dangerous.

Firstly, what is a genetically modified or "engineered" crop? The initial stage in their development involves identifying a gene with the code for a desirable protein, for example a protein which encases a particular virus. A new gene is then assembled from assorted pieces of DNA (the chemical building block), including the coding sequence of the desired gene. The gene is then introduced into a vector (carrier) which is used to infect plants.

The plant cells, which thereby contain the new gene, are selected and then cloned to produce whole plants. Field trials are then conducted to evaluate how well these new transgenic plants resist viral infection. Finally, using conventional plant-breeding techniques, crosses can be made with other crop varieties, to develop a hybrid which farmers can successfully grow.

The potential benefits of this technology are enormous: massively boosted crop yields; far less reliance on toxic pesticides; prolonged shelf-life; and in general, more healthy food. Further possibilities of the technology are many and varied: potatoes which protect against diarrhoea; bananas which permanently vaccinate against hepatitis B; tomatoes imparting a cholesterol-lowering protein; even coffee beans without caffeine! It is easy to see how poor semi-colonial countries in particular could benefit.

To date, in Britain only four foods are allowed to contain GM organisms. These are tomato puree, sweetcorn, soya beans (found in many foodstuffs as a bulking agent) and vegetarian cheese. Across the European Union three strains of maize are the only GM crops allowed to be grown commercially.

In North America the situation is very different due to far fewer regulations being in place (thanks to intervention at government level of the agro-chemical multinationals), and less opposition so far. At present a third of all maize and 35 per cent of soya beans grown in the USA are genetically modified. Globally, over 12 million hectares of commercial GM crops have been planted.



Protesters trample GM crops

In Britain there are currently some 150-200 GM trial sites.

Among the corporations controlling these crops, Monsanto is the biggest and best-known. Other important players include the German-based AgraEvo the British-based Zeneca and another US giant, Dow.

In 1998 Monsanto's corporate worth was estimated at £22 billion, a six-fold rise in five years. It has control at all stages of the agri-business. It owns "Roundup", the world's biggest selling herbicide, American Home Products, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, Cargill's, a giant grain trader and food processor, and the crop-breeding wing of Unilever.

Despite this position of strength they are losing the battle for public opinion. Though it spent £1 million in Britain last year on a high-profile advertising campaign (criticised last month by the Advertising Standards Authority for misleading the public – i.e. "lying") Monsanto failed to alter the public perception.

But even worse, in a recent report from Deutsche Bank, Europe's biggest bank, the world's largest investors are advised to sell their shares in companies developing GM organisms (GMOs): "domestic concerns regarding agbiotechnology are clearly on the rise ... we predict that GMOs, once perceived as a bull case for this sector, will now be perceived as a pariah. The message is a scary one, increasingly GMOs are becoming a liability to farmers".

As a result in the last six months Monsanto's stock prices have fallen 11 per cent.

However unpopular GM crops are, New Labour is still pressing ahead – they announced the location of four new farm trials of winter-growing oil seed rape in August. Helpfully, for anti-GM campaigners they even published OS map grid references! Not surprisingly the companies involved with these tests have asked the government to be "less precise" with future locations.

Some are now hiring security guards to protect their sites, while others may withdraw from testing in Britain due to the high costs. Consent for similar tests has already been given at another 140 sites. The government has plans for a further 75 farm trials next year, as part of a programme to monitor the effects of GM crops on the environment and wildlife.

But who is really in control: the government or the multinationals? Under the guise of testing, AgraEvo has applied for 12,500 hectares of "field trials". This sounds a lot like commercial growing. It has also emerged that two of the scientists responsible for independently verifying the safety of the government's field trials are also being paid by AgraEvo, to look for the environmental benefits of the company's crops. This hardly bodes well for truly independent crop testing.

But this is nothing new. In January New Labour minister, Lord Sainsbury, fell under the media spotlight for his extensive interests in the development of GM foods. Sainsbury also sits on the government's biotechnology committee – the body responsible for assessing GMO-related risks.

With the latest wave of crop-pulling the indications are that the opponents of GM crops are having a real impact on future investments of the major companies.

The anti-GM campaigners raise many legitimate concerns about the potential dangers of this new technology. At the moment there are sound scientific reasons for anxiety over the possibility of genetic traits spreading to other species in the vicinity of the GM crop fields. This could transmit their genes to wild relatives, making them resistant to herbicides as well, and hence producing "super-weeds".

In the most apocalyptic scenario, the "terminator gene" will be unleashed – engineered to ensure infertility so that farmers have to buy new seeds each year. Obviously, the spread of such a gene to other species could cause widespread extinction and so massive environmental devastation. As yet none of these scenarios is proven but they urgently require serious investigation. There is also very little known on the possible effects of eating food products containing GMOs.

The first "crop-pullers" were Californians who destroyed a strawberry patch in 1987. In Britain, after a series of low-key actions since 1997, the Genetic Engineering Network was set up last year, to co-ordinate campaigning. It includes Earth First, Greenpeace, several smaller groups and individuals. It also drew in many from the anti-roads movement, who saw GM crops as the "new issue" and has developed links with the J18 "Stop the City" protest because of the role of big business. Already, campaigners have destroyed over 70 of Britain's 200 or so GM crop trials.

We don't condemn the attacks on crop trials and we demand the release of all those imprisoned. But we recognise that at the heart of this movement is an ideology that is fundamentally anti-science and buttresses a primitive utopian opposition to technological development. Activists claim there is no need for GM foods. While this may be the case in the highly developed imperialist countries with widespread overproduction of many foodstuffs, it is not the same in the semi-colonial world, where GM crops could significantly reduce famine and poverty.

Of course, such bio-technology under the control of multinational bosses is currently perceived as a threat to their very survival by many peasant farmers in South Asia and elsewhere. But this means we have to direct our struggle against the multinationals, not against science.

Marxists support the development of the world's productive forces. Technologies developed under capitalism have boosted agricultural productivity many times over. Food safety, in general, has also vastly improved despite the recent spate of scares. However, while they remain under capitalist control, the potential dangers of new technologies are overlooked in favour of maximising company profits. Ultimately, only research under working class control will enable us to find out how safe GM crops and foods are.

Therefore we fight for:

- A complete moratorium on the commercial cultivation and licensing of new GM crops
- Full disclosure of the findings from all field-testing to date
- For government-funded independent crop trials, under workers' control, with full access to all necessary scientific expertise. No to secret trials. For controlled conditions in all trials to prevent any impact on the surrounding environment
- For a workers' and consumers' enquiry into the safety of GM foods
- Clear labelling of all products containing GM organisms
- The nationalisation, under workers' control of all the agrochemical companies such as Monsanto.

*workers*POWER

As the fall in union membership finally stops, new legislation opens a window of opportunity for recruitment and recognition. *Paul Morris* looks at the bosses' plans for resistance and how they can be beaten

The bosses' offensive

The Employment Relations Act (ERA), Labour's one-off attempt to revise the Tory anti-union legislation, became law last month. The legislation hits the statute books at a time when the TUC is reporting the first solid evidence of a halt to the 20-year decline in union membership.

But few trade union activists are celebrating these developments. The ERA has been carefully filleted by employers' organisations, in consultation with pliant Labour ministers. It will be "phased in", with the main provisions on union recognition taking effect only in the summer of 2000.

But the bad news gets worse: documents leaked last month show that bosses are preparing to use the legislation's fudged union recognition provisions to launch their own offensive against union rights.

Much of the act concerns "individual rights" at work: lifting the ceiling on unfair dismissal compensation from £12,000 to £50,000; the introduction of a "family friendly" policy on parental leave; and equalising rights of full-time and part-time workers. These aspects will come into force between October 1999 and April 2000.

But the key "collective rights" in the act – to allow compulsory recognition after a workplace ballot, the right to union representation at a disciplinary hearing, and specific protection against blacklisting and victimisation of union reps – will be the subject of yet another round of "consultation". Consultation with the bosses' side has already weakened the ERA: now the bosses will have until July 2000 to move the goalposts even further.

On recognition, the act as it stands allows unions to apply for recognition and then go to either a workplace ballot or binding arbitration. The Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) set up to oversee the process will have far-reaching powers, in particular to define the "bargaining unit". If activists can prove 50 per cent membership or get 40 per cent of all eligible workers to vote in a workplace ballot, recognition becomes compulsory. Even if successful, however, there are further obstacles before recognition leads to collective bargaining rights over pay and conditions. And, of course, none of the laws apply to firms with fewer than 20 employees.

The law clearly leaves the backdoor wide open for the bosses to fight over the definition of the bargaining unit. The make-up of the CAC becomes crucial here: New Labour will probably stuff the body with "human resource" professionals (personnel managers) just to show the bosses that a party funded by the unions will give them no favours.

The printing and publishing industry is dominated by anti-union bosses. A document leaked to the *Guardian* last month shows how the Newspaper Society – a bosses' club for local newspaper groups – is planning to use the new legislation to reinforce anti-union practices.

The seven-page, "confidential" memo entitled, "Employment Relations Bill – Approaches to Trade Union Recognition", offers a fascinating glimpse into the ongoing "consultation process". The authors wanted Labour to allow individual contracts, limit "family emergency" leave and allow recognition of company-stooge unions:

"Amendments to the above areas are claimed to be employer friendly . . . We are still pressing the No 10 Policy Unit and [employment minister] Stephen Byers' special adviser before determining whether to have another shot at Byers/Blair. Against the above background . . . the way in which the CAC will be constituted and make its decisions will, in practice, be crucial."



Wapping strikers 1987: print bosses are preparing for another fight

It outlines "possible approaches" to the anti-recognition fight that activists across all industries should study. This is the blueprint against which we will have to test our own strategies. The main pieces of advice from the bosses to their own include:

■ "Do nothing while confident of avoiding recognition": this is the strategy adopted by those convinced they have smashed the unions completely and where rank and file activity is nil.

■ "Do nothing while concerned that recognition may have to be conceded": these companies will rely on the undemocratic 40 per cent rule, which treats abstentions as "no" votes. This, says the document, "may prove too great a hurdle for the unions to overcome, even for unions with significant membership".

■ "Act now to counter the attractions of trade union membership": these companies are offering bribes like insurance and health care. The document notes, however: "cynical staff may take the goodies and ask for more!"

■ "Develop participative staff councils": "should help counter union aims and develop infertile ground for union recruitment," says the document.

■ "Recognise trade unions voluntarily": needless to say, the bosses are not doing this out of good will. Recognition of strong union groups before a struggle "should avoid the involvement of the CAC procedure and the possibility of an imposed and potentially legally-binding collective bargaining method; might enable the company to control/limit the bargaining unit".

■ "Recognise non-traditional independent unions": this approach, pioneered at the *Western Mail* group in South Wales, led to 300 journalists and printers becoming trapped in a single-union, no-strike deal. Although they were members of either the NUJ or GPMU, they will be represented by the scab-herding AEEU – the merged engineers and electricians union. The latter's precursor organised scabbing during the Wapping printworkers' fight in 1986. The AEEU has just 12 members at the Western Mail!

■ "Recognise non-independent union": this is effectively the post-Wapping strategy, where Rupert Murdoch's News International created a staff council with no bargaining rights, then transformed it into a "trade union" for bargaining purposes. Despite a campaign inside and outside Wapping, staff voted for this. They got propaganda and a ballot form attached to their pay slips, a personal letter and a taped message from Murdoch himself. The document recognises that it would be difficult to get such scab unions – staffed by the bosses – certified as independent unions. But then warns that " a truly independent staff council could become a dangerous animal".

The Newspaper Society document is nothing less than a battle plan for derecognition

The Newspaper Society document is nothing less than a battle plan for derecognition. The bosses know they have to tread carefully, because the new act involves hefty penalties for those found victimising union militants in the recognition struggle. So they will adopt one of the above strategies (or a combination) in the fight to prevent union members claiming their legal rights.

So what can activists do? Clearly the phased introduction of the ERA means we have to ensure we are well-organised before we launch a struggle for recognition. The union chiefs will, as always, urge maximum caution. They are caught between the need to staunch the loss of union subscriptions that sustain their bureaucratic machines and their privileges, and their reluctance to fight for more from New Labour. They will, at best, be passive providers of resources and legal backing for the coming recognition fight.

The real leadership must come from below – from activists in the branches and regions. The increased profile for union rights at work means activists should gear up now with their own battle plan to win recognition. Recognition itself means nothing without the right to bargain together over pay and conditions.

A workers' plan of action to beat the union-busters

1. Hold mass meetings and start a regular bulletin to prepare for the recognition fight. Most "human resource" managers are gutless morons who will do a "Corporal Jones" the first time they see a union bulletin. The hearts and minds battle will hot up later – but make sure the union fires the first shot.

2. Put in a recognition claim now. Ask to meet the management and insist a full-time union official comes along. If the managers point blank refuse to meet it is a good sign that they are adopting the "do nothing and hope" strategy. If they start negotiating, watch out for an offer of "recognition but no bargaining": it means they're not confident of winning a ballot – reject it and up the tempo of the propaganda war.

3. Organise a cross-union committee in the workplace to agree the best strategy. In many workplaces there is a vast pool of temporary, unorganised young workers. Once the ballot takes place the bosses will try to have "one big vote" with everyone from shop floor workers to the chief exec's chauffeur entitled to vote. If you are confident of winning, this should be no problem. But, historically, many workplaces have different agreements: in broadcasting, for example, the NUJ represents the journalists, and BECTU the technicians. But some managers will try to get every anti-union wide-boy they can find signed up as a BECTU-eligible worker. Deciding between whole-workforce or sector-by-sector balloting is important. The latter is not divisive in itself: remember it's the pro-boss Labour government that is forcing us to go through an undemocratic ballot process. The least we can do is ensure that the "bargaining unit" is defined in our favour.

4. If the bosses come out fighting now, you may have no option but to wait until summer 2000 to invoke the recognition process. You will need expert advice for this and a degree of reliance on the unions lawyers may be unavoidable. You need to be ready at every turn to respond to employers playing dirty with a court order. The working of the balloting law is so vague that it will be defined either in the courts or in actual struggles.

5. If the employers choose the "staff council" strategy one option would be to stand a union slate, making it clear that this is a stage towards recognition. A staff council full of union activists – and even "awkward squad" mavericks who are not union militants but can be trusted to defend the workforce – is one of the best weapons against the bosses using Murdoch tactics. The trade union slate should be accountable to the union: there is nothing like a meeting with management in plush surroundings for weakening the resolve of a small-time union bureaucrat.

6. If you choose the 50 per cent membership route to recognition, you need to ensure all membership lists are up-to-date. That is another good reason for a membership drive in the workplace now. Keep hammering home the key fact: the law gives specific protection to union members fighting for recognition (and also to scabs fighting against it): you are safer campaigning than not, as the penalties for victimisation are bigger than for "garden variety" unfair dismissal. Remember, though, that the CAC is entitled to enquire as to "why members joined"; the bosses will pour forth tales of ruthless intimidation.

7. If it all comes down to a workplace ballot every resource has to go into winning. The bosses' "lobbying" has ensured that you have to gain a majority that includes at least 40 per cent of all those entitled to vote. Abstentions become "no" votes. Really stupid employers will try to discourage participation or even sabotage the poll. We need to go onto the offensive with anxious colleagues and point out that they are being told not to have a say in their own future.

The biggest challenge of all, however, is to revive union activity. In some derecognised workplaces union density is greater among older workers: younger workers are either frightened or don't know how to join. A high-profile public recruitment campaign is needed – if necessary from the outside, by union branches pooling their strength and leafleting each others' workplaces.

It is not recognition that the employers fear: it is workers demanding a say through collective organisation that begins to challenge management's unbridled control over our daily working lives, and so begins to loosen the bosses' stranglehold over the workplace and society itself.

Rodney's retirement: a wake-up call for Unison's left

Rodney Bickerstaffe's retirement gives the left an opportunity to unite around a rank and file candidate

IN MID-JULY there was surprising news from the headquarters of Britain's biggest union, Unison. General secretary, Rodney Bickerstaffe, had decided to retire early, aged 54. A hotly contested race to succeed him at Mabledon Place is already well underway.

The outcome could mark an important transition in the relationship between New Labour and a strategic section of the union bureaucracy. Unison's general secretary stands at the helm of a public sector membership that is bearing the brunt of New Labour's determination to further erode the very principle of state welfare provision.

Bickerstaffe had been the general secretary of the old National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) from 1982 until its merger in 1993, with the white-collar local government union NALGO and the NHS union COHSE, to form Unison. He was a principal architect of this uneasy bureaucratic marriage of convenience between public sector unions which had suffered a mauling under the Tories after a decade of strikes and protests in the 1970s. Bickerstaffe has also served on the TUC's general council for 17 years, making him its longest-standing member.

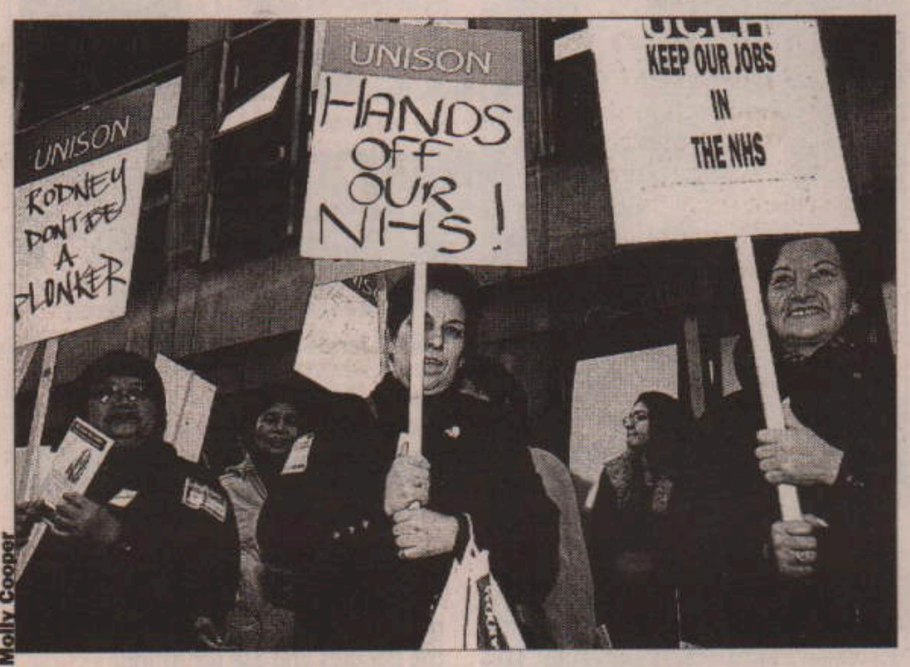
Since capturing Unison's top post in late 1995, Bickerstaffe has carefully positioned himself as a loyal, but sometimes loud (if only rhetorically), critic of many New Labour policies. More importantly, however, he has presided over Unison during an intense and vicious witch-hunt of organised left-wing activists and left-led or influenced branches over the past three years.

The use and abuse of the Unison rule book to attack the left became far more flagrant by late 1997 when Bickerstaffe and his allies on the union's national executive moved to effectively outlaw the Campaign for a Fighting and Democratic Unison (CFDU). Since then the leadership has concentrated its fire on individual members of and branches influenced by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), targeting in particular branch officers at UCLH, Candy Udwin and Dave Carr. The most recent target for disciplinary charges is Glasgow social services convenor Roddy Slorach for his role in leading an unofficial strike in August 1998.

The most serious attacks in the last year have resulted in the suspension of both the Birmingham and Sheffield local government branches – two of the biggest in Britain, with a combined membership of around 25,000.

Despite a clear indication from the union's national conference in June that delegates wanted at least the Birmingham branch reinstated with immediate effect the national executive has dragged its feet. At present it appears that the suspension of the branch will stand until next spring. Meanwhile, both city councils have seized the opportunity to redouble their attacks on workers and rank and file activists, with two leading shop stewards suspended in Birmingham and redundancies announced in Sheffield.

Bickerstaffe may not have personally orchestrated the whole series of attacks in the past two years, but he has certainly done his best to foster an atmosphere of virulent "anti-Trotskyism". At the union's June 1998 national conference a furious Bickerstaffe seized the opportunity during a debate on internal union democracy to deliver an unabashed tirade against the far left.



Molly Cooper

Instead of supporting the UCLH strikers, Bickerstaffe and the bureaucracy mounted a witch-hunt against its leading activists

In early August he issued a directive to branch secretaries informing them that they would be subject to disciplinary action if their branches backed September's lobby of the Labour Party conference (see box).

The arch modernisers of Millbank may have regarded Bickerstaffe rather suspiciously as a Jurassic Park throwback to the 1970s. Ironically, however, few union leaders have been of more real use to them since the general election. Even as he had been a demagogic exponent of a "living wage", he stubbornly opposed calls for a national demonstration in support of the union's own long-standing demands around the minimum wage. He has made several platform speeches in open opposition to the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) only to obstruct any effective industrial action against it.

Bickerstaffe made a lucrative 25-year career by posing as champion of the low-paid and particularly women in the NHS. Despite his shameless hypocrisy in the context of the Hillingdon hospital workers' dispute from January 1997 onwards, he clearly retained a substantial base of enthusiastic support among layers of the old NUPE and COHSE memberships.

Bickerstaffe's early departure from the scene leaves a vacuum that the large but less than stable alliance currently in control of the union's national executive will be hard-pressed to fill. The bosses' media and the majority of the national executive have anointed Dave Prentis, from the old NALGO and a vile witch-hunter general, as the heir apparent to Bickerstaffe. It now seems that the equally despicable Ann Picking, this year's Unison president, will not be contesting the election.

Prentis, the union's deputy general secretary, stands firmly to the right of Bickerstaffe. At this year's conference he made a vicious anti-left speech intended to cover up the national executive's appalling treatment of the Hillingdon strikers. While that might be sufficient to establish his credentials with the most "New Labour-friendly" sections of the union bureaucracy, he lacks any obvious base of support within the membership. The bureaucracy has engineered a tight timetable for the electoral process, clearly designed to work in Prentis' favour. Nominations for the post open in October, with ballot papers to be circulated in late January and the results announced by early March.

Meanwhile, the most significant electoral opposition on the left, the CFDU, should see some sharp debates sparked by the race to succeed Bickerstaffe. To its credit the CFDU has called a national hustings to decide which of the three "left" candidates it will support.

Initially, the presumed front-runner for the left's support was Roger Bannister, a long-standing member of the national executive and a supporter of the Socialist Party. Bannister stood in 1995, capturing just under 20 per cent of the total vote – well ahead of the SWP's candidate, Newcastle healthworker Yunus Baksh, who scored around five per cent. However, nearly 30 per cent of members voting supported Peter Hunter, an anti-left, overtly homophobic pro-lifer.

The joker who has now emerged from the pack is Geoff Martin, the current convenor of the union's Greater London region and a Labour Party member associated with *Labour Left Briefing* and the tiny "Unison Labour Left". Within the CFDU Martin would almost certainly gain the support of *Socialist Outlook* supporters and a number of non-aligned activists at the national selection meeting in London on 25 September. While it can't be ruled out as yet that the SWP will stand their own candidate again, it is also possible that they will support Martin as a "left unity" candidate.

THE LEFT CANDIDATES:

ROGER BANISTER, Socialist Party and CFDU supporter on national executive, from Knowsley branch (Merseyside). Stood in 1995 against Bickerstaffe, gaining 19 per cent of the vote. Gave only lukewarm support to UCLH strike around PFI.

MALKIAT BILKU, courageous shop steward who led the Hillingdon hospital dispute. Encouraged to stand by the *News Line* fragment of the Workers Revolutionary Party.

GEOFF MARTIN, current Unison Greater London convenor, former NHS manual worker and current columnist for Left Labour Briefing. Backed Bickerstaffe in 1995. An open opponent of backdoor privatisation, but less clear about backing for strikes against PFI, Best Value etc.

Ironically, Martin's credentials are somewhat dented by the fact that he supported Bickerstaffe in the 1995 contest for general secretary. He was joined by both the Communist Party (*Morning Star*), which will most probably back Prentis, and the Alliance for Workers Liberty, now Martin supporters. Martin now claims "sections of our union have cuddled up too closely to New Labour and the Government".

Obviously, the outcome of the race for Unison general secretary is important, especially given the current relationship between the Mabledon Place bureaucracy and New Labour. Defeat for Dave Prentis and the current national executive majority would be excellent. But the key task for left activists is to make maximum use of the opportunity offered by an election campaign to mobilise rank and file Unison members around three key issues:

- unqualified opposition to the witch-hunt and support for real rank and file democracy;
- support for strikes in defiance of the anti-union laws and a fight to smash those laws;
- campaigning for industrial action to fight Best Value, PFI and other forms of backdoor privatisation.

At this stage Workers Power supporters around the bulletin, *Well Red*, are not pledging support to any of the candidates who have so far declared. At 25 September we will put forward the case for a candidate tied to the above policies, and ask potential candidates where they stand on these issues. We want a militant rank and file candidate committed to turning Unison into a class struggle union not another aspiring left bureaucrat.

CFDU National Meeting re. General Secretary Election
Saturday 25 September 12 noon
Palm Room 4th Floor,
University of London Union
Mallet St. London WC1

LOBBY OF LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE

Each year since the election of the Blair government in May 1997 has seen a lobby of Labour Party conference. In 1997 and 1998 the Unison branch at UCLH initiated the call for the protest, while this summer the SWP has called the event in its own name and set up "Ad Hoc Mobilising Committees".

Each year the Unison leadership has explicitly opposed the demonstration, despite the fact that its demands have echoed existing Unison policy on issues ranging from the level of the minimum wage to opposition to New Labour's racist legislation against immigrants and asylum seekers.

This year, however, the national leadership has pulled out all the stops in an effort to intimidate branches and undermine support for the Bournemouth lobby. A letter, from Bickerstaffe dated 4 August, instructs branches "not to use any union funds to support the 1999 lobby" before threatening disciplinary action. The general secretary's edict, backed by the NEC, forbids not only financial support but the use of "any resources" including Unison banners.

This letter is another illustration of the extraordinary lengths to which the union's leaders are prepared to go to keep Unison "safe" for New Labour. It also shows the unbridled contempt for lay members' democracy that characterises the Mabledon Place bureaucracy. While hiding behind Tory anti-union laws to justify their position, Bickerstaffe and the majority on the national executive are using the anti-democratic methods of the Cold War witch-hunt to stifle internal opposition.

Ironically, the political descendants of the Communist Party victims of the witch-hunts of the 1950s, now huddled around the Morning Star, have been either silent about or directly implicated in the latest attacks on the organised left in the union.

The fringe meeting at this year's national conference in defence of union democracy attracted over 300 delegates. But the enthusiasm for resisting the bureaucracy's offensive has yet to be translated into an effective opposition to the red-baiters. The creation of a united campaign against the witch-hunt that is not the property of any one tendency remains absolutely vital. It would link the defence and extension of union democracy to the development of a strategy for opposing the ongoing New Labour attacks.

Crucially, activists should fight for their branches to defy the leadership's ban on support for the 26 September lobby at the same time as pushing for a delegate-based conference called by branches that aims to broaden the fight for union democracy into an effective rank and file opposition.

We call on all trade union members, student unions, pensioners' organisations, tenants organisations – all working class organisations – to support and build for the lobby and help begin the fight back against New Labour.

Housing workers score victory in Tower Hamlets

HOUSING WORKERS in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets have scored an important victory, just as they entered the second month of an indefinite strike. The action was against the Labour council's plans to scrap most neighbourhood housing offices and replace them with a call centre to log requests for repairs.

Strikers had decisively rejected the latest offer from council management at a 26 August mass meeting, but talks on 2 September yielded a deal that guarantees no compulsory redundancies and temporarily secures the future of all 24 offices. As we went to press it was unclear whether the council had actually dropped its call centre plan completely.

The strike began in early August following an overwhelming "yes" vote in a ballot of around 250 Unison members. The council leadership's original plan threatened the loss of up to 100 jobs. New Labour persisted in pursuing this attack on housing workers and the service they provide, despite overwhelming evidence after consultation of the council's tenants that they preferred a repairs service directly linked to neighbourhood offices: so much for listening to local people!

Nearly one in three households in Tower Hamlets don't have telephones and on many estates a majority of tenants speak English as a second language, if at all. The borough has the largest Bangladeshi and first-generation Somali populations of any local authority in Britain. However inadequate the current service may be, a call centre could only make the situation worse for the vast majority of tenants.

The New Labour leadership has been all too keen to comply with the Government's "Best Value" criteria of cutting costs and being "competitive" with private sector companies. The council's performance makes a mockery of the pledge Labour made in 1994 to vastly improve council housing in the borough. At that time Labour swept back into office, ousting the Liberal Democrats from control after eight years of racist, divide and rule policies.

From the outset the action was remarkably solid, with Unison recruiting new members and the housing department's management resorting to the use of a scab crew of agency temps to run a skeletal emergency service. The strikers' determined stand attracted widespread public support, not least in the Bangladeshi community. Hundreds of local residents joined a weekday Unison demonstration and tenants have bolstered picket lines.

Mass meetings were a regular feature, attracting interest and solidarity from other sections within the department. Workers in the Homeless Person's Unit and the Rents, Lettings and Quality Control section have refused to touch any tasks from the neighbourhood offices despite getting letters from management threatening disciplinary action. At the time of the settlement Unison officials had still failed to implement the clear call of a mass meeting a fortnight before to organise a ballot for a one-day strike across the whole of the council.

Though precise details remain to be clarified council bosses have clearly made some significant concessions and an important victory against a Best Value-inspired plan has been won. The outcome shows that determined, indefinite action can beat back the New Labour bosses.

It is now vital that the positive lessons of the Tower Hamlets strike be spread throughout the union, where branch after branch faces similar attacks. The 6 November conference in London against PFI and Best Value offers an important opportunity to do just that.

For details of the strike's outcome, contact Tower Hamlets Unison, York Hall, Old Ford Road, London E2 9LN. Phone: 0181 983 0637 or Fax: 0181 983 3163.

CONFERENCE AGAINST PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES,
6 November, 10 am - 5 pm, Natfhe HQ, Britannia Street, London WC1. Contact Greenwich Unison on: 0181 854 8888, x5227 for more information.

OBITUARY, Colin Ward, miner and socialist: 1957 - 1999 by Gen Doy

We were very sorry to hear of the recent death of Colin Ward, aged 41, who had been seriously ill for some time with advanced diabetes.

Colin was an active National Union of Mineworkers activist at Coventry colliery. He played a leading role in the union's year long struggle against pit closures during the great miners' strike of 1984/85. Wherever there was action, wherever there was a picket line or demo in the thick of the fight with Thatcher's cops, Colin's was there.

He was a great speaker. He estimated he travelled 82,000 miles, often accompanied by his first wife Barbara, during the epic strike, talking to workers and students in Britain and abroad about the miners' fight.

Colin's committed leadership and political ideas enabled him to develop militant tactics in the day to day strike activities, but also led him to formulate a critique of the politics of the trade union leaders, even of militant leaders like Arthur Scargill.

Colin was always courageous in putting his ideas into practice, which at one point resulted in him getting his hands round Neil Kinnock's throat and throwing him over a car bonnet, demanding that the Labour leader get his and other sacked miners their jobs back if Labour came to power.

Colin became a supporter of Workers Power's miners' organisation and paper, Red Miner. He helped us organise meetings with up to thirty miners from around the country to discuss both the strike, the politics of the NUM and the trade unions in general and the struggle against capitalism. Colin was eloquent in explaining how and why the fight of the miners and their families was linked to the wider class struggle against exploitation and oppression.

He helped build the National Rank and File Miners' Movement inside the NUM whose founding conference was attended by over 100 miners and representatives of the Women Against Pit Closures movement.

Colin, together with several other Coventry colliery NUM members was arrested on a trumped up charge and jailed for a month. They emerged to find letters from the Coal Board telling them they were sacked. Colin refused compensation and fought for an industrial tribunal ruling in his favour.

However, he was refused his old job and eked out a living on the £10,000 (less deductions) compensation he eventually received. He never claimed dole money on the principle that he was still fighting for his job. For the rest of his working life Colin struggled with terrible financial hardship and could only get low paid jobs.

During the latter part of the strike Colin met Chris Connolly, who he later married. A delegation of striking miners arrived at a local school which a group of parents had occupied to protest at its threatened closure. Climbing in through the windows with the food parcel Colin met Chris, a class conscious fighter like himself and eventually became step-dad to her two children. Their child, Katy was born later.

Colin, supported tirelessly by Chris, struggled against failing health for many years but never lost his sense of humour or his will to see the world rid of injustice and poverty. He was a great laugh, a lovely man, a dedicated socialist. It was an honour to know and work with Colin Ward.

His friends and comrades will miss him and think of him often. His spirit lives on in the struggles and victories of workers everywhere. We send our sympathy to Chris, Katy, Tracy and Christopher and to Colin and Chris' grandchildren.

workers POWER
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COMMENT

The racists in Parliament

THE LEADER of Britain's Conservatives is now convinced that he has found a weapon that will pierce New Labour's armour: one of the oldest weapons in capitalist society's ideological arsenal – racism.

The Tory chief made a great display of his meeting with Tory council leaders from Kent and the City of Westminster to tackle the supposed "crisis" facing local authorities as a result of New Labour providing a "soft touch" for asylum seekers.

Hague has drawn inspiration from the August performance by his shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe who had rushed to Dover in the wake of clashes between asylum seekers and local youth on 14 August.

Widdecombe, a rent-a-quote, god-squadder, without actually condoning the violence that had erupted at a weekend funfair, let it be known that her sympathies lay with local whites who have frequently taunted and occasionally attacked some of the hundreds of asylum seekers concentrated in grim bed and breakfasts. She demanded immediate action by the Government to disperse refugees from Dover.

Needless to say, Widdecombe strengthened her position as the darling of the Tory tabloids. Home Secretary Jack Straw's response was no less sickening for being so utterly predictable.

Straw, who is currently piloting through parliament the most draconian legislation against refugees ever conceived by either a Tory or Labour government, claimed that his Tory predecessors had been "soft on asylum seekers". He insisted that a Home Office document showed that the Tories had effectively declared an amnesty in favour of some 35,000 asylum applicants in 1993.

Throughout the summer the Home Office has repeatedly signalled that so far as New Labour is concerned "refugees are not welcome here". Lord Bassam, a recently appointed junior minister, sought to shock listeners of Radio 4's *Today* programme with the news that asylum applications by Romanies fleeing the Czech republic had nearly trebled since January 1999. The total? An astonishing 150!

Bassam was seeking to justify proposed new visa requirements on Czech citizens travelling to Britain. The Foreign Office, always eager to pursue its "ethical" policies around the globe, has been lecturing the Prague government – not on the need to combat anti-Roma racism but on the fact that unless they keep the Roma in the country they won't get to join the European Union.

The Government also wants its French counterpart to ensure that they've properly corralled refugees from Kosova, Albania, Iraq and Afghanistan. Sick of constant petty harassment from French police in Calais and often reduced to living in the town's abandoned factories and warehouses, hundreds of refugees have hidden in lorries and even tried to walk through the tunnel in order to cross the Channel.

Now, with the backing of London, the CRS, France's notorious riot police have been given the green light to round-up and detain suspected "illegals". If they still make it to Dover, they'll encounter sniffer dogs and stepped up lorry searches.

The tabloids are doing their damnedest to spread scare stories about "sponging" asylum seekers. The scapegoating of refugees is cynically designed to distract sections of the middle and working classes from the reality that their politicians, both Tory and Labour, have decided that the only prescription for an anaemic British capitalism is ever more attacks on state welfare provision, the social wage and job security.

Whether Jack Straw, with both his attacks on asylum seekers and his disgusting swipes at travellers, is simply giving vent to his own "Middle England" prejudices or trying to placate the bigots who edit the bourgeois press, he is playing a dangerous game. Having drawn blood the likes of Hague and Widdecombe will only press harder on the issue of immigration and asylum. But Straw is ultimately giving succour to the even more sinister forces of the still marginalised fascist right waiting to cash in on the racist sentiments whipped up in Dover and elsewhere.

This threat makes it all the more urgent that socialists and anti-racists, especially in the unions, intensify opposition to Straw's Immigration and Asylum Bill, and to all immigration controls. The experience of Kosovars and Kurds in Calais highlights the need not only to build an effective opposition to racism in Britain, but to the emerging reality of "Fortress Europe".

Schools for socialism – Bolsheviks and education

Kate Foster looks at education in Russia in the first years after the revolution

FOLLOWING THE socialist revolution in Russia in October 1917, the young workers' state faced enormous difficulties due to the isolation of the country and its terrible economic backwardness compared with the western imperialist powers. But despite these problems the revolutionary dynamism that was unleashed created tremendous opportunities for change and advance and bequeathed us an inspiring glimpse of what a socialist society might look like.

Both of these aspects of post-revolutionary Russia can be seen in the education system in the first years of Soviet Russia.

The educational tasks which confronted the Bolshevik government were immense. The whole purpose of education had to be changed. In the commentary on the Communist Party programme of 1919 the Bolsheviks summarised their position on education under capitalism:

"In bourgeois society the school has three principal tasks to fulfil. First, it inspires the coming generation of workers with devotion and respect for the capitalist regime. Secondly, it creates from the young of the ruling classes 'cultured' controllers of the working population. Thirdly, it assists capitalist production in the application of sciences to technique, thus increasing capitalist profits." (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* p.279)

Russian education under the Tsars was severely restricted; illiteracy was widespread. Progression in education was not based upon academic achievement; entry to university relied upon who you knew, your family background and your politics. Many revolutionaries were forced to study abroad since involvement in political activity could mean exclusion from further education.

There was, however, a tradition of private schools and while the vast majority of these were extremely conservative, a few were run by liberals who were experimental in their approach and aware of the progressive educational ideas of the time. The early teaching methods of the new workers' state were to be influenced by the active and exploratory learning of the Dewey System, developed in the USA, which rejected passive learning by rote.

On 26 October the Bolsheviks established a new workers' government. They set up a Commissariat of Education (Narkompro) under the Bolshevik and well-known intellectual, Anatoly Lunacharsky. The commissariat was to be known as Narkompro. It was given responsibility for school and higher education as well as for the arts and culture.

Art lover Lunacharsky famously resigned on hearing that the revolutionary forces in taking Moscow had destroyed part of the historic buildings in the Kremlin. He later withdrew his resignation when the reports turned out to be false. It was, in fact, not the interests of its first commissioner which were the decisive influence over the brief of the commissariat, but the overall approach of the Bolsheviks to education.

From the very beginning education was not seen as separate from the rest of society but integral to it. Education was not to be restricted to the early years of your life but a continuous process – truly lifelong learning. Access to art and culture was also part of education for all.



Lenin addresses the first All-Russion Congress on Education, August 1918

As with many of the newly established ministries the first problem was literally to gain access to their building. Many of the old Tsarist functionaries were still occupying the ministries, refusing to hand over the keys and removing important documents. It took over a week of negotiations to install the new commisariat with the office workers agreeing to stay on, while the old officials were allowed to leave.

From its inception Narkompro appears to have been allotted somewhat of a Cinderella role within the new government. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the immediate tasks of negotiating a peace with Germany and then fighting a civil war. Many noted that the newly appointed officials were predominantly women, many were the wives of Bolshevik leaders. Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, was a key figure.

They were certainly not without talent. Yet despite the presence of some influential figures within the commissariat, it seems that education was rarely discussed within the Central Committee and this was a constant cause for complaint from both Lunacharsky, himself a member of the Central Committee, and Krupskaya.

The early days of the commissariat saw a lively debate on the teaching methods and curriculum within the new Soviet schooling system. On the issue of how schools should be organised there seems to have been agreement within Narkompro. Lunacharsky was keen to encourage education soviets at all levels (village, town, county etc.). The running of education was to be placed in the hands of the masses. This, of course, left a question mark over the role of the commissariat. Clearly ,Lunacharsky and Krupskaya believed that Narkompro should only support and advise rather than control. Facing opposition from within the party to this insistence upon democratic control by the masses rather than central direction, Krupskaya wrote:

"We were not afraid to organise a revolution. Let us not be afraid of the people, let us not be afraid that they will elect the wrong representatives, bring in the priests. We want the people to direct the country and be their own masters... Our job is to help the people in fact to take their fate into their own hands." (*On Educational Soviets* 1918)

The Bolsheviks were committed to free, compulsory co-education for all. Access to higher education was to be open to all. Private schools were not abolished, but it was made illegal to charge anyone for education.

The differences were to centre around what kind of schools were needed and what they should teach. Two differing approaches emerged, one with supporters in Petrograd and the other in Moscow. All agreed on an active approach to learning. The Petrograd educationalists argued for a balance between academic subjects and technical skills, with children only receiving specialist training in their late teens.

The Moscow group proposed the idea of a school commune, with much greater emphasis on learning through work. The children would experience life and learn skills for life through the school. The schools would be open seven days a week, twelve months a year. The debate raged on for months and the beginning of the school year in 1918 had to be put back a month to wait for advice from Narkompro to be distributed to schools.

Ultimately, a compromise emerged – the most explosive question was over allowing holidays and the Moscow group were eventually defeated and three months holiday each year were agreed. Schools were to be open for seven days a week, but one and half days were for clubs and trips. Two papers were sent out: an overarching declaration and a more detailed statement: the former written by Lunacharsky from the Petrograd group and the latter coming from the Moscow group.

The impact of these two documents within the schools must have been electrifying. Education was to be transformed beyond recognition. It was not just to be available to all, it was to be controlled by those who were actually involved in it: by teachers, pupils, parents and the local soviet. Teachers were to be subject to election. The school would not only provide education and training, they were required to provide all pupils with a hot breakfast.

Homework, examinations and punishment were all abolished. The schools were to be known as the United Labour Schools to reflect their non-segregation on the basis of age or sex and their emphasis on active learning and commitment to the importance of work.

The whole function of education and schooling was to be changed. The new approach, summarised in the Communist Party Programme, shows the centrality of education to the revolution. It called for:

"... the transformation of the school so that from being an organ for maintaining the class domination of the bourgeoisie, it shall become an organ for the complete abolition of the division of society into classes, an organ for the communist regeneration of society."

But when it came to actually implementing this policy in the schools two substantial obstacles stood in their way: teachers and a lack of resources.

Narkompro inherited a teaching force which had been trained under autocratic Tsarist Russia. Within days of the October Revolution the main teaching union, the All Russian Teachers' Union (VUS), voted not to co-operate with the new regime. From November until the following March they called their members out on strike. The Bolsheviks were not surprised. Teachers are described in *The ABC of Communism* in the following way:

"The teachers in the public elementary schools receive a special course of training by which they are prepared for their role of beast tamers. Only persons who have thoroughly acquired the bourgeois outlook have entry into the schools as teachers." (p279)

Appeals were made for teachers prepared to work with the Soviet regime, but there were precious few. Differences emerged as to how to deal with the opposition in the VUS. Some argued for the dissolving of the VUS and the creation of a new communist teaching union – some split from the VUS and established the Union of Teacher-Internationalists. Others, including Krupskaya, argued for a struggle within the VUS in an attempt to win the rank and file away from the reactionary leadership.

Krupskaya argued that a communist union would exclude some who might be prepared to work with the regime. She lost this particular battle – the VUS was dissolved in 1919 and a communist-dominated union created.

It is possible that some of the teachers could have been won over and given time new teachers would have been trained by Narkompro but the revolution across Russia was facing great danger. The civil war was creating terrible shortages and social break-down. Education and Narkompro were not exempt. In fact they appear to have suffered more than most.

When Narkompro was established Lunacharsky was frequently criticised for a rather chaotic approach to recruitment. Apparently, if he met someone whom he thought was interesting he would immediately offer them a job in Narkompro. The approach to money in the first year also appears to have been equally haphazard: they had no one who had any accounting skills and no idea of working within a budget. Narkompro soon became the target of some centralised rationalisation.

The war brought the issue rather than pedagogical debate to the forefront. Workers began to desert Narkompro as it was not a priority for rations. Offices within Narkompro were taken over by homeless Narkompro employees. Typhoid broke out among these unofficial inhabitants.

In the schools conditions were if anything even worse. Teachers had no special rations. Reports came in of teachers starving to death. The war was creating thousands of orphans and schools had the responsibility of trying to provide for them. The school commune became not an ideal, but a brutal necessity. The study of the value of work, for children as young as five and six, became working in order to survive.

Lunacharsky, in desperation, wrote several times to the Central Committee but with little or no response.

The result of opposition and shortages meant that little progress was made in introducing the United Labour School system and the progressive teaching methods of Narkompro. Narkompro and Lunacharsky came under severe criticism for lack of central direction and control. In an early move towards increasing bureaucratisation, the Central Committee, while not prepared to remove Lunacharsky from Narkompro, appointed a deputy commissioner, Litkens, to oversee and exercise a veto on the work of the commissariat.

The revolutionary transformation of education in Russia was to suffer the same fate as the revolution itself. The failure of the revolution to triumph outside of Russia meant that, despite eventual victory in the civil war, the Soviet regime remained isolated and beleaguered. In turn this created the conditions within Russia for increased bureaucratisation and centralisation. In education this culminated in an imposed curriculum, the reintroduction of privilege and the suffocation of progressive ideas.

But the experience of those first few revolutionary steps serves as an inspiration to those who work in education, those who want to fight the oppression of youth and those who strive for a new society based on equality, creativity and freedom.

Education, as well as so many other spheres of life, was opened up to debate and experimentation, to the idea that the masses themselves could shape and control their destiny. The defeat of the revolution and the terrible setbacks that came with the rise of Stalinism could not entirely destroy this precious legacy of the first workers' state in history.

marxism
THE BASICS
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM

Lenin and the theory of imperialism

The hunger, disease and oppression in today's world can be blamed on the domination of the multinationals and banks. Here Alison Hudson outlines how Lenin came to understand the imperialist epoch

MORE THAN half a million children have died in Iraq since 1990 as a result of United Nations' sanctions. Millions are dying in Africa because of a lack of drugs to fight AIDS. Pro-independence supporters are shot dead in the streets in East Timor with arms sold to Indonesia under New Labour's ethical foreign policy. This is the world at the end of the twentieth century.

Marxists call the world system that has dominated this century imperialism. It was Vladimir Lenin who analysed developments within capitalism in his pamphlet, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,* published in 1916. He sought to explain the causes of the first world war, which was then raging, as being rooted within the stage of development that capitalism had reached rather than as a result of the policies of governments or the "accidents" of history.

Lenin argued that twentieth century capitalism was no longer dominated by individual capitalists operating in a market ruled by free competition. Instead, there had been a massive growth in monopolies – huge corporations cornering the market and dominating it.

Monopolies were formed through the concentration of production in ever larger enterprises, through merger or buying up of competitors. This concentration often coincides with combination, that is the grouping together in a single enterprise of several different branches of industry e.g. a large steel plant that smelts iron ore, converts pig iron into steel, then rolls the steel into plate.

The endless push to maximise profit drives the capitalist to concentrate and combine, and so dominate more of the market. If a capitalist buys up or develop industries that provide raw materials or further processes products (combination) initial costs are cut so more profit is extracted from the finished goods. Once started this process is inexorable and the concentration of enterprises becomes so great that no competitors are left and the capitalist has a monopoly.

Lenin believed the end of free competition and its replacement with the rule of monopolies was largely completed by the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet it originated in the 1860s when free competition reached its peak. Capitalists began to see the advantages of monopolies and cartels (monopolists joining forces on an international basis – also known as trusts) to reap greater profits from the booms and survive the slumps.

After the relatively long boom at the end of the nineteenth century and the crisis of 1900-1903, monopolies and cartels were established as "one of the foundations of economic life". In the US in 1904, 1.1 per cent of businesses were responsible for half of all production.

Lenin wrote: "Capitalism in its imperialist stage leads right up to the most comprehensive socialisation of production; it drags the capitalists, against their will and consciousness, into some sort of a new social order, a transitional one from complete free competition to complete socialisation."

But while "production becomes social... appropriation remains private. The social means of production remain the private property of a few."

The privileged position of the monopolies leads to a greater and greater contradiction between their advanced development and the lack of development of other sections of industry. The drive for domination leads inevitably to conflict and crises.

The tendency to concentrate is also apparent within finance capital. The banks developed from being "middlemen" used by the capitalists into powerful monopolies themselves, controlling the money capital of businesses, large parts of the means of production and the sources of raw materials nationally and abroad. They achieved this by directly annexing other banks and making them into their branches and indirectly by acquiring holdings and shares in banks and businesses.

IN BRIEF

- **Imperialism combines both the concentration of capital into ever larger monopolies and their domination by finance capital.**
- **The few imperialists dominate the world either through direct rule, such as in colonies, or indirectly through political and economic rule, as with semi-colonies.**
- **However this domination does not end the disparity in growth or the tensions within the system, rather it increases the contradictions within capitalism, leading imperialism to be termed by Lenin the epoch of wars and revolutions.**

The last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth saw massive expansion in the network of banks, their rapid concentration and a huge growth in their turnover. By 1909 the three big Paris banks had 1,229 branches in France and the number of accounts of the Credit Lyonnais had risen from 28,535 in 1875 to 653,539 in 1912.

From carrying out technical operations the banks had come into their own, the enormous scale of their dealings meant, said Lenin, that "a handful of monopolists subordinate to their will all the operations both commercial and industrial, of the whole of capitalist society; for they obtain the opportunity – by means of their banking connections, their current accounts and other financial operations – first, to ascertain exactly the financial position of the various capitalists, then to control them, to influence them by restricting or enlarging, facilitating or hindering credits, and finally entirely determine their fate, determine their income, deprive them of capital, or permit them to increase their capital rapidly and to enormous dimensions etc."

They become the "common bookkeepers" of the whole capitalist class, organised and socialised in the same way as industry. Through the acquisition of shares and holdings in industry and through the appointment of bank and industry directors onto each others' boards, the merging or union of the capital of industry and the banks progresses even further.

Added to this is the role of state officials and ex-state officials on the boards of banks and industry, creating a direct means for the banks and industry to gain political influence. By the turn of the century this process had resulted in domination of finance capital and the financial oligarchy that oversees it.

The dominance of the financial oligarchy also means the dominance of a handful of "financially powerful states". At the time Lenin was writing, the old capitalist countries of Britain and France and the new rapidly expanding capitalist countries of Germany and the United States owned 80 per cent of the world's finance capital between them.

These few rich countries accumulated capital in gigantic proportions and consequently sought means of making greater profits from this capital. Commodities had long been exported but the rise of finance capital saw the concurrent rise in the export of capital (loans and investment) itself both within undeveloped parts of Europe and the colonial world. The advantages are clear: profits are high because of the scarce capital already there, the cheap land and raw materials, and low wages of the workers. Money can be made from servicing loans, from commercial treaties, from requiring the debtor country to use your country for orders, contracts etc. And all the profits can be repatriated back to the imperialist country itself.

The imperialist nation states had by 1900 completed the seizure of all of the territories on the planet – either directly by colonial rule or indirectly by tying countries into economic subservience while formally observing their independence (semi-colonies) as with Argentina, which was dominated by Britain because of the huge amount of British capital invested there.

Lenin argued that imperialism would not lead to stability but to increasing instability, and a greater tendency towards war and economic crises. The rival imperialist powers would fight over the division and re-division of the world. The history of the twentieth century has tragically proved him to be correct.

The division of the world was about obtaining profits, not promoting world harmony. The divisions were according to relative strength, resting on relative capital – there was no virgin territory or market left, so instead of division, the cartels and imperialist nations would have to resort to re-division to increase their share, leading to instability and even war.

Overall Lenin predicted a tendency of the imperialist nations to become ever more parasitic on the rest of the world – usurers, loan sharks, bullying less powerful nations to give up their goods and raw materials.

Despite their enormous power and influence "finance capital and the trusts do not diminish but increase the differences in the rate of growth of the various parts of the world economy". This creates massive contradictions and tensions around the globe, and for all the incredible advances in productive forces we have seen this century, imperialism has not even come close to solving those contradictions – as the 31 wars that took place last year alone prove.

Lenin's words, written during the first imperialist war are as true as ever: "what means other than war could there be under capitalism of removing the disparity between the development of productive forces and the accumulation of capital on the one side, and then division of colonies and 'spheres of influence' for capital on the other?"

What does imperialism mean for the world working class? Exploitation, oppression and misery. Imperialism as an economic system relies on the exploitation of the non-imperialist world: colonies in Lenin's day, semi colonies today.

Imperialism also played a role in keeping the working class in the imperialist countries in check. As arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes admitted in 1895:

"The Empire is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists."

In other words British bosses could deploy the greater profits made as a result of imperialism (super profits) to stop revolution at home. A section of the working class could be "bought off" (at least temporarily) with some of these super profits. As well as higher wages and better terms and conditions for this layer of workers – the labour aristocracy – improvements in sanitation, lighting and housing benefited the mass of workers.

The bitter legacy of this exploitation of the colonies and semi-colonies is not only the enduring poverty and oppression that blights Africa, Latin America and Asia, but the racism that was used to ideologically justify the subjugation of millions upon millions of people. The beginning of the imperialist age saw a huge rise in rabid nationalism, militarism and the first anti-immigration laws.

None of this means that the workers of the imperialist heartlands are lost forever to the cause of socialism. Every crisis forces the capitalists to turn on the working class – including the aristocracy of labour. Every struggle contains the potential for generating the solidarity and class consciousness that undermine all divisions inside the working class, including racism. And, because of the very nature of the imperialist system – characterised by war and crisis, the likelihood for such struggles increases.

Indeed, here was the final element of Lenin's theory of imperialism – namely that it opened up an epoch of wars and revolutions. He was right. The list of revolutions this century is enormous, stretching from Russia in 1905 to Indonesia in 1998. Those revolutions are as much a part of the imperialist epoch as war and economic crisis. And those revolutions hold the key to overthrowing the imperialist world order. The question becomes: can revolutionary socialists win leadership of the masses in order to push those revolutions towards a final victory against capitalism? For Lenin the age of imperialism made the need for revolutionary internationalism literally a matter of life and death for the workers of the world. And so it remains for us today.

EAST TIMOR BY JOHN MCKEE

Imperialism's crocodile tears

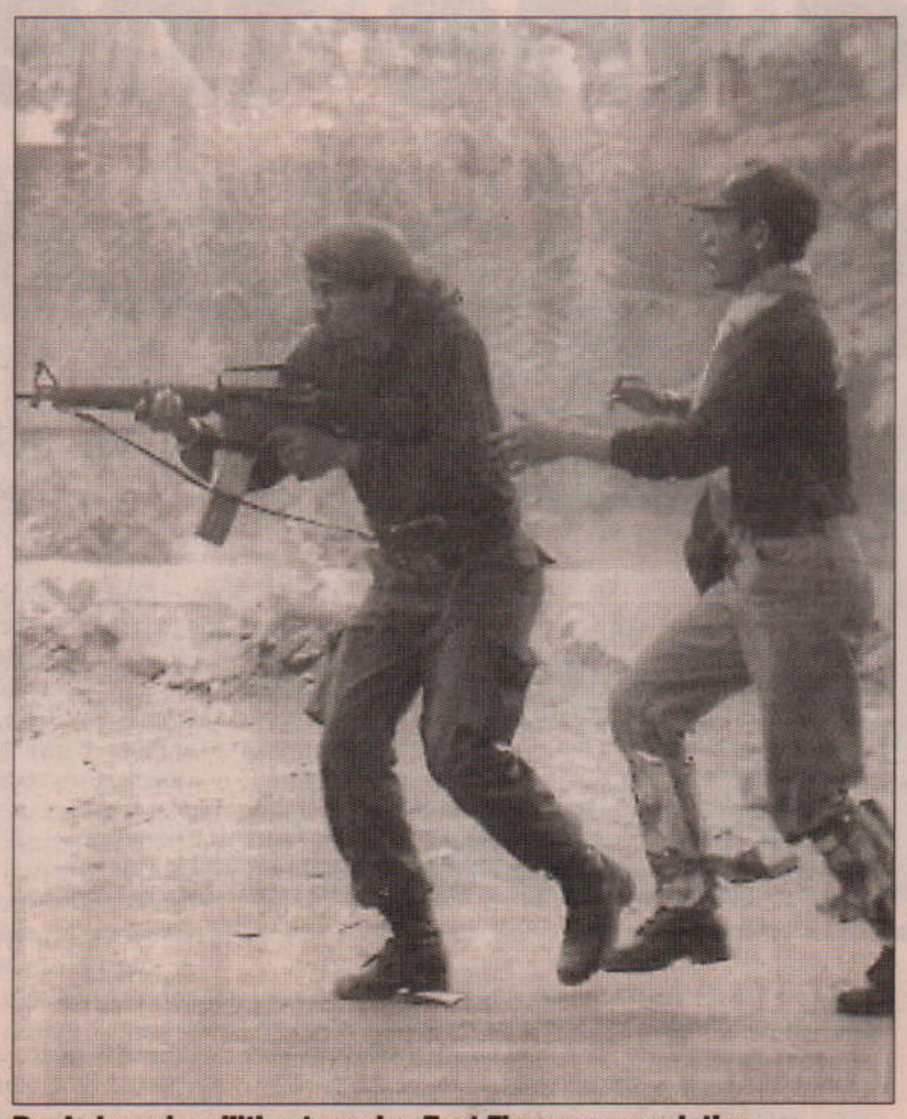
THE FEROCITY of Indonesian repression in East Timor was brought home to millions of television viewers world-wide when a young Timorese was hacked and shot to death on camera, outside the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Dili. Pro-Indonesian militias rampaged through the streets the day after the referendum on independence.

The militias' fury was a result of the failure of their attempt to intimidate the population. Despite a reign of terror in large parts of the country, with assassinations, massacres and burning of villages, a massive 98.6 per cent of voters turned out to vote – 78 per cent voted for independence.

In Maliana, near the border with Indonesian west Timor, 3,000 people waited outside the polling station at 6.30.am to vote. Many had walked miles to get there. Over 2,000 of the town's population had fled the area because of the constant onslaught of the militias, over 30 residents had been murdered during the "campaign". Across East Timor an estimated 50,000 people fled their villages prior to the vote.

The violence led to several postponements of the polling day and protests by the UN that Indonesia was failing to keep the agreement signed with the UN and Portugal, the old colonial power still recognised as "administering" East Timor. That agreement left the responsibility for ensuring a peaceful campaign in the hands of the Indonesian security services – military thugs not exactly renowned for their impartiality in East Timor.

Indeed, a powerful faction of the armed forces closely associated with more 20 years of bloody repression in East Timor and the deaths of 200,000 people, set out to sabotage the referendum. They created, armed and even paid the militias to carry out their dirty work. This was well known in Jakarta and to the UN.



Pro-Indonesia militias terrorise East Timorese population

In June, Eurico Guterres, head of the "Thorn Militia", responsible for killing dozens of people in Timor, was made head of a newly created civil defence guard in Dili to help the police with "law and order"! Key military commanders of "Kopassus" an elite commando unit used by Suharto for repression, and supposedly dissolved after his fall, were in fact organising the killings and intimidation. It is reliably reported that Army Commander General Wiranto tried to persuade the Indonesian cabinet to call the referendum off at the end of July. He was overruled by the civilian members who were already subject to pressures from the US and other imperialist powers to honour the agreement or face the IMF pulling the plug on the economy.

Day after day, attacks and murders take place under the eyes of the security services and UN. The militias even took over the airport at one point to stop people leaving, while the police looked on. The UN itself has come under attack, its unarmed police appealing to the Indonesian security forces for help to no avail.

Kofi Annan made "vigorous protests", as did the US, Portugal, Australia etc. But "business as usual" with the Indonesian regime is far more important for the imperialists than the lives of hundreds of Timorese. In the midst of the violence it was revealed that the Hawk jets being exported to the regime by Britain's Labour government had been used over East Timor. Tony Blair took immediate action – and invited the military to our biggest arms fair to buy some more.

The East Timorese people have demonstrated their desire for independence, not only in the referendum, but over 25 years of struggle since the invasion in 1975. The Indonesian army and their agents will continue to try and thwart that wish until the very end. They will try and create bloody chaos, hoping that the new Indonesian parliament will reject the referendum decision when it meets in November. The East Timorese must look to their own organisations of struggle, their own armed militias, to achieve their state – not to the imperialists or the UN.

Socialists world-wide should campaign for:

- Indonesian army and police out of East Timor, disarm their militias
- Halt all arms sales to the Indonesian regime
- Arms and aid without conditions for the Timorese and their fighting organisations
- Immediate recognition of East Timor as a sovereign state – no to a UN/imperialist controlled "four year transition", no UN-sponsored occupation by Australian, British or Portuguese imperialist forces
- Convene a sovereign, revolutionary constituent assembly under the protection of the fighting organisations and pro-independence militias.

DEMONSTRATE AGAINST THE ARMS FAIR

Wednesday 15 September

8am: assemble at Mile End Park, London, to march to Canary Wharf Arms Exhibition.

6 – 9pm: vigil at Marsh Wall (South Quay Docklands Light Railway)

INDONESIA

The stalled revolution

THE INDONESIAN masses are paying the price for a revolution that stopped half-way. The limited democratic rights they now exercise were the ones they paid for with their own blood on the streets last year.

If they hoped for a democratic assembly chosen by free, equal and direct suffrage, the sweeping away of the corrupt Golkar regime, the removal of the army's dictatorial powers, jobs for the unemployed, land for the poor peasants, for the rights to self-determination for the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago – then they have been cruelly disappointed.

Millions still hope to gain these elementary democratic objectives from the president and the government which will emerge from the June elections. One thing is certain: they will be disappointed once again.

When the student-led demonstrators poured onto the streets in May 1998 the dictatorship of President Suharto was shaken to its foundations. The terrified military and civilian godfathers of the regime unceremoniously dumped Suharto and replaced him by his old crony, Habibie.

Free elections were promised but with a year's delay, to allow the regime to ride out the economic crisis with the help of the IMF and the army. The leaders of the bourgeois opposition Megawati Sukarnoputri, Amien Rais, and Abdurahman Wahid, rushed to do a deal with Habibie and General Wiranto demobilise the mass movement.

In November the students, who initiated and headed the democratic movement, made a second attempt to oust the regime. They hoped to pressure the secular nationalist and Islamist politicians to head the struggle against regime. But Megawati, Rais, and Wahid had no intention whatsoever of provoking a revolution from below.

Their eyes were on the prize of the June 1999 elections, a "peaceful transition" that would open the pig trough of state power to them and their allies. They were as determined as Habibie and Wiranto to keep Indonesian capitalism and its brutal state machine intact.

The final results of the elections are still not clear, such is the undemocratic complexity of the constitution accepted by the opposition. The suffrage, if universal, is neither equal or direct. The 500-seat parliament has 38 deputies appointed by the military high command. When parliament elects the president, it is joined by 65 representatives of 'social and mass organisations' and 135 provincial representatives who will over-represent Golkar's strength in the countryside and outlying islands.

Despite the fact that Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) gained the largest number of votes and will have 154 seats, this by no means guarantees her the presidency nor her party the decisive role in government. The whole system is designed to force Megawati to assemble a coalition, including the figures of the old regime, in order to be elected president. Not that much forcing had to be done. She was only too willing to offer seats in the cabinet to all parties, including a substantial number to Golkar.

Megawati and her party draw support from the masses of Java and Bali where the majority of the population of Indonesia live. Not only is she the daughter of Ahmed Sukarno, leader of the independence struggle against the Dutch and first president of the country, but Suharto tried to crush her party in his last years in power. It was this struggle that gave her a reputation as a fighter against the regime. But she is a thoroughly bourgeois politician, seen by the imperialists as a useful tool to hoodwink and demobilise the masses.

The military basis of the regime remains intact. Few of the opposition parties even challenge the notion of its "dual function", political and military. It remains in place at every level of society, from the parliament down to the provincial and village level. It still acts as a "state within a state" as its actions in East Timor show. Real change is impossible in Indonesia without the breaking up of this powerful counter-revolutionary force.

For the present, the revolutionary masses who fought against Suharto – the students, workers, peasants and poverty stricken shantytown dwellers – have been pushed to one side. Many of the student organisations who took a leading role in the struggle mistakenly called for a boycott of the elections.

Yet the struggles in East Timor show the Achilles heel of the regime. The national question threatens to blow apart the new stability. The victory of the long struggle in East Timor, the fact that a referendum was forced out of the regime has not been lost on other minorities.

The people of Aceh have a long history of struggle, both against the Dutch and against Jakarta. The Suharto dictatorship's policy of ruthlessly exploiting the region's oil and gas deposits while keeping the population in poverty, re-opened the demands for independence. Since the late 1980s the "Free Aceh Movement" has become an increasingly powerful military force.

The fall of Suharto revealed the degree of repression carried out by the army in the 1990s and the collusion of the big oil companies like Mobil in it. Numerous mass graves were discovered and publicised. Recently, another in a long line of massacres was perpetrated by the army. At the end of July over 70 civilians in one village were murdered and thrown into unmarked graves, provoking a two day general strike right across the province in August. Similar movements exist in West Papua (Irian), Ambon and in other areas.

If Megawati gets the presidency she has few answers to the problems facing Indonesia. In her first policy speech since "winning" the election she made many promises. She declared that not just Suharto but all his cronies would be brought to justice, only to offer Golkar seats in the cabinet. She sobbed when she spoke of the conflict in Aceh but then asked the people to "be patient". She promised to allow them to retain more of their wealth but warned all "troubled areas" not to use the referendum weapon to break away from Indonesia.

She attacked military repression and promised to reduce the army's role in politics but she said her main priority was to "restore confidence in business". She committed herself to supporting the IMF restructuring package and to pursuing further privatisations. The ailing Jakarta stock exchange jumped by 3 per cent following her speech, a real vote of confidence by the bourgeoisie.

But the revolution is not finished in Indonesia. If Habibie, with the support of the army, cajoles his way to the presidency again the masses will come onto the streets. If Megawati gains the presidency, but under Wiranto and Habibie's supervision, she has no answers to the political and economic crisis wracking Indonesia.

The radical student and workers' organisations, the small left parties which offered the workers no clear revolutionary goal must address the strategic question. It is the task of communist revolutionaries in Indonesia to channel the disillusion and protests of the coming months and years into a real revolution – one that settles accounts with the old regime and with the capitalist system that bred it.

IRELAND

Unionists insist the future of Northern Ireland is Orange

CHRIS PATTEN'S proposed reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) provoked a massive propaganda campaign by the Orange bigots of Northern Ireland. It was aimed against Sinn Fein and the IRA. Lurid details of punishment beatings, death threats to alleged drug pushers, vandals and car thieves within the Catholic community, as well as the killing of RUC informers, were all marshalled to prove that the IRA cease-fire had broken down.

Revolutionaries hold no brief for the "social control" exercised by the Republicans in "their" community. The problems of anti-social crime, drug addiction and so on, need economic and political power in the hands of working class people to mobilise the resources which can wipe out these undoubted scourges on young lives.

Certainly "policing" by the RUC, where it exists, is aimed at political repression. The jails are full of republicans not drug dealers, rapists or burglars. But an elitist "secret army", even if it has deep roots in the community cannot provide democratic people's justice either. However, the scaremongering over all this by the Unionist establishment was a diversion.

The Loyalist disinformation campaign was well and truly bought by the British media. Moreover, it has dented the traditional "bipartisan" approach to Northern Ireland by the British parties. The Tories, moving ever more to the right under Hague, have lined themselves up uncritically and unconditionally with the Unionist bigots.

Yet, as evidence that the Republican cease-fire has broken down, it was simply hogwash. The number of these incidents has not increased of late and they were never included as a measure of the cease-fire until the moment of truth for the Unionists approached: sharing a cabinet with Sinn Fein and facing proposals from the British on reform of the 13,000-strong RUC, plus 3,000 full-time and 1,250 part time reservists.

Scores of pipe bombs have been aimed at Catholics during this year alone. No matter that the IRA had clearly maintained its cease-fire against the Protestant paramilitaries and the state forces while the Protestant paramilitaries have kept up a spate of sectarian killings – it is the Republicans who are in the dock.

At the same time Protestant terror gangs continue to murder innocent Catholics just because they are Catholics. Not only has the RUC not brought any of these killers to justice but they have been shown to be in collusion with some of them. They were undoubtedly involved in the assassination of solicitors like Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson because they defended Republicans fitted up by the RUC.

The RUC – with only eight per cent Catholics – also has a huge civilian infrastructure supplying it, a veritable "security industry". It is the pride and joy of the entire Orange and Loyalist Movement. For most Protestants to touch it is to touch the Ascendancy and the Union. It has an over 80 per cent approval rating from them. Catholics on the other hand detest it as the spearhead of discrimination, oppression and insult.

Patten's reforms include symbolic measures like its renaming as "The Police Service of Northern Ireland" and abandoning the flying of the Union Jack outside police stations. The roar of rage that the surrender of such symbols will provoke need hardly be imagined. Slightly more substantial is Patten's proposal to abandon the full-time reserves, to have a police board with all political parties represented on it, including Sinn Fein, and division of the force into local districts. Last, but not least, Patten proposes a recruitment drive until the force has 42 per cent Catholics.

While these proposals – if they were carried out in full – in no way end or even undermine British rule in Northern Ireland, they would undermine the old sectarian Orange statelet – and with it many of the economic privileges which that state dispenses. An important sector of the Protestant community will fight tooth and nail to prevent this.



RUC attack demonstators in the Lower Ormeau Road, Belfast

And they know that if the release of prisoners were stopped and Sinn Fein expelled from the talks, it would mean that the whole peace process was dead in the water. The IRA is one side in the war. If the British and Unionist state will not negotiate with them, then there can be no peace.

It would become clear as day that no reforms worth talking about would come from the Brits or the Orange Ascendancy. For the latter another "Fenian plot" would have been defeated and British "Lundys" like Mo Mowlam seen off.

It was, of course, no surprise that Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist should voice this demand. It was also no surprise that David Trimble and the Official Unionists should take up these calls as the moment for entering the joint executive approached and as the date for the release of Chris Patten's report on the RUC arrived.

Revolutionary socialists and level-headed Irish nationalists have always known that the parties of the Protestant Ascendancy would never voluntarily give up anything that was essential to their power. And the ability to dole out privileges to their supporters, which the control of the state machine in the Six Counties gives them, will never be voluntarily surrendered. Someone must force their grip from power.

Although Blair has held on for the moment, he – like all previous Labour governments as well as the more politically liberal Tory ones – refuses to face a fundamental dilemma. Only a willingness to call the Unionists' bluff, to openly make the membership of the United Kingdom (with all its economic subsidies to the Orange statelet and the Protestant labour aristocracy) totally conditional on the acceptance of a settlement agreed by the British parliament and by the Irish population, North and South, will break the log jam of Orangeism. British recognition of the present Orange veto (consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland) dooms any settlement which could meet the most elementary demands of the oppressed Irish nationalist population.

If the Protestant Ascendancy is not forced to give up its brutal, corrupt, sectarian, paramilitary police force, if they are not forced to relinquish their near monopoly of the lucrative jobs in the state bureaucracy and security industry, if their first cut of the best jobs in industry and commerce is no longer an option then they will continue to bellow "No Surrender" to every peace deal until it is whittled down to one totally unacceptable to the nationalist population.

Blair is up against the Orange dilemma – one which has changed its form but is at root the one faced by Gladstone, Asquith, Lloyd George and Harold Wilson. Is there any sign that Tony Blair is made of sterner stuff? No, British imperialism – despite the pitiful illusions of Adams and McGuinness – will not force the united front of Orange reaction to bow the knee.

It cannot do so without opening deep divisions in its own ranks. To do so would open a full-scale constitutional crisis in Britain, into which the monarchy, the army and the other unelected apparatus of state would be drawn. Therefore the most likely outcome is that Patten's proposals will be watered down and Mowlam will be "promoted" out of the Six Counties.

Yet if the republican leaders accept a bowdlerised "Orange version" of the Good Friday agreement, above all with the RUC intact, then the Republican movement will fragment and various forms of armed struggle, even if they have less prospect of a military victory, will resume.

If the workers of Northern Ireland, of the Irish Republic and of Britain do not want to see this endless spiral resume its hopeless course then they must take up a mass struggle on the streets of all three states – around a slogan Karl Marx urged on the British workers 160 years ago: "the repeal of the Union."

KOSOVA

Stop the attacks on Serbs and Roma

SINCE NATO troops entered Kosova and established a "protectorate", 80,000 to 150,000 Serbs have fled the province. Only 30,000 remain. A similar story applies to the original Roma population of around 40,000 – only 7,000 are left. This shows the hypocrisy of Clinton and Blair who claimed this war was fought to protect human rights.

In the first two months after the Nato invasion some 250 Serbs and Roma were murdered. The world's working class and progressive movements must unequivocally condemn these atrocities and their perpetrators.

Of course, after the horrific attempted genocide by Milosevic some spontaneous revenge killings were inevitable. The uncovering of a series of mass graves on an almost weekly basis testifies to the scale. The perpetrators of these actions, and even more their planners and organisers, well deserve the most exemplary punishment. But most of them are in Serbia and not in Kosova today.

However, there is mounting evidence that the campaign against the Serbs and Roma who remained is not "spontaneous" but well-organised.

The US-based Human Rights Watch organisation released a report in August, entitled "Abuses against Serbs and Roma in the new Kosovo", which documents abductions, beatings, house-burning and murders of Serbs and Roma. The most notable was the massacre of 14 Serb farmers in Gracko, a village near Pristina. Gracko is surrounded by Albanian villages under Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) control and many of its inhabitants are refugee settlers from Bosnia and the Krajina. The villagers, aged 15 to 60, were harvesting their crops on July 23 when they were cut down by automatic weapons fired at close range from several directions. According to Gracko inhabitants the attackers were soldiers of the KLA.

The report concludes that:

"The most serious incidents of violence...have been carried out by members of the KLA. Although the KLA leadership issued a statement on July 20 condemning attacks on Serbs and Roma, and KLA political leader Hashim Thaci publicly denounced the July 23 massacre of 14 Serb farmers, it remains unclear whether these beatings and killings were committed by local KLA units acting without official sanction, or whether they represent a co-ordinated KLA policy."

The US based Institute of War & Peace Reporting identifies a further element:

"The Albanian Mafia, posing as freedom fighters, have turned the 'ethnic cleansing' of Kosovo into a lucrative business."

Units of the KLA engaged in revenge attacks on Serbs were being manipulated by the Mafia in a housing scam, with vacant properties being sold to homeless ethnic Albanians for 400 German marks each.

The purpose of abductions and beatings is clearly to terrorise Serbs and Roma into leaving Kosova: most of those abducted are subsequently released but warned to leave Kosova. House-burnings are also widespread. Thirty Roma homes were torched in the Brekoc neighbourhood of Djakovica within the space of three hours on July 12. Uniformed KLA soldiers told the families to leave their homes a few days before. The Roma neighbourhood in Pec was almost entirely looted and burned in late June.

Veton Surroi the publisher of the Pristina daily, *Koha Ditor*, has bravely condemned this campaign:

"I know how Kosovo's remaining Serbs, and indeed Roma, feel, because I, along with nearly 2 million Albanians, was in exactly the same situation only two and a half months ago. I recognise their fear..... I know the obvious excuse, namely that we have been through a barbaric war in which Serbs were responsible for the most heinous crimes and in which the intensity of violence has generated a desire for vengeance among many Albanians. This, however, is no justification. Those Serbs who carried out Belgrade's orders and committed atrocities against Albanians have already fled, as have others fearing reprisals from relatives of the thousands who are buried in mass graves. Today's violence – more than two months after the arrival of NATO forces – is more than simply an emotional reaction. It is the organised and systematic intimidation of all Serbs simply because they are Serbs and therefore are being held collectively responsible for what happened in Kosovo."

Those socialists worldwide who supported the armed struggle of the KLA against the attempted genocide, directed by Milosevic, must equally condemn the KLA and all attempts to ethnically cleanse Kosova of its Serb and Roma population.

It is ever more urgent that the workers and the internationally minded youth of Kosova – who did not suffer and fight to simply reverse the horrors of ethnic cleansing – combine into a revolutionary workers' party. This party must fight – politically in the first instance – the ethnic cleansing, the Nato-occupation, the restoration of capitalism, whether by the multinationals or the local Mafia.

Kosova's workers must link up with the working classes of Serbia and the surrounding Balkan states because the only strategy for peace and freedom in the Balkans is a socialist federation of workers' states.

SOUTH AFRICA

Public sector workers challenge ANC rule

The South African working class has responded to the ANC's electoral victory and the continuing attacks of the bosses with some of the largest protests since the end of apartheid, reports *Lesley Day*

IN RECENT months South African workers have shown that there are limits to their patience with the ANC's leaders. Strikes and protests about jobs and pay revealed a new willingness to challenge the government since the ANC received a massive 66 per cent of the vote in the June elections. It secured this decisive victory with the help of its Alliance partners, COSATU, the biggest trade union federation, and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The workers' organisations ran mass campaigns in factories and communities urging an ANC vote and stressing the government's achievements in the previous five years. But as soon as the working class started to press its own demands after the election, it became clear that Thabo Mbeki's new administration would continue to rule on behalf of the South African capitalists. The belt-tightening programme, ironically entitled Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), puts severe restrictions on the growth of public sector spending.

Despite gains such as increased house-building and provision of utilities, overall living standards for many workers have stagnated or even fallen. Last year unemployment actually rose by 186,000 – and that was just the official figure. There have been massive job losses in several key private sector industries and even in the public sector the number of jobs fell between 1995 and 1998. Meanwhile, restrictions on the private bosses' drive to accumulate have eased considerably. Company tax has fallen again from 35 per cent to 30 per cent and there has been a big flight of capital out of the country.

With discontent growing among its rank and file members, COSATU's leadership launched a campaign against the job losses, high interest rates and the reduction of import tariffs. It expected to join an Alliance "summit" with the ANC and SACP in August to discuss GEAR, but at the last minute the ANC leadership called this off.

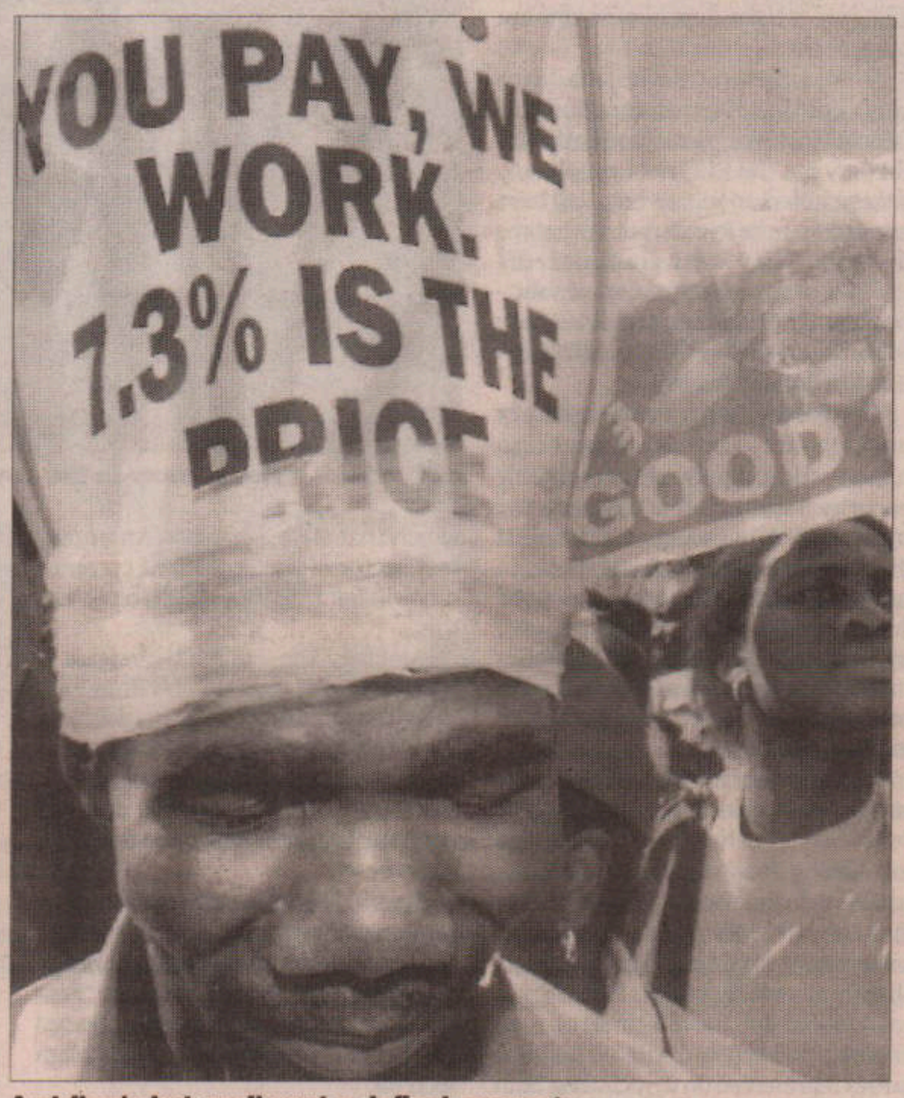
"Relations are very tense," said a senior SACP officer. "There is a feeling that some people in the ANC want COSATU and the SACP to help in an election campaign but then drop us as soon as it's over."

At the same time as the attacks on jobs, both public and private sector employers have been trying to squeeze real wages. This immediately contradicts the promise to reduce the "apartheid wage gap" – the huge differences between rich and poor that still run largely in parallel with the racial divide.

This bosses' offensive on pay provoked a strike wave this winter. Miners sustained a week-long strike and won an 8 per cent increase, just above the real inflation rate, and a promise of an above inflation rise next year. In the post office, strikes and a go-slow followed, with managers threatening a lock-out. The most serious strike has been among central and local government workers. They have borne the brunt of the budget restrictions with the government setting out its wages policy as early as last January.

The 12 public sector unions demanded increases of between 10 and 15 per cent – to meet inflation and raise the wages of the worst-paid. They found themselves labelled "selfish" and "economist". The government tried counterposing the wage bill to other public sector spending. In response the unions pointed out that public sector workers have shouldered the impact of the spending squeeze. The average public servant earns R3,000 a month (just over £300 a month), compared to a cabinet minister's monthly salary of R40,000. The lowest-paid public sector workers earn just R1,500 a month – not a living wage.

Long negotiations and fruitless attempts at conciliation saw the unions reduce their demands considerably to a 7.3 per cent rise (8 per cent for teachers), while the government conceded little and then unilaterally imposed a 6.3 per cent increase in August. Furious public sector workers staged the biggest strike since the end of apartheid on 24 August. The government had expected action from the core of the more militant unions such as the National Education, Health and Allied Workers (NEHAWU) and the South African Democratic Teachers' Union. But in fact the 24 August action embraced a far wider swathe of workers across the whole of the public sector. Over half a million came out on strike including some of the old "moderate" and predominantly white unions.



A striker's hat spells out a defiant message

ANC spokespersons hastily issued statements saying they would like to see "compromises from all sides", but government ministers continued to resist any major concessions. Talks were, however, expected to resume between COSATU representatives and the government by mid-September. The gap has now narrowed and a deal could well be in the offing, though it is likely to signify nothing more than a temporary truce.

Whatever the precise outcome of the present dispute, it is clear that public sector workers are likely to face a deal that falls far below their original just demands. There are plenty of lessons to learn from the recent wave of struggles. The willingness of the membership to fight, in contrast to the leadership's eagerness to compromise, shows the need for rank and file control over the dispute, the need for cross-union links, and the crucial importance of raising overtly political demands such as an end to privatisation and swingeing taxation of the rich.

Workers need to challenge the whole basis of the Alliance between their organisations and the ANC-led government. While COSATU and SACP leaders claim the Alliance means that workers can have an influence on the government, the traffic has been virtually all one way – the workers' organisations are tied to a capitalist government. They have become its foot-soldiers among the masses.

At both COSATU's conference held in August and in the pages of the SACP's press, there have been signs of mounting pressure from below. The leaders have been taking time out to defend the Alliance. A leadership paper to COSATU's 20 August Special Congress claimed that the election campaign had helped overcome the gap between the ANC leadership and its mass base. Now the Alliance structures should be given more say in policy-making and the government should stop calling all critics "counter-revolutionary"!

Speakers felt obliged to warn the COSATU-backed ANC MPs that although they might be under ANC rather than COSATU discipline, they should remember their "moral and historical obligations".

SACP secretary general Blade Nzimande, addressing the Special Congress, declared that it was the working class' responsibility to "pull its weight" behind a strong ANC government, not "run away from the task". This is a none too veiled warning to those calling for a break from the ANC. At the same time, Nzimande gave a graphic illustration of what being tied to the ANC government means. Rather than declaring wholehearted support for the public sector workers and calling on all workers and party cadre to mobilise support, he uttered a string of weasel words. It would be wrong, he said for the public sector unions to "advance the interests of their members as if they were an opposition to the government just as it would be wrong for them to mechanically support each and every government decision".

Meanwhile, the SACP's monthly, *Umsebenzi*, noted that SACP members find themselves on both sides of the bargaining table in the public sector strikes – some as government ministers and others as trade union leaders, before declaring that this should be seen as a challenge rather than an embarrassment!

The leaders of the SACP are wrong. Rather than strengthening the Alliance, the workers' organisations should be breaking from it. Workers need their own revolutionary party not an alliance with the ANC or a treacherous pro-capitalist workers' party like the SACP.

IRAN

Iranian government clampdowns on opposition

More than 2,000 students and workers are currently being tortured in Iranian jails after the Islamist regime moved to crush a nationwide rebellion over the summer months. A number of prisoners are already believed to have been killed.

In June and July, thousands of students took to the streets and occupied their campuses, demanding, "Death to dictatorship!" and "Long live freedom!".

The response from the police, the right wing military squads, the Pasdars, and the clerical fascist thugs of Hizbollah, and the Asaar, was swift and brutal. They surrounded the universities in Tehran and in other cities and began arbitrarily arresting everyone in the street who might be a student or a sympathiser of the pro-democracy movement.

Although mass demonstrations forced the regime to release some protesters, others were attacked by baton-wielding cops and thugs. In an attempt to crush the movement, Pasdars even raided the dormitories of Tehran university, where the students were staging a defiant sit-in. On 5 July seven students were killed by police in their dormitories in Amir Abaad near Tehran.

Those who were not immediately arrested were beaten up so badly they were hospitalised. But even in hospital, the gangs pursued the students, dragging their victims from their beds and taking them to torture camps like the infamous Evin prison. Two students reportedly died in the hospital.

Two prominent student leaders, Manoucheihr Mohammadi and Gholamreza Mohajerinejad, were paraded on television, having clearly been drugged and tortured, to recant their crimes and admit to being agents of "foreign powers".

During the past two years, the Iranian ruling class has been bitterly divided. Despite the continued anti-Western rhetoric of the Islamists many bosses and clerics too, want a thaw in Iran's relations with imperialism. This reforming wing is prepared to make democratic concessions in order to undermine the fundamentalists and win the trust of the USA.

It was these forces who put forward President Mohamad Khatami who was swept into office in 1997 with mass support. In a country where 60 per cent of the population is under 25, students are a large and significant section of society and they played a large part in Khatemi's campaign.

But in the last few months, workers and students have grown increasingly frustrated not only by Khatemi's failure to introduce meaningful reforms but also his willingness to bring in counter-reforms. The first signs of this growing anger were felt in the workplaces.

Latin America is now deep in economic recession. From the Southern Cone to Mexico unemployment has soared. Governments are imposing yet more IMF-dictated austerity measures. The response has been a wave of mass demonstrations, occupations of universities and sectional strikes. *Dave Stockton* looks at a few examples

Latin America in turmoil

COLOMBIAN GENERAL STRIKE

A general strike by 350,000 Colombian public sector workers paralysed Bogota, Medelin, Cali and Barranquilla, a port city on the Caribbean, for two days at the beginning of September. Burning barricades of buses helped the strikers hold off the paramilitary riot police and water cannons.

Their demands were an end to the assassination of trade union leaders and local activists by the death squads linked to the military, a moratorium on the huge public sector debt and the breaking off of negotiations for a $3.5 bn loan from the IMF which will only come with a new round of austerity measures.

Colombia is in the worst economic depression it has suffered since the 1930s according to the New York Herald Tribune. At the same time the government of President Pastrana, elected on a programme of reaching peace in the 35 year long war between the Colombian military and the two powerful guerrilla movements, the FARC and the ELN, has failed to achieve its objectives.

The strike was concluded without achieving its aims but the unions made clear that it was a warning strike. A joint government commission to discuss the unions' demands has been set up. But this is unlikely to resolve anything of importance. Colombia's workers need to prepare an all out general strike, not only by public sector workers but of the entire working class if they are to tackle the deepening crisis and the attacks on working class militants.

MEXICO

Students have been on strike for three months at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the country's largest university with 267,000 students.

The university administration imposed a $63 fee per semester on students. Until now, except for a symbolic fee of about two US cents, UNAM students were not required to pay tuition fees. The new measures sparked an explosion of protest from the students defending the principle, written in the Mexican Constitution, that guarantees a free university education.

The UNAM directors, for their part, point out that many of the public universities in Mexico already charge minimal fees. Many students see the step as the first towards the privatisation of university education. Private universities in Mexico serve the upper middle classes and the rich. Typically they charge between $2,000 and $3,000 per semester.

Many sections of the working class – including electrical workers, teachers, academic and university workers – are supporting the student movement. The National Organising Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), which represents Mexico City's teachers, initiated strike action in support of the students. The electrical workers, fighting the government's plan to privatise Mexico's electrical utilities (also in opposition to the language of the Constitution), have joined in student demonstrations.

The struggle has attracted the support of all those who oppose the free market policies of the ruling party and its subordination of the Mexican economy to the dictates of the IMF.

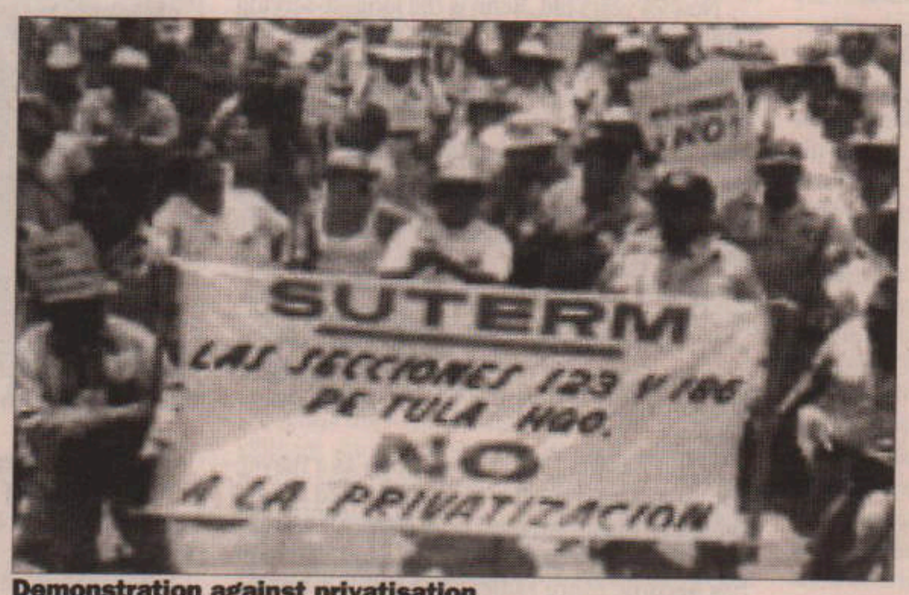
Students from other universities are organising in support of the UNAM protesters. The students have formed a General Strike Committee (CGH) and are occupying the gigantic campus in Mexico City. They have also organised protest marches involving tens of thousands of students and workers.

The students have been subjected to kidnappings and beatings by goons from the PRI, the governing party. Clearly students have to deepen their links with the workers who are sympathetic to them and create defence squads that can protect this and future struggles.

ARGENTINA

Argentina's economy is in deep recession In the first quarter of this year alone it contracted by three per cent. Argentinian exports fell 13 per cent in the first four months of 1999 and exports to the Mercosur bloc, including Brazil, fell by 27 per cent. Among the sectors hardest hit are the automobile industry, which has seen a 43.9 per cent fall; metalworking, a 30 per cent decline; and textiles, 19 per cent.

Industry is hard-hit by the recession across the border in Brazil and the free float of the country's currency. Exports to Brazil fell by 29 per cent in the first five months of the year, resulting in losses to the Argentine economy of nearly $1 billion. 50 per cent of Argentine auto production is destined for export across the Brazilian border. Meanwhile, as exports of industrial goods dry up, the prices on agricultural products and raw materials have fallen drastically, according to some estimates resulting in losses of $5 billion.



Demonstration against privatisation

At the same time the government of Federal President Carlos Menem is imposing a budgetary squeeze, extracted by the IMF as the price of $2.8 billion of loans, and another $7 billion in contingency credits. The Argentinian economy is expected to contract overall by between two to four per cent in 1999, and unemployment is increasing, with next month's jobless figures expected to reach 15 per cent.

During Argentina's last recession, in 1995 after the Mexican peso crisis, mass street uprisings erupted in several of the poorer provinces – involving blazing barricades of tires, mass demonstrations and strikes. These broke out when regional governments were unable to pay their public servants' wages.

No wonder then that when such a situation began to develop in the northern state of Corrientes, Menem's government promptly dispatched paramilitary police but at the same time executed an about-face on its previous refusal to provide financial assistance to the beleaguered state government

Argentina is now facing presidential elections which puts some limits on the government's repression and the savagery of it austerity. But the room for manoeuvre of the bourgeois politicians is limited

Official Peronist candidate Eduardo Duhalde – supposedly a more traditional Peronist, rather than a neo-liberal "Menemist" – adopted the demand for forgiveness of the country's $100 billion foreign debt, thinking this would be an attractive campaign slogan. The response from the capitalist parasites to this bit of populist demagogy was immediate. Argentina's stock market plummeted by nine per cent and Duhalde abandoned his pledge the next day.

The country's Vice President, Carlos Ruckauf went to Washington on July 20 to meet with representatives the World Bank and US Administration officials. A supporter of Duhalde, Ruckauf offered assurances that there would be no reneging on Argentine foreign debt payments and made a declaration of submission to the international banks.

The international bankers had their own demands to make: swingeing "labour and fiscal reforms," i.e. a brutal assault on the living standards of the Argentine working class and the deepening of the Menem government's drive to privatise state enterprises and wipe out social services.

Despite the loyalty of the Peronist functionaries to the prescriptions of Wall Street and the International Monetary Fund, the government fears provoking social upheavals.

Sparked by an official unemployment rate of 14.5 per cent, unrest is growing. In June alone, 13,000 more jobs were wiped out, with 91,000 workers joining the unemployment lines over the past year. According to government figures, the number of jobless has risen to 1.9 million, while another 1.8 million are forced to subsist on part-time jobs, unable to find full-time work.

Meanwhile, the government has faced mounting protests from different sectors of the population and has been forced to make a series of humiliating retreats.

Earlier this month the Argentine Congress took a hasty vote to delay the imposition of a new vehicle tax designed to pay for teachers' salaries after striking lorry drivers nearly brought the country's economy to a halt. The Menem government was on the brink of imposing a "state of emergency."

Last May the government was forced to rescind major cuts in education in the face of mass student protests and the resignation of Education Minister Susana Decibe.

And in June, tax concessions were made to farmers after a four-day strike. These concessions proved inadequate, however, to prevent a mass march of farmers on the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires on 21 July to protest against falling prices and lack of government support for the agricultural sector.

In June strikes and demonstrations of teachers, tutors, parents, health workers, pensioners and even the police erupted in the northern province of Corrientes. Public sector workers had not been paid for over two months and had not received their December 1998 salary bonus. The reason for this is simple. The provincial government is bankrupt and the provision of social services had also been suspended.

Other workers supported the teachers' strike, with public transport workers and prison guards taking industrial action on June 18 and joining a mass picket of the state government offices In the interior of the province lorry drivers' blockaded a major arterial route in protest against increased state charges. On June 21-22, different groups of professional workers from the private sector took to the streets in the capital for the first time. They had not received their salaries and demanded an urgent solution to the financial crisis.

The scale of the protest forced President Carlos Menem to disburse six million pesos to prop up the Corrientes government. This money will not cover all the back wages and pensions, much less meet future payments – and meanwhile the social crisis is worsening.

Independent trade unions are illegal in Iran. Meanwhile workers face all the problems associated with the worldwide neo-liberal offensive. Wages are often paid late, or not at all. Privatisation results in massive lay-offs.

Parliament is in the process of passing a major amendment to the labour laws, which will exempt workers from any protection in workplaces with less than four employees. That amounts to two million workers or 40 per cent of the nation's workforce. No health and safety checks, no minimum wage, no redundancy rights for them. In a situation where there are, according to official figures, 10,000 deaths at work every year and 150,000 injuries resulting in loss of limb, this new attack was rightly seen as legalising murder.

A massive May Day demonstration – with over 100,000 workers on it – forced Parliament to delay, but not withdraw, the introduction of the new law. It also signalled to the working class and students that the regime could be challenged. A new mood of confidence spread from the working class to the students.

At the start of the student protests, the majority of the activists saw their role as exerting extra-parliamentary pressure in support of the President Khatami. But when the president declared that "deviations will be repressed with strength and determination" illusions in the reforming president rapidly dissipated. In an angry letter to Khatami the Tabriz Independent Student Union summed up the new mood:

"We began our movement thinking you are behind us in bringing about a change and 'civil society'. But it is clear now we were deceived by your smiles and promises. You seem to have sided with the fundamentalists now in attacking the students."

The Tabriz students are absolutely right. Khatami has sided with the fundamentalists. The crunch came at the end of July, when the Pasdars issued a warning in the fundamentalist newspaper, Kayhan, demanding that the president stop supporting the students and claiming that his reforms had gone too far. Within days, Khatami capitulated and a wave of repression was unleashed.

It is now crucial that the international workers' and students' movements do everything in their power to halt the torture and murder and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all the students and workers arrested over the summer.

If we succeed in this, then there is every indication that a new revolutionary situation will begin to develop in Iran. Evidence of workers joining the students on the demonstrations and of a high level of women's participation in the protests point to an alternative to relying on the reforming wing of the bourgeoisie. Indeed the "Islamic Republic", in reality a foul clerical dictatorship, cannot be reformed it can only be blown up by mass revolution.

But if the workers and students are not to be cheated out of everything they fought for as they were in the early 1980s they must fight not only for full democratic rights and workers' demands but for a workers' republic based on shoras (councils) made up of delegates of the workers, the urban and rural poor and the youth. To fight for this a revolutionary workers party must be built in Iran.

Send messages of support and condemnations of the arrests to: The Sit-in Protest Committee, fax: 0171-603 6015; email: tir78@hotmail.com

Tony Benn and the lim

Tony Benn's retirement marks the end of an era for the left. *Dave Telfer* examines his political career and assesses the current state of the Labour left

TONY BENN recently announced his intention to step down from parliament. He will not contest his Chesterfield seat at the next general election. Benn's departure represents the end of an era for British politics in general and for the left in particular.

Now 74 years old, Benn is the longest-serving Labour MP. He first entered parliament in 1950, when he became MP for Bristol South East where he remained for all but three years until 1983.

During those three years, between 1960 and 1963, he fought to renounce the title, inherited from his father, of Viscount Stansgate, which forced him out of the Commons. He has fought a total of 17 parliamentary elections during his political career, up to the last general election when he was re-elected as MP for Chesterfield, a seat he first won in a by-election in 1984. Benn was a member of the Labour Party NEC between 1959-93.

Benn has long had a reputation as a maverick: as postmaster general he attempted to have the queen's head removed from stamps. He is also known, rather remarkably, as a politician who has become more radical as he became older. Harold Wilson apparently once commented that Benn "immatured with age."

While famous as a left winger, Benn has never claimed to be a revolutionary. He has always dismissed the need for a revolution in Britain, counterposing the power of parliament:

"The reason why the labour movement has never espoused a revolutionary alternative in Britain, as some socialists have done abroad, is because we ourselves fashioned the democracy which should express itself through a fully functioning democratic parliament. Therefore to ask the British labour movement to abandon democracy and go for the short cut to socialism by some coup d'état is to ask us to repudiate our history." (Arguments for Democracy)

Benn's reformism is evident in this quote. The British, he claims, are instinctively democratic (by which he means attached to parliament) and have no need to turn to "foreign" revolutionary ideas. This has been the stock-in-trade of left reformists since the Labour Party was founded. It is nonsense, repudiating the revolutionary tradition of the British from Cromwell in the seventeenth century, through the Chartists in the nineteenth century to the revolutionary socialist and syndicalist shop stewards of the twentieth century.

Nor is it true that the British labour movement shaped the existing parliament. Labour movement pressure certainly led to the extension of the vote, but the bourgeoisie have always kept "democracy" in check. Our democracy is curtailed by institutions hallowed by the British constitution but elected by nobody – the monarchy, the House of Lords, the civil service chiefs, the commanders of the police and armed forces, the judiciary, the Privy Council and so on and so forth.

Last, but by no means least Benn shamelessly equates the socialist revolution – which by definition must involve the mass of the working class and must be made by direct democratic organisations of that class, workers' councils – with a "coup d'état". This suggests that revolution is made by a minority and is intrinsically undemocratic – the very opposite of every revolution that has taken place this century, not least the Russian Revolution of October 1917 which was made by the masses not by a coup d'état as every honest account of it, even by bourgeois academics, proves.

Benn's theoretical attachment to reformism – even of the most left variety – explains the ups and downs of his long political career. His achievements have always been limited, hemmed in by the restrictions of a capitalism that he disliked but could never conceive of overthrowing by revolutionary means. The compromises and even betrayals championed that resulted from this have been as much a feature of Benn's political life as his much vaunted radicalism.

Benn's early political career saw him hold several posts in the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan in the 1960s and 1970s, including Minister of Technology, Secretary of State for Industry and Secretary of State for Energy.



Tony Benn with Arthur Scargill on a miners' demonstration

It is in this period that his commitment to "democracy" and Parliament, even if it meant attacking workers became clear. Throughout the late 1970s, including the period of mass strikes in 1978/79 known as the Winter of Discontent, he remained a member of one of the most right wing Labour governments ever seen. As workers fought the imposition of the wage cutting Social Contract with strike action, Benn held fast to the principle of "collective responsibility" in the Labour cabinet, refusing to challenge the union bashing strategy of Jim Callaghan and Denis Healey who were determined to undermine union power.

He did not resign, vote against or even speak against the government. Keeping the Labour government in office, rather than standing with the workers, was the priority for Benn. And his role was not simply confined to keeping quiet. He openly admits in his diaries that as the Minister of Energy, faced with a tanker drivers' strike, he was prepared to use troops to smash the strike in order to keep Labour in office and protect his own position as a voice of opposition within, not outside, the government.

During the same period Tony Benn – who was later a firm advocate of the miners during their heroic fight against pit closures in 1984/85 – took on the NUM. Of course his methods were different from the right. He was famous for bringing workers' leaders into his office, showing them the union banner draped behind his desk and sharing a big mug of strong tea with them. But behind the hospitality lay the hit.

As energy minister Benn carried through a massive pit closure programme. Worse, he colluded with the right of the NUM to push through a regional productivity deal. The impact of the deal would be to divide region against region, undermining nationally agreed pay deals by imposing differentials based on the quantity of coal produced.

Despite national ballots rejecting this deal Benn and the then miners' leader, outmanoeuvred the opponent of the deal, Arthur Scargill, to push it through via regional ballots. The significance of this betrayal of the workers' interests – and it was a betrayal of the first order – became clear in 1984 when the regions that had benefited most from the deal due simply to geological factors (Nottinghamshire in particularly) became bastions of scabbing in the fight against pit closures and fatally undermined the effectiveness of the national strike.

The years after 1979, when Labour began their long period of opposition, were the heyday for Bennism as a distinctive trend in the Labour Party. In 1979 the election defeat did shake the Labour Party up considerably. A large number of activists, rightly, blamed the Callaghan leadership for the defeat and for attacking the working class. They began to rally around the slogan "never again", meaning, never again a Labour government that broke its manifesto pledges and turned on the working class.

Given that the right drew the opposite conclusion – that the unions and the working class had led to the downfall of a Labour government and should be attacked for doing so – a battle was inevitable. To his credit Benn sided with the :never again" camp and quickly rose to become the leader of a powerful left pushing for constitutional reform of the party to restrict the power of the Labour leadership and enhance the power of the membership.

Released from the duty of supporting a Labour government if office, Benn made two challenges to the leadership, coming within 1% in 1981 of beating Dennis Healey for the post of deputy leader and challenging Neil Kinnock for the party leadership in 1988 on a ticket with Eric Heffer.

As it turned out 1981 was the heyday of the left. But its moment of near victory – a victory that saw the hard right of the party defect to form the Social Democratic Party – rapidly turned into its moment of defeat. Terrified by the defection of the SDP and the growth of the Bennite movement the remaining right, in alliance with top union bureaucrats, demanded that Michael Foot launch a witch hunt. The right was about to regroup.

To neutralise Benn a special meeting was called in late 1981 at the plush mansion of the ASTMS (a union which went on to form today's MSF) at Bishops Stortford. At this meeting the right threatened Benn with an all out war and further defections unless he called off his reforming campaign. Faced with the threat of a split Benn caved in to the right's demands. The movement would be called off and all efforts would be turned towards preparing Labour for the next general election (which came in 1983). In early 1982 Benn announced that the left had won, the war was over and the job now was to unite behind the leadership (witch hunter Foot and right wing Healey).

Again, this was a betrayal. It disarmed and disoriented the left. After the 1983 election disaster, in which Labour was savaged, with Benn himself losing his seat, the right were able to turn around, blame Benn and the left and begin their transformation of the party back to being a safe alternative for the bosses.

They did this with gusto under the new Kinnock/Hattersley leadership and Benn – who probably believed he had won – paid the price for demobilising his movement after the treacherous pact with the right at Bishops Stortford. The left was driven back on every front. Purges and witch-hunts became the norm. Benn's base was driven out of the party, his reforms neutralised by counter-reforms from the right. Defeat followed defeat and the left was reduced to the sorry state it has remained in to this day.

Benn is leaving parliament with Tony Blair leading Britain's first Labour government since 1979 having followed both Neil Kinnock and John Smith in unleashing a series of attacks on the left as part of a transformation of the party into one safe for Britain's bosses. Blair has won a number of significant victories in the

its of left reformism

way that the Labour Party organises itself that mean that the left is now far more marginalised than it ever has been and unable to get itself into the sorts of positions of power that it did in Labour's early years of opposition.

All of the campaigns that Blair has waged inside the Labour Party beginning with the battle to rewrite Clause 4, the part of the Labour Party's constitution held dear by Benn and the left inside the party, have been won with relative ease. The left is now extremely weak and bewildered by what they have seen going on.

Benn has said that he is not giving up politics by leaving parliament, promising instead "to work closely with all those, outside and inside parliament, who want to see the Labour Party recommit itself to the causes of social justice, democratic socialism and peace."

Although Benn is an astute critic of the changes Blair has made in the way the Labour Party functions, the nature of parliament and has passionately held views on democracy and the senselessness of war, neither he, nor his co-thinkers on Labour's left have the means to overcome the problems they identify.

On the question of internal democracy Benn sees Blair's "modernisation" as a kind of patronage. That is, Blair is using his powers to appoint an ever increasing number of people to positions of power without the need to go through either the party membership or parliament itself. The examples he gives show what he means: Blair has appointed a number of people, mainly Tories, to important consultative positions from Michael Heseltine, to head a committee dealing with trade relations with China, to David Mellor being put in charge of football.

The adoption of list systems for elections to the European Parliament as well as the Scottish parliament and Welsh Assembly are seen as part of the same process, ensuring that electors cannot choose the individual candidates, but rather only those that are Tony Blair's choice. The decision to give the power to set interest rates directly to the Governor of the Bank of England is seen as part of the same trend.

He says:

"Seen in this light, modernisation can be understood for what it is – a throwback to feudal England where the King appointed everybody and there was not a shred of real democracy allowing the people to have any say whatever in determining their own future." (Tribune, 6 November 1998)

The nature of parliament itself has also changed, according to Benn, as reflected in his statement explaining his decision to stand down. For one thing, he observed that politics is moving out of parliament. For another the role of parliament was now changing "from being an instrument we can use to control the economy, into an instrument used to control us in the interest of the economy."

His arguments on Europe are an extension of his arguments on the nature of democracy. Benn has always maintained an anti-European stance whilst keen to point out that his is not the same xenophobic position as the Little Englanders of the right.

The problem for him is that the acceptance of a European Central Bank having the power to make decisions that effect all of Europe's citizens is undemocratic because it is unaccountable to the individual parliaments of the European Union's nations. Furthermore, it is protected by the terms of the Maastricht Treaty from pressure by those national parliaments.

Of course, Blair's strategy has always been one of closing down debate and concentrating power increasingly into his own hands and this must be fought by all activists within the Labour Party. But parliament, even if it has become increasingly shallow and increasingly dominated by sound-bite politicians – of which Blair himself is a prime example – has not fundamentally changed. It has never been an instrument that we can use to effect real change, it has always been wielded to act in the interests of capital. The illusion that parliament can be used by the working class to see off the evils of capitalism for good is the central lie of reformism.

The British, he claims, are instinctively democratic (by which he means attached to parliament) and have no need to turn to "foreign" revolutionary ideas. This has been the stock-in-trade of left reformists since the Labour Party was founded.



Benn in Wilson's cabinet in 1974

To his credit, Benn has consistently been an almost lone voice within the Commons in opposition to imperialist wars. However, his position on all these conflicts has consistently centred on the same fatal reformist flaw: a reliance on the United Nations (UN) to solve the problems.

He talks of the UN as a neutral force within these conflicts. But the UN is an organisation developed by and controlled by the USA and is always subservient to the needs of US imperialism. The Security Council, far from being an arbitration body is in fact a Council of War.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait and the UN imposed sanctions as a prelude to the actual conflict which was to follow with such devastating effects, Benn was fully supportive. When this policy was turned into one of an actual shooting war, Benn and his supporters complained that sanctions hadn't had time to work.

In short, this pacifist line is one which fails to recognise the logic of why imperialism is responsible for war and sees war as something qualitatively different from the other tactics that imperialism, and the US in particular, uses to achieve its aims. It isn't. Sanctions, bombs, or whatever tactic imperialism chooses are in the end the same thing: the use of force and violence through which imperialism imposes its will on the world as a whole.

Benn has for many years been a dominant force within the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs. This group consists of around 35 MPs and 6 MEPs, although its active core consists of a somewhat smaller number, including Diane Abbott, Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Grant. These MPs also figure on the editorial board of their publication, Socialist Campaign Group News, along with their main "theoreticians" Ken Livingstone and Alan Simpson.

The other major "official" opposition is represented by the Labour Reform Group who produce the Tribune newspaper and is a less thorough opposition to Blair. But between them, these groups reflect the central concerns of left reformism.

Alan Simpson's politics rely on a strategy of government intervention into the economy in line with Keynesian economics allied to a set of social policies inherited from Beveridge. In short he views it as possible to manage international capitalism for the benefit of the working class.

Ken Livingstone favours a similar mixture of Keynesian economics and social reform mixed in with disgust for Labour's attempts to woo middle England and thereby drive away Labour's old support. He is further concerned that Labour is trying to break the union link, merge with the Lib Dems and silence the rank and file.

The Labour Reform Group sees as its main task the defence of democracy within the party. This it sees as being carried out mainly by attempting to enable Labour Party members to participate more fully in the areas of decision making and the drawing up of policy and moving away from the centralisation of power within an increasingly smaller band centred around the leadership itself. Also part of this process is its aim of ensuring that those in power are more firmly held to account. These purely internal matters are, for them, the main problem with the Labour Party.

They see the Labour Party as having as its central aims ensuring social justice and economic prosperity. They fully accept the new version of Clause 4 as the means to achieve this. They are happy to work in a party that relegates the unions to just one more special interest group within the party, equal to voluntary and community groups for example. In a word they are modernisers who think Blair needs to be kept in check.

They are currently trying to set up a Charter of Rights for Labour Party members frustrated with the centralisation of power. They see the introduction of the major reforms that Blair has brought about, not only the new Clause 4 but also Partnership into Power and One Member One Vote, as being not a problem in themselves but subject to abuse by the leadership.

Their draft charter proposes that these moves away from democracy are reversed.

As John Hurley, in one of their documents, puts it:

"It is clear that since the election a chasm has opened up between the leadership and the party membership. This chasm is not about the modernisation of party structures – few members would really want to return to the era of smoke filled rooms or Militant infiltration – but about how far members can influence the direction of government, through these new structures. The principles of a modern and democratic party are not being observed. Party policy is being made through processes which consult widely, but which are not transparent, allowing policy formulation to be effectively determined by small central elites and imposed on the membership. The selection of representatives is being removed from members and systems of patronage are being established. Timescales for debate are curtailed and no platform is given to alternative views, however well informed. Members have no opportunity to change parts of policy documents which they find unacceptable – policy is offered on an all or nothing basis and alternative options are excluded. The principle of One Member One Vote is being eroded in favour of a system of closed committee rooms that it was supposed to abolish."

In other words, they are operating purely on questions of the internal functioning of the Labour Party and not on the questions of policy, which they explicitly reject as being part of their arena.

Both these loose groupings share the idea that reform can be delivered by better management of capitalism and that the Labour Party can be the vehicle for achieving this.

Linked to both of these is the Centre Left Grassroots Alliance which has, for the past two years stood a slate for the elections to the NEC.

In 1999 their candidates included two of their successful candidates from the 1998 elections, Liz Davies (famously deselected by the Labour Party leadership after being selected to fight the seat of Leeds North East in 1995) and Mark Seddon, the editor of Tribune.

Their election statements had in common a stress on the need to defend internal democracy but policy statements, where there were any, were at best woolly. One of the slate, Bill Butler, for instance, claimed support for "fairer" distribution of power, wealth and resources, a "realistic" minimum wage, "decent" levels of pensions and benefits and "adequate" funding for local government.

We are left to ask: who is to be the judge of what is fair, realistic, decent or adequate?

The Grassroots Alliance came into being as part of a campaign (together with the Labour Reform Group and the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy) to delay (not stop) the implementation of Partnership into Power but found that shoddy treatment by the party bureaucracy meant that they had to maintain their existence further.

The choice of name of Centre Left Alliance is highly significant as they consider it important to elect a left chair and centre co-ordinator so as to ensure balance. They are keen to assert that they do not represent a "party within a party"

What remains on the left of the Labour Party now are groups and individuals still peddling the same old myths that Benn and his like have been peddling for years. They are convinced that the Labour Party is still the vehicle for the transformation of society – if only Blair would moderate his assaults on their abilities to operate within it.

The goal of the left now has changed from the days when Benn and Heffer actually put in some kind of challenge on the leadership, however inadequate, to one of "keeping the party labour" as they put it.

What is needed, though is a strategy that banishes forever the myth that managing capitalism in favour of the working class and one which puts up a real fight against Blair and his policies. In other words a strategy designed to win workers away from a reliance on reformism and win them to revolution.

Where now for the op

The crisis gripping the Milosevic regime in Serbia and the growing opposition to it indicate that the Balkan conflict is not yet over. *Keith Harvey* examines the prospects for the opposition's success and outlines the only progressive solution to the current turmoil.

MORE THAN 150,000 Serbians opposed to President Slobodan Milosevic took to the streets of Belgrade on 19 August in the biggest show of resistance to his regime since 1996. The working class, disillusioned reservists from the war in Kosova and even ex-supporters of the regime are all combining to pose a real challenge to Milosevic's rule.

At the rally in August, opposition groups demanded that Milosevic leave power within a month and vowed to shut down the country with continuous demonstrations on 21 September, with road blockades and a general strike if he does not. "From that day on, there will be no going home," said Vladan Batic, the co-ordinatorof the Alliance for Change.

The aftermath of the war in Serbia has seen a series of mass demonstrations and unrest leading up to the huge protest last month in the country's capital. The bourgeois opposition forces held protest meetings in many towns. They also organised a petition for the resignation of President Milosevic. Disaffected soldiers are demanding unpaid wages.

The war has left the country in ruins. As one western economist put it, "Serbia has been bombed back to the beginning of the century." Serbia's de facto loss of Kosova has enormously discredited the Milosevic regime.

Many workers rightly hold the regime responsible for starting four bloody ethnic wars in the past eight years. The carnage has ended not with the Greater Serbia promised by Milosevic, but with a Serbia and Montenegro smaller than they were at the end of the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, an economy on the verge of collapse and atrocious living conditions for the bulk of the population.

The regime now represents a bloc of those sections of the bureaucracy in the state apparatus desperate to hold onto their position and of significant sections of state enterprise managers and the bourgeoisie – a good part of which has a mafia-like character. The bloc comprises the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), led by Milosevic, and the Yugoslavian United Left (JUL), with Mirjana Markovic, Milosevic's wife, at its head. It has allied itself over the last period with the bourgeois democratic Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and the fascist SRS.

The regime is a classic example of bonapartism where power is centralised in the hands of a "strong man" and a powerful repressive apparatus which appears to stand above society, parties and classes, but in reality rules on behalf of the dominant elite. In this case the elite is a decaying Stalinist bureaucracy and a nascent bourgeoisie both committed to completing the restoration of capitalism in former Yugoslavia.

For a long time the regime had a base inside the working class and the peasantry while the urban middle class became more and more alienated. Today the regime has little base inside society at all.

Serbia was the dominant nation in pre-1991 Yugoslavia. After 1987 this domination increasingly took the form of national oppression after Milosevic came to power. It had most to win by defending and extending this domination and most to lose by the break-up of Yugoslavia. This explains the chauvinist course taken by the Serbian bureaucracy. And this chauvinism has, in turn, resulted in both conflicts and temporary alliances with imperialism, whose interest was, and largely remains, capitalist restoration under conditions of political stability.

THE KOSOVA war, on the one hand, temporarily strengthened the regime because it could claim to be defending the country against Nato, and because it could discredit the bourgeois democratic opposition as "enemies of the fatherland". On the other hand, the war weakened the material underpinnings of the regime because of the massive economic and financial damage inflicted on Serbia. Rising unemployment, no wages for soldiers and workers, little tax income for an ever weaker state apparatus have all directly harmed the regime's electoral base.



Serbian protestors burn pictures of Milosevic

Milosevic's government is now at its weakest since the mass workers' demonstrations of 1987-8. Once open differences inside the state apparatus emerge Milosevic's days in power are numbered. However, the revolutionary potential in today's Serbia is seriously endangered by the relatively weak class independence of the workers and the role of the bourgeois opposition.

The bourgeois democratic forces have little by way of a power base inside the state apparatus. They mainly represent the urban middle classes and draw some support from sections of the working class and the peasantry. Politically they are grouped around the "Alliance for Change", whose prominent leaders are Zoran Djindjic, Dragoslav Avramovic, Milan Panic, Vuk Obradovic and Milo Djukanovic. Djindjic is the leader of the small Democratic Party and played a role in the student protests two and a half years ago. Djukanovic is the president of the small republic of Montenegro and has the regional police force and some popular support behind him.

These leaders are not "genuine democrats" fighting for "freedom" and "liberal-democratic values". Most are former associates of Milosevic who have been purged at one time or other. Avramovic was the chief of the National Bank and implemented an austerity programme for Milosevic between 1993-96; Panic is a US-based millionaire who was Prime Minister of Serbia; Obradovic is an ex-general and Djukanovic was for several years Milosevic's puppet in Montenegro who led a war of plunder against Dubrovnik in Croatia in 1992. Djindjic allied himself with the arch-reactionary, semi-fascist Bosnian-Serbian leader Karadic in an attempt to oust Milosevic. These "democrats" are mainly expelled favourites of the regime they denounce today.

There are differences inside the Alliance over the question of whether – after the resignation of Milosevic – there should be a transitional government (meaning more stability but which would only be possible with the approval of the SPS/JUL) or whether there should immediately be new elections with the risk of further political instability.

Another pole of the opposition is the SPO, led by Vuk Draskovic. This party played an important role in the protests of 1991 and is much better organised nationally. Its main difference with the Alliance for Change revolves around who shall be the main leader and the different tactics toward the regime. The Alliance currently favours a full confrontation with Milosevic and leans wholly on imperialism for support. The SPO wavers between supporting and taking the leadership of the mass protest and seeking a compromise with Milosevic.

In the days before last month's protest in Belgrade Draskovic refused to attend the rally, only relenting on the day when the size of the march exceeded expectations and his non-appearance would have been damaging to the SPO's reputation.

At the moment the SPO urges Milosevic to accept a lower profile position or resign with certain guarantees for him and his family. However, even the SPO seems not to have any significant support inside the state apparatus – particularly the army and the police. But through its temporary co-operation with Milosevic (Draskovic was the Yugoslavian vice-prime minister until April this year and his party still forms a coalition with the SPS, JUL and SRS) it controls the Belgrade city council and the TV station, Studio B. It organised by far the largest opposition demonstrations of recent weeks but has since called a halt to them.

In August a third opposition group was formed, the Movement for a Democratic Serbia, led by General Perisic. Like many figures in the Alliance he is an old Milosevic stalwart, sacked late in 1998 as the army chief of staff for criticising Milosevic's policy in Kosova.

The bourgeois democratic opposition want capitalist restoration but with an orientation to – i.e. dependence on – imperialism and the destruction of the state monopolies. They would also – at least initially – purge the repressive state apparatus since it is full of people deeply hostile to them. But these "democrats" never offered the nationally oppressed people the right of self-determination and even, on occasion, demanded a greater crackdown on the "Albanian terrorists" in Kosova.

MORE POWERFUL than these opposition parties is the fascist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) led by Seselj. As the Serbian presidential elections at the end of 1997 indicated, it has a real power base. It got a majority of votes in the first elections which were then annulled by Milosevic and was just narrowly defeated in the second set, only after massive manipulation. In contrast to the bourgeois democratic forces it has significant roots inside the repressive state apparatus, especially the police.

Seselj threatened to resign from the government after Milosevic agreed to the treaty with Nato which effectively "sold out" Kosova. But the SRS is still in the government waiting for a better opportunity to take power.

There can be no doubt about the fascist character of this party. In towns where it governs it intimidates and expels national minorities. It had armed gangs and militias operating (mainly looting, raping and massacring) in the Bosnian war. A government under Seselj would be a massive threat to the working class and open the way to a full-blown police/military dictatorship.

The SRS stands for a different road to capitalism, one with no reliance on imperialism but rather a future inside a pan-Slavic bloc with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. There can be no doubt that such a regime would have no long, stable life ahead of it since these countries are economically very weak themselves and Serbia would descend into an even deeper economic crisis.

With such a reactionary gaggle of parties vying for power the only way out of the crisis that will benefit the masses is for the working class to strike out on its own road – of class independence and revolutionary socialism. But the obstacles to taking this road are enormous – thanks to the legacy of Stalinism, which atomised the working class and undermined its capacity for independent organisation.

The official Yugoslav trade unions are still tied to the ruling bureaucracy. Their bureaucracy forms an integral and important part of the ruling stratum, the basis of which is a stalled restoration process, thwarting the enterprise managers in their bid to become capitalist owners. This union bureaucracy is not in any sense anti-capitalist. It has done as much as it could to bind the workers to the restorationist goals of the Milosevic regime; it has backed the sacking of workers and prevented the development of a class struggle trade union and political opposition in the enterprises as much as it could. But it is in

position to Milosevic?

temporary conflict with people it views as an immediate threat to its own privileges.

Precisely because of the official unions' role in propping up the regime it is vital to develop tactics to break workers from these organisations. They are not "normal" economic trade union organisations and will be virtually impossible to transform from within. Therefore, the smaller independent trade union movement, Neza Visnost, represents an important step forward towards working class independence despite its economist and pro-market defects.

The progressive potential of Neza Visnost is clear from its role in the economic struggles against non-payment of wages, against sackings and for higher wages. It also spoke out against the national chauvinism of the Milosevic regime, opposed the wars against Croatia, in Bosnia and against the Kosovars. At the same time it opposed the sanctions against Yugoslavia from 1992 onwards and the Nato attacks on Serbia and Montenegro.

Neza Visnost has an estimated membership of around 100,000, but only about a third of these workers still have a job. The problems faced by the union in recovering from the war – which not only hit its members hard but also forced it to a semi-illegal existence – are increased by the fact that, unlike the bourgeois opposition, it does not receive substantial (if any) material support from the trade union movement in western Europe.

With such a reactionary gaggle of parties vying for power the only way out of the crisis that will benefit the masses is for the working class to strike out on its own road – of class independence and revolutionary socialism

BUT THE main weaknesses of the independent trade unions are political. From its very foundation Neza Visnost had a strong "anti-political" bias. In that sense it repeats the weaknesses of the Yugoslavian workers' movement of the 1960s to the 1980s. It regarded the move towards capitalism as inevitable (if not an advance). It was unable to understand the material basis for the reactionary politics of the various fragments of the bureaucracy and the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois forces in Serbia. It characterised these elements as lacking "wisdom" or "democratic will" instead of recognising them as mortal foes of the working class.

It believes that only bourgeois democratic reforms and a regime based on parliamentary institutions can offer a political way forward.

Neza Visnost proved incapable of developing a class standpoint independent from the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois opposition even if the trade union itself was suspicious about their real aims. It had little or no independent profile in the Alliance in the recent demonstrations against Milosevic.

This subordination leaves the independent union politically helpless. Indeed, it alienates militant workers opposed to the opposition because they are opposed to capitalism. It helps bind these workers tighter still to the official unions, the Milosevic regime and could even drive them towards the SRS.

Nevertheless, inside the independent unions there is some suspicion towards the Alliance. This has expressed itself in demands for the formation of a new workers' party based on the unions. This is an absolutely urgent step. All class conscious workers in Neza Visnost should fight for an emergency conference of rank and file delegates of the union and change the union's orientation: end all support for the Alliance and fight for an independent working class party whose programme must start from resistance to a Nato/IMF take-over. It must be a programme for working class power which links the immediate democratic and social demands of the masses with the struggle for working class power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We do not limit our call for a workers' party to Neza Visnost members, albeit in the current circumstances many of the initial members of a genuine proletarian party may come from this source. We also call on the rank and file members of the reformist organisations, unorganised rank and file workers, women's organisations, soldiers and students to form such a party.

The deterioration in the economic situation, especially over the winter, means that the question of food, wages and inflation will continue to provoke dissent and even unrest. However, as elsewhere, the degree of social and economic shock may induce political passivity given the need to adopt survival strategies at a household level. To overcome this the building of a socialist leadership is vital. Such a leadership can, under such conditions, generate mass political unrest focused on issues such the payment of wage arrears, the existence of widespread goods shortages, and known cases of corruption and privilege the elite. It can provide a workers' answer to these manifestations of the crisis and transform the struggle for survival into a political struggle for power.

The bourgeois opposition does not look strong enough at the moment to overthrow the regime, especially given that there are no indications that Nato plans a military attack on Serbia with the goal of directly overthrowing Milosevic. They either have to win the support of a significant section of the repressive state apparatus and the bourgeoisie or they have to win over the mass movements in the southern Serbian cities and of the soldiers. If they do not succeed in either, Milosevic will probably stay in power.

In the present situation revolutionary proletarian policy must start from the necessary and legitimate struggle of the working class against the reactionary Milosevic regime. The present situation offers the best possibility for a proletarian revolution against the Milosevic dictatorship this decade. Workers in Serbia therefore have to fight both against the regime and for the political independence of workers and soldiers from the bourgeois opposition misleaders. Class conscious workers cannot support the imperialist/bourgeois opposition's drive to oust Milosevic and install a pro-imperialist transitional regime.

We support all genuine protests and struggles of workers and soldiers against the regime. We support the mass protests of the soldiers and the workers in the cities like Leskovac. These must be organised and extended nationally.

The Serbian working class must not give political support to the leadership and aims of the Alliance for Change or the SPO. Where they call demonstrations against the government, the trade unions and local factories and offices must participate under their own banners and slogans. We cannot support the Alliance for Change or the SPO's drive to replace the regime with imperialist puppets. Nevertheless, we are opposed to any attempt by the regime to suppress these protests since this will drive the workers even further into the arms of the pro-imperialist opposition forces.

Current events in Serbia in the aftermath of Nato's victory in Kosova, all indicate a maturing pre-revolutionary situation. Any brutal acts of repression by the regime could rapidly turn this into a revolutionary situation. The urgent task faced by the Serbian working class is to create a revolutionary leadership which can offer an alternative to the demoralising spiral of national chauvinism and the take-over of the rump Yugoslavia by US and EU multinationals. The massive strike waves of the late 1980s and the spring of 1991 indicate that the Serb workers are amongst the most militant in the Balkans. But they must build a revolutionary leadership and fight for working class power or their militancy will be betrayed by the opposition groups.

A PROGRAMME OF ACTION FOR THE SERBIAN WORKING CLASS

■ Workers and soldiers must not only protest but also organise themselves on a regular basis in mass action councils. Regular demonstrations should elect delegates for a co-ordination which should formally organise the protests and be accountable and recallable to the masses.

■ Organise action councils made up of delegates of the soldiers' companies and urban protests on a regional and national basis. For an independent co-ordination which does not rely on the bourgeois opposition.

■ Disarm the local police! Arm the people! For armed defence for the demonstrations! Soldiers should distribute their weapons to organised self-defence units of the masses! For a workers' militia to defeat the troops loyal to Milosevic and the armed gangs of Seselj and Arkan!

■ To exorcise the spectre of Great Serbian chauvinism once and for all it is crucial for the mass movement to support the right of national self-determination for all national minorities inside Yugoslavia (Hungarians, Moslems in Sandzak etc.) For unconditional and immediate recognition of the republic of Kosova! No to the continuing repression of the Albanian minority inside Serbia! No ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Kosova!

■ Fight all attacks on democratic rights! For full freedom to assemble, to demonstrate and to publish! Down with state censorship! Employees of papers, state radio and TV and the mass protest movement must put all media under their control!

■ No to any military coup by Milosevic against the Montenegrin government!

■ For an emergency plan of the working class! Milosevic's regime and Nato have ruined the country – now is the time to reorganise the economy and to rebuild the country! For workers' control of all big enterprises! For a public debate on where to put the limited resources of the country!

■ For the immediate expropriation of the Milosevic clan and all the enriched followers of the regime! Nationalise all big enterprises under workers' control!

■ For international trade union solidarity! Build links with the unions in Kosova, Albania, Macedonia, Croatia and Greece! Mutual solidarity for the struggles which are underway at the moment in Greece, Croatia and Serbia!

■ Nato out of Kosova and the whole of the Balkans! Finishing the Milosevic dictatorship is the job of the workers in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosova not the big western powers! Down with all sanctions against Balkan countries!

■ For immediate elections to a Constituent Assembly under the control of mass action councils! Class conscious workers' delegates would fight inside such a Constituent Assembly for a revolutionary workers' government which would introduce a democratically planned economy and a regime of workers' democracy. Such a Constituent Assembly should also debate and agree on the future state of Yugoslavia (centralised, federation or confederation) including the state of Montenegro.

■ Put Milosevic and all leading figures of the police and army in front of a workers' tribunal where both Serbian and Albanian delegates should judge them! Find out all those who were guilty of war crimes in Kosova in the past and put them on trial before workers' tribunals!

■ Overthrow Milosevic but do not replace him with the ex-followers of the regime and today's followers of the Nato killers! For a government based on action councils of workers, peasants and soldiers!

■ For an international workers' campaign to force the imperialists to finance, without any conditions, the rebuilding of Serbia and Kosova! No delays in financing Serbia's reconstruction until Milosevic is removed! Put reconstruction finance into the hands of democratically elected councils of workers, peasants and rank and file soldiers!

■ Down with the reactionary regimes in all Balkan countries who rob their people to enrich themselves and spread national hatred! For workers' and peasant revolutions in the whole of the Balkans! For a voluntary, socialist federation of the Balkans with full equality for all states!

Such a programme will not fall from heaven into the minds of the Serbian working class. It needs to be developed, understood, explained and propagated by a conscious nucleus of revolutionary activists. Building such a revolutionary organisation in Serbia (and in all the other Balkan countries) is of the highest importance today. It is the precondition for building a mass revolutionary workers' party.

There is no escape for Serbia out of the spiral of oppression, exploitation and misery without a mass revolutionary party which can lead a proletarian revolution, establish a workers' state in Serbia and fight for a socialist federation of the Balkans.

workers POWER

WHERE WE STAND

CAPITALISM is an anarchic and crisis-ridden economic system based on production for profit. We are for the expropriation of the capitalist class and the abolition of capitalism. We are for its replacement by socialist production planned to satisfy human need. Only the socialist revolution and the smashing of the capitalist state can achieve this goal. Only the working class, led by a revolutionary vanguard party and organised into workers' councils and workers' militia can lead such a revolution to victory and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. There is no peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism.

THE LABOUR PARTY is not a socialist party. It is a bourgeois workers' party—bourgeois in its politics and its practice, but based on the working class via the trade unions and supported by the mass of workers at the polls. We are for the building of a revolutionary tendency in the Labour Party, in order to win workers within those organisations away from reformism and to the revolutionary party.

THE TRADE UNIONS must be transformed by a rank and file movement to oust the reformist bureaucrats, to democratise the unions and win them to a revolutionary action programme based on a system of transitional demands which serve as a bridge between today's struggles and the socialist revolution. Central to this is the fight for workers' control of production.We are for the building of fighting organisations of the working class—factory committees, industrial unions, councils of action, and workers' defence organisations.

OCTOBER 1917: The Russian revolution established a workers' state. But Stalin destroyed workers' democracy and set about the reactionary and utopian project of building "socialism in one country". In the USSR, and the other degenerate workers' states that were established from above, capitalism was destroyed but the bureaucracy excluded the working class from power, blocking the road to democratic planning and socialism. The parasitic bureaucratic caste has led these states to crisis and destruction. We are for the smashing of bureaucratic tyranny through proletarian political revolution and the establishment of workers' democracy. We oppose the restoration of capitalism and recognise that only workers' revolution can defend the post-capitalist property relations. In times of war we unconditionally defend workers' states against imperialism. Stalinism has consistently betrayed the working class. The Stalinist Communist Parties' strategy of alliances with the bourgeoisie (popular fronts) and their stages theory of revolution have inflicted terrible defeats on the working class world-wide. These parties are reformist.

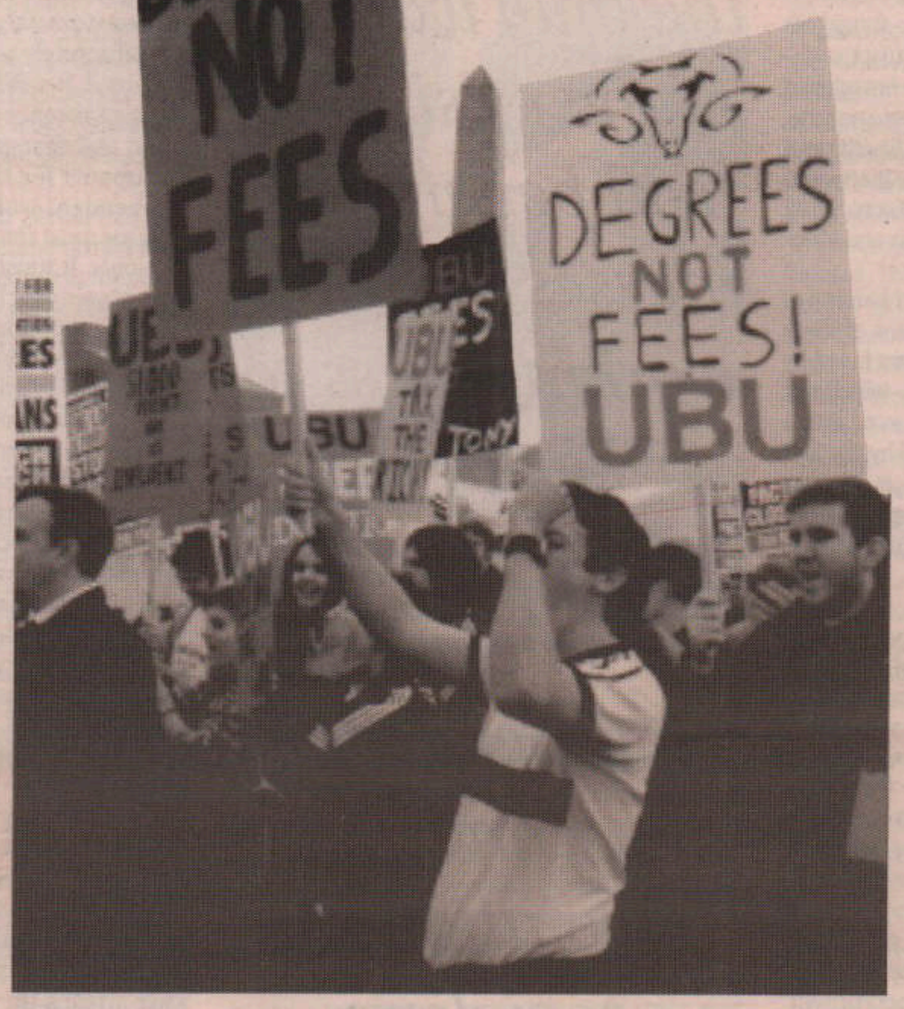
SOCIAL OPPRESSION is an integral feature of capitalism systematically oppressing people on the basis of of race, age, sex, or sexual orientation. We are for the liberation of women and for the building of a working class women's movement, not an "all class" autonomous movement. We are for the liberation of all of the oppressed. We fight racism and fascism. We oppose all immigration controls. We fight for labour movement support for black self-defence against racist and state attacks. We are for no platform for fascists and for driving them out of the unions.

IMPERIALISM is a world system which oppresses nations and prevents economic development in the vast majority of third world countries. We support the struggles of oppressed nationalities or countries against imperialism. We unconditionally support the Irish Republicans fighting to drive British troops out of Ireland. But against the politics of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois nationalists, we fight for permanent revolution–working class leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle under the banner of socialism and internationalism. In conflicts between imperialist countries and semi-colonial countries, we are for the defeat of the imperialist army and the victory of the country oppressed and exploited by imperialism. We are for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of British troops from Ireland. We fight imperialist war not with pacifist pleas but with militant class struggle methods including the forcible disarmament of "our own" bosses.

WORKERS POWER is a revolutionary communist organisation. We base our programme and policies on the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the revolutionary documents of the first four congresses of the Third International and the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International. Workers Power is the British Section of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International. The last revolutionary International (the Fourth) collapsed in the years 1948-51. The LRCI is pledged to fight the centrism of the degenerate fragments of the Fourth International and to refound a Leninist Trotskyist International and build a new world party of socialist revolution. If you are a class conscious fighter against capitalism; if you are an internationalist—join us!

As students return to college to face debt and poor facilities, we say it's time to....

Step up the action



Kick off the new academic year with vigorous and well-organised non-payment campaigns

STUDENTS RETURN to college this month owing £15 million in tuition fees; 10 per cent of last year's tuition fees have still not been paid. And that's before this year's bills have even been drawn up.

The *Times Higher Education Supplement* in July wailed that the non-payment of fees was in danger of becoming an "epidemic" on the scale of the non-payment of the poll tax. Excellent.

Students confronted with three or four years of abject poverty, followed by years of debt, have had enough.

Last year marked a significant rise in student action. Non-payment of tuition fees protests spread across the country – including even Oxford University. In February and March, students at Goldsmith College in south London took the struggle a step further and occupied the administration centre when non-fees paying students were threatened with expulsion. Within seven days, the college vice-chancellor backed down, withdrew the letters and agreed to write to Blair demanding the fees be scrapped.

At the same time, other students, in the University of East London, Camberwell Arts College and elsewhere, used the occupation tactic to fight for improved conditions – more computers, better facilities. By Easter a wave of occupations was on the horizon.

Only the holiday period, the arrival of exams and – importantly – the re-election of Labour's student leader Andrew Pakes as president of the National Union of Students combined to prevent the occupations from spreading.

This year, it won't just be first year students who will be having to pay the fees. Two-thirds of students will be faced with the bills.

About 400,000 new students will start college this month, joining the ranks of nearly two million Higher Education students. The number of students has doubled in the last 20 years – but the Government has slashed its funding per student by more than 40 per cent over the same period. Tony Blair has announced that he wants student numbers to increase by a further half a million by 2002 – but that this expansion has to be "self-financing"!

Britain's bosses increasingly need a more highly educated workforce to design, implement and operate the new technologies. But they have not been prepared to pay for this "modernisation" through increased taxes on their profits and wealth. They want students and working class parents to pay through the introduction of tuition fees and the abolition of the maintenance grant - even though they, the bosses, will benefit!

Blunkett had the nerve, at the time of the introduction of the fees, to claim that this was a pro-working class measure. The fees would only be levelled at middle and upper class families who could afford to pay and so would increase working class participation in higher education. What rubbish!

Students are eligible to pay tuition fees if their parents or partner earn £23,000 a year or more. This is not a high wage and encompasses most families with two working parents. By far the biggest cost for students, however, is their maintenance – rent, travel, clothes, food and, increasingly, books and computers since most colleges spend so little on student resources that it is now impossible to complete a degree without your own PC and library.

The government's own web-site estimates this annual living cost as £4,000. This figure is so unrealistic as to be ridiculous. Rents in Halls of Residence, for example, are £65 a week and rising, quite apart from anything else. But even taking this figure as accurate, a student is facing a debt of £12,000 to £15,000 over a three-year course depending on whether s/he is paying a tuition fee on top.

Again, New Labour claims that this debt will only be called in when the graduate starts earning higher than average wages. Yet the income level for the compulsory repayment of loans is £10,000 a year before tax. At least the government is realistic about the amount of time it will take before the debt is fully repaid – the student loan becomes null and void if it has not been recovered by the time the graduate is 65 years old!

Two things are certain from all this: the number of students who are forced to drop out of their courses for financial reasons will continue to rise; and the number of students taking direct action to fight back against this injustice through rent strikes and demonstrations, lecture boycotts and occupations will also continue to rise. The task facing student militants is to ensure this second trend increases, not the first.

With the experience of last year's struggles behind us, we should kick off the new academic year with vigorous and well-organised non-payment campaigns. Every students' union needs to organise a general meeting in the first week of term to ratify this policy and agree to back it up with strikes and occupations should anyone be victimised for non-payment.

Such action can bring immediate results. It would boost the chances of the new Scottish Parliament voting to kick out the fees. It would make the universities themselves plead with Blair and Blunkett to shelve the fees. It would be the first step in the fight to scrap the loans and bring in a realistic maintenance grant, set at the same level as the minimum wage. That would be a good term's work!

FEEDBACK ■ Contact us on 0181 981 0602

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