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workers POWER

SPECIAL MILLENNIUM

20 PAGE ISSUE

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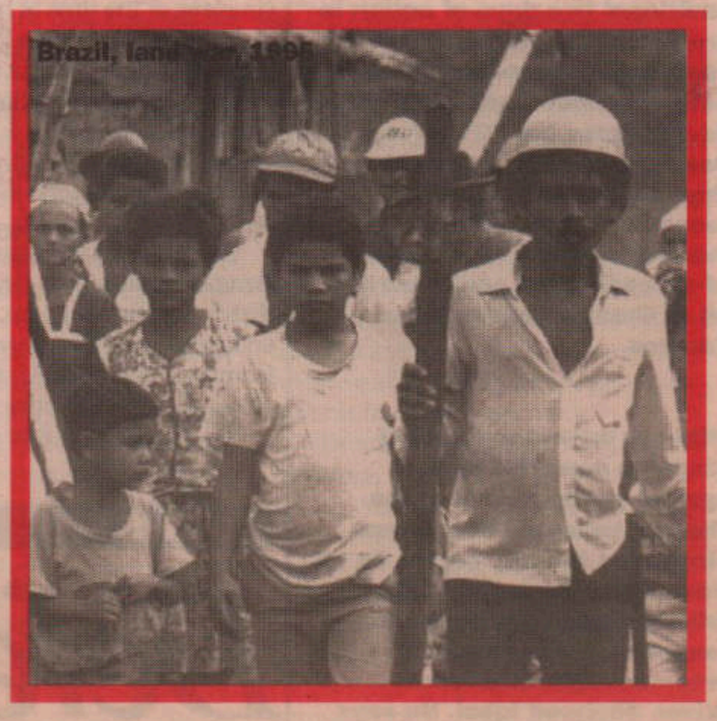
Britain
Miners' strike
1984/5



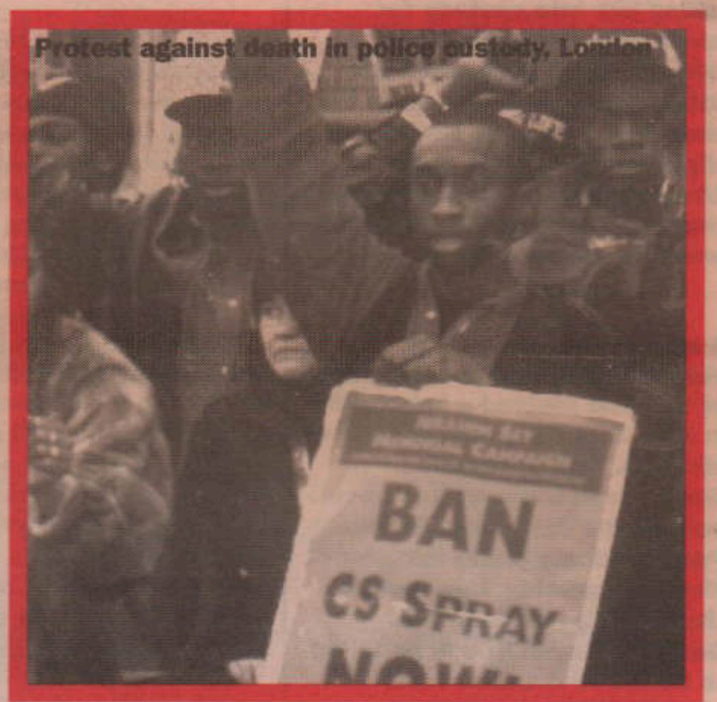
Australia
Dockers' strike
1998


Brazil, land occupation, 1998



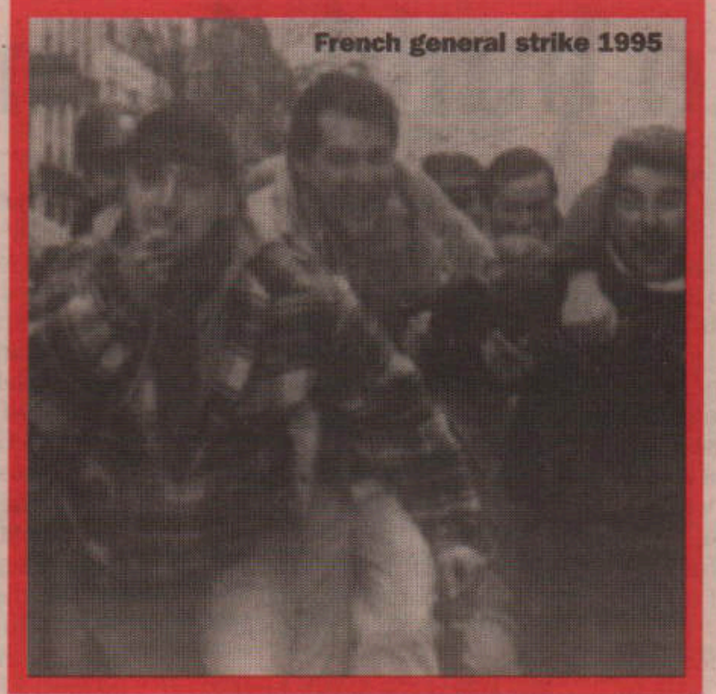
Student demonstration against fees, Britain

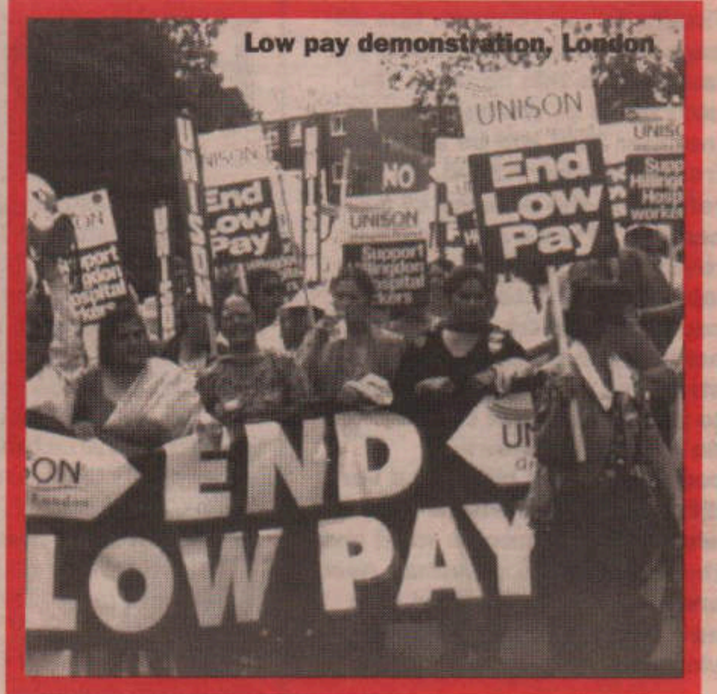
FORWARD TO THE SOCIALIST CENTURY



Protest against death in police custody, London


Indonesia, 1999


French general strike 1995



Low pay demonstration, London

We have a world to win!

IN BRIEF

After years of cuts in real pay and increases in working hours bus workers in Greater London are fighting back against bosses at a number of the privatised companies. The biggest struggle so far is Centre West with garages scattered across several West London boroughs and in Orpington, Kent. In November some 2,000 TGWU members staged two highly effective strikes in pursuit a half-decent pay rise. There was an unofficial walkout by drivers at the Westbourne garage in October, while workers at the Orpington site staged an additional two days of action in protest at the victimisation of a co-worker. Centre West bosses have responded with a threat to de-recognise the TGWU from 3 December. If this proves more than a bluff, workers must respond with an all-out, indefinite strike, with the aim of spreading the action across all of Greater London's bus garages.

Mini-cab drivers in Reading staged a powerful protest against police racism in the Thames Valley as 300 drivers blockaded the city centre on 26 November. The mainly Asian drivers staged the action in response to the arrest the previous night of a fellow driver, Shaheed Iqbal. He says that police assaulted him after taking him into custody for minor motoring offences. The drivers fought back when the police waded in to break up the blockade. Five cops sustained slight injuries, while eight drivers were arrested. Drop the charges; suspend the cops who arrested Shaheed Iqbal.

A small blow for equality. Voters in the rural constituency of Wairapa elected a Labour MP in New Zealand's recent general election. This is notable in itself, given the seat had been held by the right-wing National Party's deputy prime minister. More remarkable, however, is the winning candidate, Ms Georgina Beyer. She is believed to be the first transsexual elected to any parliament.

Finally, to our readers: this 20-page millennium special is our last edition this century. The next issue of Workers Power (number 240) will be available from 1 February 2000. As we reflect on the passing of a century of wars and revolutions, of tragedies and injustices inflicted by capitalism, of triumphs achieved through the masses' struggles, we also look forward to the twenty-first century. We do so with a renewed commitment to building a very different future where the eradication of human want and the satisfaction of human need are paramount. Forward to a new century of revolutionary victories.

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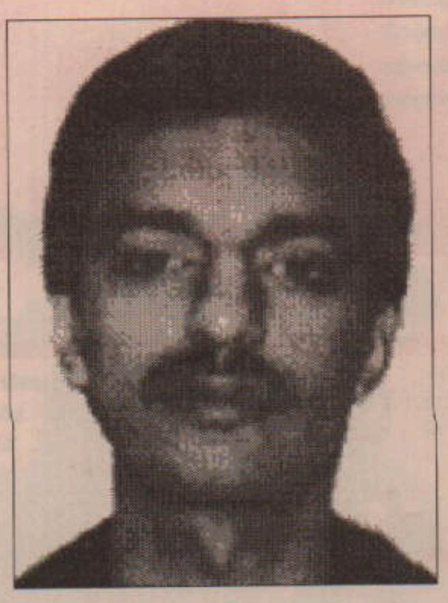
RACIST FRAME-UP

Free Satpal Ram

"IT IS a national disgrace – the worst example of injustice and racism." These were the words of solicitor Gareth Peirce, best-known for her dedicated work that eventually gained the release of the Birmingham Six. She is referring here to the case of Satpal Ram.

Satpal has now spent 13 years in British prisons for an act of self-defence. Nineteen at the time of his conviction, he is now 32. As Gareth Peirce put it at a mid-November House of Commons' meeting in support of Satpal's application to the Parole Board: "He has been wrongly convicted and effectively destroyed by everyone in the legal system."

Satpal's ordeal began in 1986 in a Bengali restaurant in the Handsworth district of Birmingham. After he had endured several minutes of verbal abuse from an adjacent table, a racist drunk physically attacked him.



His attacker was four stone heavier, several inches taller and wielded a broken bottle. Satpal, fearing for his life, defended himself with a knife from his workplace.

Both Satpal and the thug who attacked him went to hospital. The assailant subsequently died, after pulling a drip from his arm and discharging himself.

Incredibly, the incompetent solicitor allotted to Satpal wrongly advised that he could not make a plea of self-defence. Eventually, he was found guilty of murder and received a 10-year sentence.

But Satpal has suffered at least three additional years of imprisonment – simply because he has always protested his innocence and resisted the brutal treatment meted out to him. This has included spells in solitary confinement, as well as racist abuse – both verbal and physical. To date, the prison authorities have transferred him more than 50 times.

The scandal of this man's brutal incarceration must not be allowed to continue. Satpal's fight for freedom has gained widespread support throughout the West Midlands and amongst anti-racist campaigners nationally. But so far New Labour has proved every bit as impervious as the Tories.

Now a renewed campaign for his release is lobbying MPs and publicising this racist miscarriage of justice, with the help of both Gareth Peirce and the Lawrence family's solicitor, Imran Khan. The band Asian Dub Foundation has donated time and money to the campaign. They recently joined with members of Primal Scream for a highly successful Central London campaign benefit.

These developments offer a renewed chance for workers and youth to take up the case in unions, schools and colleges. Fighting Satpal's case can also help stop others facing a similar fate.

■ For further information contact:
Free Satpal Ram Campaign
101 Villa Road, Handsworth,
Birmingham B19 1NH
website: www.ncadc.demon.co.uk

COURTS

Defend the jury system

DURING HIS stint as Home Secretary Jack Straw has been hell-bent to show that he can crack down harder on crime and dissent than any Tory predecessor. Not content with increasing police budgets and powers, privatising more jails and licensing MI5 to target environmental campaigners, he now is out to erode the fundamental right to trial by jury.

Straw wants to stop defendants in a wide range of cases from electing for a jury trial. In short, he wants to restrict a right first conceded in the Magna Carta. At present, only a proportion of criminal cases which carry the possibility of custodial sentences automatically go to magistrates. More serious cases go to the Crown Court where they are heard before a judge and jury. In so-called "middle-ranking" cases, including many assault, theft and some drug possession charges, defendants have a choice.

Not surprisingly, many opt for Crown Court, despite the danger of a higher tariff if convicted, for the simple reason that juries are fairer than magistrates.

Magistrates tend to be older, white and middle class. Defendants, of course, are largely young and working class and, very disproportionately, black. In other words, they come from society's most oppressed sections that routinely get picked on by the police.

For all its weaknesses, the jury system means that the state has to prove its case to at least ten out of twelve ordinary men and women. Juries are more likely than magistrates to disbelieve the police, and view with scepticism the claims of CPS barristers. Black defendants have a consistently better chance of acquittal in front of a jury.

Responding to Straw's announcement, a Bar Council spokesperson called on Straw to "reflect on government research which shows that black Britons don't trust the overwhelmingly white magistracy."

Straw, however, insists that magistrates themselves can be trusted to decide if a case can go to Crown Court. They will be allowed to take into account the defendant's background and the likely "effect of a conviction on his or her reputation". In other words, the magistrates will have the green light to exercise their class bias still further.

Straw's pathetic defence for pursuing policies he once opposed as shadow home secretary relies on supposed savings to the taxpayer of £105 million and the claim that defendants are clogging up the system by opting for Crown Court. In fact, this measure is far more likely to unleash a torrent of appeals against convictions by magistrates, cancelling out his hypothetical savings.

He has also got his sums wrong in asserting that 24,000 defendants went for jury trials. The most recent figure is 18,000 – a 50 per cent fall since the Tories last attacked this right in 1993.

Civil liberties groups, anti-racist organisations and the Law Society are all opposing the moves. But it is vitally important that the labour movement recognises what it at stake and acts accordingly. It is working class people who will suffer if Straw succeeds in clawing back a right that has existed for nearly 800 years in England.

N30

How to build the movement

THE LATEST gathering of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle, Washington was the focus of international protest. Bill Clinton has rightly said that many see the WTO as "some rich guys' club". Too true.

This body of global bosses and politicians has since 1995 sought to ensure that international exchange delivers ever higher profits to multinational corporations, based mainly in the western world (see *Workers Power* 238).

The protesters against the WTO come from a range of political organisations.

At one extreme of this spectrum stand "deep ecologists", who seem to regard humanity itself as the main enemy, and whose ranks include self-styled philosophers with views not far removed from the vilest elements of Nazi ideology.

In general, they advocate strict immigration controls and some have even welcomed the spread of AIDS as an effective means of reducing a human population that they see as too large. Thankfully, they made up a small fraction of the numbers gathered in Seattle, but it is vital to expose the essentially racist and anti-human character of their politics. Such dangerous, thoroughly reactionary cranks should be driven out of the movement.

At the same time, the Seattle events attracted trade unionists, campaigners against Third World debt and greens who recognise that the real enemy of the environment, both human and natural, is multinational capital, not the impoverished masses of Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa.

The apex of the Seattle protests on the last day of November, re-dubbed "N30", swiftly became an international symbol of deep discontent with capitalism in the closing days of the twentieth century.

A host of activities were staged in major cities around the globe. In London the focus for anger was the abysmal and still worsening state of public transport, both in the capital and in Britain as a whole.

In the wake of the Paddington rail disaster and with the Blairites absolutely determined to turn over chunks of the London tube network to the corporate killers at Railtrack, Euston station seemed the right place for the "N30" protest in London.

The bosses' media, rather than address the issues, sought to create a panic about riots. The hysterical press coverage suggested that the bosses actually fear the forging of a new alliance prepared to take militant action both to highlight the transport crisis and to put forward a progressive solution. The growth of links between groupings such as Reclaim the Streets and trade unionists working on the tube and elsewhere is a welcome development. With May Day 2000 as the next major date on the calendar for the activists gathered around this lobse "movement against capitalism", there is the real possibility of fusing youth anger with the workplace muscle of key sections of trade unionists.

There is more than one way to bring the City to a halt and there are few better ways to hit London's big bosses than with a solid strike across the transport network. May Day 2000 must be seized on as a great opportunity to build a new fighting alliance.

Transport should be a major focus but such an alliance must also appeal to other public sector workers in the NHS, for example. They face the prospect of both backdoor privatisation and direct experience of the WTO's tender mercies as multinational healthcare corporations seize on PFI as a way of buying hospitals in Britain.

If real, effective links are developed with what remains a large and potentially powerful organised working class, the movement associated with J18 and N30 need not remain an expression of protest at the awful way things are, but can become a force for really changing them.

AGRIBUSINESS BY JENNY SCOTT

Profit poisons the food chain

WE ARE what we eat. If this old saying is true then we need to be afraid, very afraid.

The weekly supermarket shop may not be the nourishing goodie basket suggested by the television adverts. Food produced under capitalism, and taken for granted by millions of consumers, frequently poses real health risks. GM foods are not the only rotten fruit.

In the last 15 years cases of food poisoning have risen by 600 per cent. These are government figures. The actual incidence of food poisoning is probably much higher because most people with mild cases don't bother going to their GP.

Food production is dominated by a combination of huge corporations, like Nestlé and Northern Foods, big farms run by landowners like the Duke of Westminster and retail giants like Sainsbury and Tesco. Linked to these enterprises are the big chemical companies, the animal feed producers and, of course, outfits developing GMOs, like Monsanto. Together these concerns constitute an extremely powerful capitalist conglomerate – agribusiness, which in Britain accounts for 8.8 per cent of total GDP and employs over 11 per cent of the workforce.

Agribusiness is concerned with profit. Food safety, nutrition and quality are of scant concern to these capitalists. The cutting edge of their huge combine profit harvester is intensive farming – or "conventional" as opposed to "organic" farming in the industry's vocabulary.

The "conventions" they are talking about are recent – 50 years old, in fact. They involve abandoning crop rotation in favour of more chemicals, pesticides, antibiotics and growth promoters. Crops are boosted, herds are increased, animals are grown abnormally quickly and supermarket shelves heave with the end products, all uniform and neatly wrapped in cellophane supplied by their friends in the agrichemical sector.

Not all of the developments in intensive farming and the food processing industry that it spawned are negative or, rather need not be negative. Increased yields could, in a rational world, be made safe for consumers – through stringent regulation – and could be distributed on the basis of real need to alleviate starvation world-wide. But neither of these things are happening, quite simply because the market – capitalism's golden calf – will not and cannot allow them to happen. Both would undermine profit.

For example, effective regulation of food production could ensure that chemical residues are eliminated prior to distribution. This would be costly, but enitrely worth it in terms of safety. Faced with this choice, agribusiness chooses profit. In 1996 pesticide residues were found in a staggering 41 per cent of all fruits and vegetables analysed in a safety survey.

Effective regulation of the meat industry could have prevented the BSE crisis. It could have banned the introduction of animal matter into the feed stocks for vegetarian cattle. Instead, in 1980, the Tory government – with several leading members among the big players in the agribusiness – handed regulation over to the beef industry. The agriculture ministry announced:

"New proposals reflect the wish of ministers that in the present economic climate the industry itself should determine how best to produce a high quality product."

The result was the BSE epidemic, the death of people through CJD and the beef wars of the 1990s. As the *Guardian* put it in 1996:

"The lives of thousands appear to have been put at risk to prevent financial harm to a powerful lobby, the farming and food industries."

The focus on beef should not deflect attention from the problems of intensive farming in other sectors. Salmon farming in Scotland has resulted in a fish-flu epidemic that has infected wild fish in surrounding seas. Battery-farmed chickens – bred for meat and eggs – have led directly to an increase in incidents of salmonella poisoning in people.

The representatives of agribusiness – like the Meat and Livestock Commission and the National Farmers' Union (NFU) – have waged a three-pronged defence of their industry, demanding:

- less regulation, not more – so resisting the right of the government regulation body, the Meat Hygiene Service, set up last summer as part of the Food Standards Agency, to inspect abattoirs on the grounds of extra cost
- increased compensation from the government and the EU for any financial ill effects caused by health scares – the salmon farmers got £9 million from the taxpayer to compensate for the flu epidemic; the beef industry received billions for the BSE crisis
- consumers "buy British"; the NFU has been at the forefront of a profoundly chauvinist campaign to promote sales of British produce and impose trade barriers against food from abroad.

The NFU, backed by the Tories and the right-wing tabloids, justify each reactionary demand by banging on about the "farming crisis" in Britain. A recent banner headline in a the *Daily Express* read: "Farmer's suicide shames Britain". An NFU press release on the eve of the WTO meeting declared: "Many producers rightly feel extremely worried that while their production costs increase to meet the new regulatory demands, they will see their industry sacrificed as cheaper imports flood in which are produced to lower standards than in the UK."

Now, while it is true that the fall in pig, cattle, wheat and sheep prices have contributed to a 74 per cent drop in farming income over the last two years, and many small farmers have endured terrible privations, the agri-capitalists are hardly having to take their Range Rovers to the pawn shops. They are, in fact, one of the most protected sections of the capitalist class.

These people take their little pigs to market confident that they will be richly rewarded during any lean periods. In Britain in 1996 the farming industry – the big farmers – received £4,414 million in direct government assistance and a further £3,169 million from the EU's notorious Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) fund.

They are paid to "set-aside" land – that is, they are paid not to produce anything (so as to reduce the EU's food mountains). The Earl of Iveagh (an heir to the Guinness empire) gets a £1 million subsidy anually from the EU for not growing anything on his Suffolk estate. Viscount Cranbourne gets £41,000 a year for not cutting down trees on his land in Dorset.

Big farmers and the other components of agribusiness are cushioned from the effects of the farming crisis. The agricultural workforce and small farmers are not so lucky. If consumers are the victims of illness as a result of unregulated food production, the agricultural workers are the victims of agribusiness' ruthless pursuit of food for profit.

The NFU, and its allies like the Countryside Alliance – a Tory and toff-front organisation – are against the minimum wage. As the Alliance states:

"Plans to introduce a statutory minimum wage will have a severe effect on many small rural businesses."

In 1997 average wages in production stood at £334.90 before tax; for agricultural workers it was £248.40 (men) and £174.30 (women). This is poverty pay for a workforce whose average working week is 48 hours (52.8 for dairy workers).

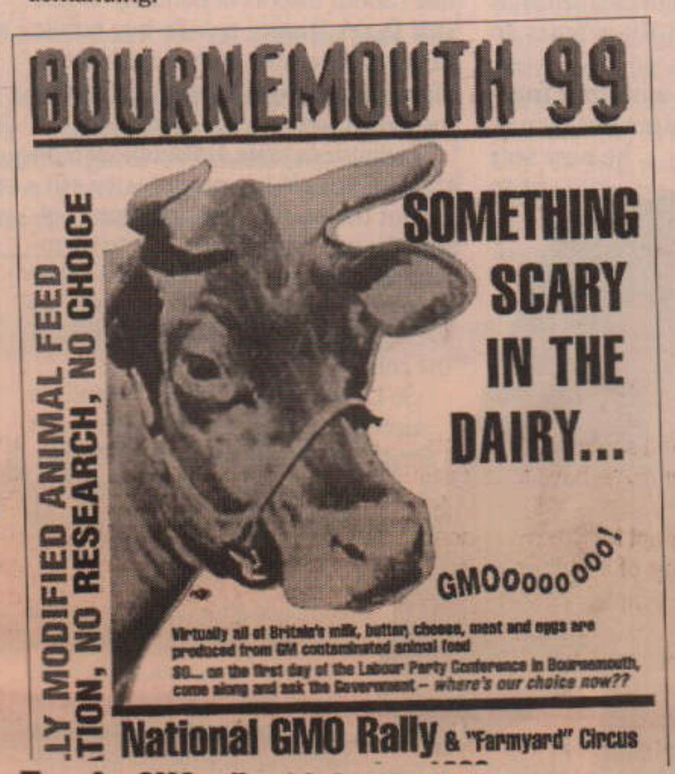
Nor has low pay saved jobs, as the NFU likes to claim. The workforce was cut by 27 per cent between 1987 and 1997.

And these workers bear the brunt of agribusiness' unsafe practices. Working in agriculture is literally, a killer. In 1997 63 workers died in accidents, the average annual rate is 55. Workers are also at risk from pesticides, especially the use of organophosphates (which Labour has refused to ban). These pesticides have been known to be poisoning agricultural workers since the 1960s.

Furthermore, rural workers and the rural poor face lousy services – no buses, no nurseries, few schools and few doctors. Not a penny of the lavish subsidies handed out to the big landowners goes towards meeting these needs.

The answer to the farming crisis, therefore, has nothing to do with the NFU's demands. It must start from the needs of agricultural workers and working class consumers. Regulation by the government is useless without the means of enforcing it. Tinkering with the food chain will not make it safe. And compensating farmers while leaving farmworkers to rot is a scandal.

The answer has to centre on the nationalisation of the land and the organisation of farming on a new, regulated and safe basis that can help feed not only Britain but the world's starving poor. It means nationalising all food production and processing, with no compensation and under workers' control, and it means establishing a national scientific institution funded by taxing the rich and with full independence from both the government and agribusiness to monitor all aspects of food development and safety.



Flyer for GMO rally at Labour's conference

This land is my land

THE BIGGEST demonstration so far under the Labour government was the March 1998 Countryside Alliance march. The biggest lobbies of the Labour conference have been mounted by the NFU. What are these organisations?

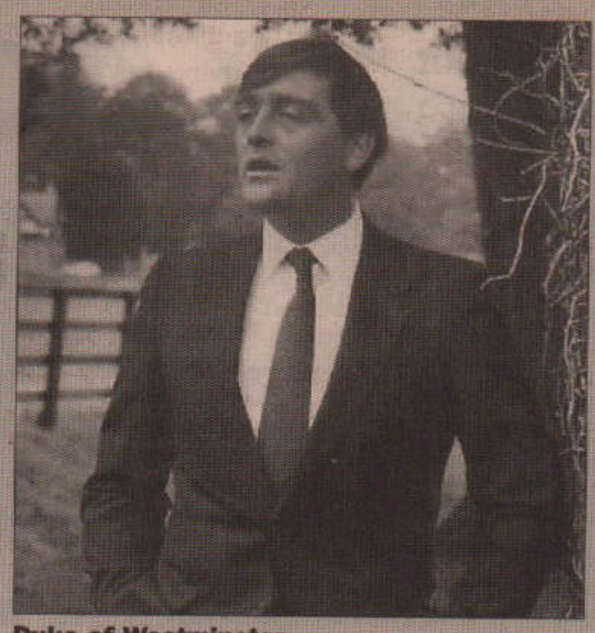
They are the front organisations for rich and powerful capitalists, people in the vanguard of the Tory right. They are opposed to every progressive measure governments take, whether on food safety, social improvement or environmental protection. They are opposed to:

- **public access to the countryside ("the right to roam")**
- **public housing in rural areas**
- **any payment of rates on privately owned land**
- **the minimum wage**
- **food safety regulators**
- **pesticide taxes.**

The Countryside Alliance – chair John Jackson, also chair of the Ladbroke Group betting empire – is a Tory outfit, dominated by big landowners like the Dukes of Westminster and Devonshire. It was formed by a merger of the British Field Sports Society, the Countryside Business Group and the Countryside Movement.

Its march, and subsequent activities, have nothing whatsoever to do with the farming crisis. It is purely and simply a pro-fox hunting lobby.

It has close links with the Tory Party (its former chair was the Tory MP for Wimbledon) and, as the *Telegraph* inadvertently noted in an article praising it, it represented "the power of landed interest in politics".


Duke of Westminster

It has close links with the NFU. This outfit has the word union in its title, but it is no such thing. It has an annual income of £16.6 million, plus profits from its Mutual Insurance Company, the main insurance agency in the countryside.

As its own publicity states it exists "to promote the interests of . . . farming businesses" (note, not farm workers, or even farmers), and its "links with the multiple retailing sector [the supermarkets] are extremely good." Its membership categories are "farming, rural, professional and corporate".

In a word, it is a bosses' association. It works closely with the Country Landowners Association (CLA), the "only organisation completely dedicated to the interests of private landowners and rural businesses". Just like the Countryside Alliance and NFU, the CLA is against food safety regulation, specifically the Meat Hygiene Service. In classic Tory speak it demands that landowners be entrusted to run the countryside, so the government must "keep the legislative framework to a minimum". On the other hand these "natural guardians" of the countryside are not shy in demanding that they get taxpayers' money in return for their stewardship of the land:

"Landowners should obtain full tax relief for the burden of expenditure incurred by them to meet society's obligations (e.g. expenditure on the environment, conservation expenditure and expenditure on the provision of access)."

All of these outfits – uniting aristocrat and bourgeois in defence of a rural England that they own (66.2 per cent of all land in England is privately owned) – share a hatred of the working class, a reactionary disdain for the environment and a wanton disregard for food safety and public health.

Next time they come to town we should greet this green-booted rabble with a defiant demonstration of urban working class solidarity with our rural brothers and sisters, and we should demand the TGWU and TUC pay for and organise this response.

LONDON MAYOR

Back Livingstone

PART FARCE, part soap opera, the race to become the first elected mayor of Europe's biggest city has entered a new stage. After a lengthy delay New Labour's vetting panel finally allowed Ken Livingstone's name go to on the ballot, with its outcome to be decided by the party's carefully fashioned electoral college.

Within forty-eight hours of the resolution of the fiasco surrounding Livingstone's candidacy, a rather large skeleton walked out of Jeffrey Archer's none too fragrant cupboard and on to the front pages, so putting an end to his brief spell as the Tory candidate (see box).

Tony Blair and his chief lieutenants had hoped to repeat in Greater London their dubious feat in the Welsh Labour Party where the anti-democratic abuse of the trade union block vote had enabled them to foist the Blairite stooge, Alun Michael, on a party membership that overwhelmingly preferred Rhodri Morgan. They soon realised that they had miscalculated badly as their reluctant standard-bearer, Frank Dobson, lagged behind not only Livingstone but also the supposed no-hoper, Glenda Jackson, in three opinion polls.

In the meantime the Millbank-orchestrated Dobson campaign stumbled from blunder to blunder, alienating many constituency party members who are now much more likely to vote for Livingstone in response to a laughable combination of chicanery and incompetence.

Over the space of a fortnight it emerged that Dobson's camp had:

- exclusive access to the names and addresses of some 69,000 individual party members
- spent nearly £19,000 on posting letters to party members that included the suggestion that Livingstone enjoyed the backing of Jeffrey Archer, ex-Tory minister John Gummer, and "Socialist Organiser", a group that ceased to exist in the early 1990s
- called hundreds of party members on their home numbers and
- made use of offices provided by spinmaster Matthew Freud, better known for retailing the fabricated romance of the two Gingers (Spice and Evans).

On 25 November news broke that Dobson's backers were urgently seeking to lift the ceiling on campaign spending above the current £69,000. This move comes after the party machinery had already extended the ballot period to 16 February in the hope that more time will enable their man to close the gap.

To date Dobson has avoided head-to-head confrontation with Livingstone beyond the confines of a television studio. On 16 November as hundreds of trade unionists and party members attended a debate on public transport in London, sponsored by the three rail unions, Dobson claimed that he had a long-standing engagement with constituency party members and supporters. The venue was a Bloomsbury pub, barely 10-minutes walk from the venue for the debate, where Dobson had left Glenda Jackson to carry the can for the government's tube privatisation plans.

New Labour spinners have already begun slinging the mud at Livingstone. Michael Cashman, a Blairite MEP and member of the party's national executive, penned a deceitful letter to *The Guardian*, where he accused Livingstone's gesture politics at the GLC of bearing ultimate responsibility for the introduction of the homophobic Section 28.

Unfortunately for Cashman, the Livingstone-led Greater London Council (GLC) had been abolished by the Tories two years before one of their backbenchers introduced the notorious legislation.

The whole exchange throws interesting light on how out of touch New Labour is with London workers. While New Labourites like Cashman remember the 1980s as "the dark days of the GLC" Londoners look back and see the genuine, if partial, improvements the GLC made to local services.

Blair himself wasted no time joining the lie parade. He told the Observer, that "when New York City produced bonds for the subway, the City went bankrupt." But New York City never issued any bonds for its subway. Instead, the bonds scheme was developed by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, a state agency, that only emerged six years after the worst of New York City's fiscal crisis in 1975.



The next few weeks will undoubtedly see every lie printed against Livingstone and the GLC in the 1980s regurgitated as gospel by one or another New Labour acolyte.

On its own all this may seem an attractive enough reason to vote for Ken Livingstone. But those socialists still in the Labour Party and in Labour-affiliated unions must go beyond simply fighting for a Livingstone victory in the electoral college. On the one hand, it is vital to relate to the widespread illusions that large sections of London's working class have in "Red Ken" as a champion of their interests. But we must also seize this opportunity to insist that Livingstone immediately halts his endless retreats on policy and to place our own demands on the man Blair fears so much.

Livingstone is not to be trusted – and not just because he now sees fit to dine alongside City bankers. Close scrutiny of his record at the GLC would also reveal that he repeatedly shied away from a head-on battle with the Thatcher government, whether over "Fares Fair" or the abolition of the GLC, where he relied on a combination of publicity stunts and legalistic appeals to the House of Lords.

Despite his enduring "red" reputation he is a clever career politician, committed to his own survival as a Labour MP. There is still considerable uncertainty as to what concessions he made to placate the vetting panel. Certainly, there have been warning signs. Livingstone has repeatedly offered a deputy's post to Glenda Jackson, unabashed proponent of tube privatisation. In a recent article for *Labour Left Briefing*, he again insisted that "Glenda Jackson and Frank Dobson would make fine Labour mayors of London." Worse still Derek Draper, a wide-boy public relations operator with close links to Mandelson, now has a job in the Livingstone camp.

Livingstone's fate depends heavily on the unions. If he manages to surmount the hurdle of the electoral college, he will owe a great deal to members of Unison, the TGWU and other unions who will have secured him an overwhelming majority in their third of the college.

So Livingstone is obliged to lend his support to actual union struggles such as the Skychef workers' fight for reinstatement at Heathrow. An embarrassed Dobson added his name to those calling for a boycott of Lufthansa, Skychef's parent company after Livingstone had joined picket lines and received speaking invitations from the strikers.

Livingstone has repeatedly appeared at tubeworkers' rallies against privatisation and joined demonstrations in support of a predominantly Asian workforce at Pricecheck convenience shops trying to force their sweatshop employer to recognise the TGWU.

Between now and mid-February it is crucial to push for union-organised hustings of the Labour candidates, and to maximise the vote for Livingstone in affiliated unions. Far stiffer pressure must be applied to the arrogant bureaucrats of the AEEU and the shopworkers' union, USDAW, who have denied their members a vote in the selection. And in the Labour Party resolutions should be sent to the NEC condemning the disenfranchisement of the RMT, Aslef, MSF and BECTU on the grounds that they were behind with their financial payments. These unions should be reinstated and allowed to vote in the electoral college.

We must demand Livingstone's presence on picket lines and any demonstrations against benefits cuts, police brutality, deportations and the asylum legislation. We must fight to prevent any retreat on Livingstone's pledge to stop the privatisation of the tube and call on him to support a range of policies that will never appear in the Millbank-devised manifesto including:

- A steeply progressive wealth tax and swingeing taxes on big business
- The return to public ownership of all aspects of London Transport without compensation to the privateers
- The abolition of all PFI/Best Value/Education Action Schemes
- For a massive programme to confiscate empty private properties and build new social housing across London
- Sacking of Metropolitan Police officers guilty of racism; prosecution for those involved in deaths in custody and disarming the police - no CS gas, guns or truncheons.

Archer's downfall: sleazy does it

WE MAY never know whether Ted Harris, Lord Jeffrey Archer's 66-year-old friend, desperately needed to top up his state pension when he decided to sell his story of Archer's efforts to pervert the course of justice to the *News of the World*. Perhaps Harris' go-between, the ubiquitous Max Clifford, is a New Labour operative.

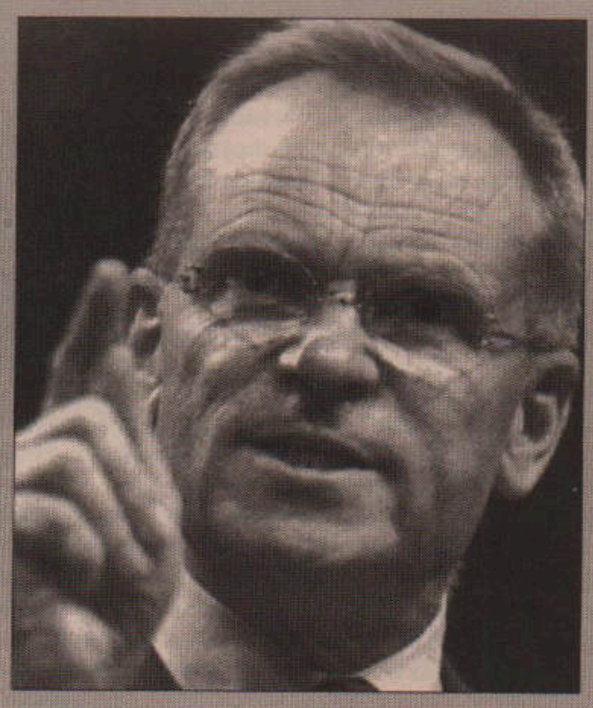
Whatever the motive, Harris' tale of being asked to lie about a September 1986 dining engagement during Archer's libel suit against the *Daily Star* soon sank his lordship's mayoral campaign.

In the event, the pathetic Archer was evidently seeking to conceal from his wife an ongoing liaison with his then secretary, rather than any sexual involvement with Monica Coughlan, the prostitute who had sold her story to the *Star*.

As a result of Archer's downfall, William Hague also emerged as a prat yet again. Less than six weeks before, the Tory leader used the party conference to declare his absolute confidence in Archer's "probity and integrity". This assertion coincided with an investigation of Archer's dubious share dealings in Anglia television.

Perversely, the lying lord's withdrawal may benefit the Tories' mayoral campaign. If Stephen Norris, despite his own complicated sex life, should ultimately become the Conservative candidate, he is sure to prove a more formidable foe than Archer. Tony Blair might even be tempted to back him against Livingstone.

But coming in a week when the ex-Tory MP Neil Hamilton was doing battle in a libel suit with Mohammed al-Fayed and there were new allegations about dodgy donations by the Tories' expatriate treasurer, Michael Ashcroft, the Archer affair showed that for all the best efforts of such new Labour figures as Derek Draper, Geoffrey Robertson and Peter Mandelson, when it comes to sleaze the Tories still do it (slightly) better.



It is easy to make fun of this farcical cavalcade. But there is a serious message: Britain is a country where politicians can get away with anything because there is no real democratic accountability and scrutiny. Even the USA has a better system for stopping routine corruption in government than Britain. Ultimately, the reason for all political corruption is that the state remains, as Lenin said "a committee for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie".

The whole system, from the corporate hospitality boxes at Twickenham, through the government procurement contracts to the backstage deals done at trade fairs and via the honours system, is designed to formalise corruption. Occasionally a few get very greedy and overstep the mark - but the system does everything to protect them.

Whether it's Labour or Tory in power, the temptations are great and the prizes spectacular. Archer got caught. So did Peter Mandelson - but because Labour is content to carry on stripping away even the minimal open-ness and accountability within the system, Archer goes down in disgrace, while Mandelson becomes Northern Ireland minister.

While the liberals of the *Guardian* dream of a bright new constitution that would prevent merchants of falsehood and sleaze like Archer from hiding behind corruption and the libel laws we have a different solution: smash capitalism - the real cause of all the dodgy dealing in government.

UNISON

Vote for Bannister

THE CONTEST to succeed Rodney Bickerstaffe as general secretary of Europe's biggest union, Unison, looks set to be a three-way race. Dave Prentis, the New Labour candidate, will face Roger Bannister of the union's left wing and Peter Hunter, the candidate of the reactionary right wing.

Hunter calls for disaffiliating Unison from the Labour Party, for right wing reasons. Hunter aggressively opposes abortion rights and wants to dismantle Unison's self-organised groups for women, black, lesbian and gay, and disabled members.

But Hunter is not the main enemy of Unison members in this contest. Dave Prentis is. The current deputy general secretary is New Labour's chosen candidate in this race and has the whole of Unison's bureaucratic machinery behind him.

Once confirmed as the NEC's choice, he did not have to seek a single branch nomination. In contrast, Roger Bannister gained 61 branch nominations and the overwhelming support of Unison's Greater London regional council. Bannister stood for general secretary in 1995 and gained just under 20 per cent of the vote.

Prentis is a time-serving head office bureaucrat. He lacks the charisma of Bickerstaffe as well as the latter's residual credibility as a campaigner for the low-paid. If he wins Prentis will simply carry on with mild rhetorical criticisms of the government, while doing nothing effective to challenge New Labour's attacks on public sector workers.

The union leadership has already pulled the plug on a strike ballot among NHS ancillary and domestic workers. This is a clear indication that the leadership does not want a whiff of struggle against new Labour's restraints on public sector pay in the run-up to the election. In fact, it is far more committed to pursuing vicious witch-hunts against left-wing activists (see box) and left-dominated branches such as Birmingham and Sheffield. Both remain suspended.

Bannister's record is by no means perfect, but he does embody a tradition of struggle at branch level and is standing on a genuine class struggle programme. Workers Power supporters in Unison, around the bulletin *Well Red*, will fight hard for a Bannister victory between now and the close of the ballot on 18 February.

WE FIGHT FOR:

- **Build the union – for a massive recruitment drive targeting young workers on temporary contracts and from agencies**
- **Scrap the anti-union laws, defy them whenever necessary**
- **Kick out the privateers: industrial action to halt PFI, Best Value EAZs etc.**
- **Take back into public ownership, without compensation and under workers' control, all those services privatised over the last 20 years**
- **Abolish poverty pay: for a £7 an hour minimum wage with no exceptions**
- **For real "single status": a 35-hour week for all with no loss of pay and no strings**
- **Stop the witch-hunt, for rank and file union democracy: all officials elected annually, fully accountable and immediately recallable and paid the average wage of the members**
- **Defend and strengthen self-organised groups; for caucus rights for all facing systematic discrimination.**

DEFEND RODDY SLORACH

Unison officials have expelled Roddy Slorach from the union. Roddy had been first a Naigo and then Unison member for nine years and was the union's long-serving convenor for the social services department at Glasgow City Council.

He stood accused of harassing his branch secretary, but Roddy's real crimes in the eyes of the union leaders were his membership of the Socialist Workers Party and his leading role in an unofficial strike in August 1998 by members fighting the victimisation of three co-workers in the social services department. The disciplinary process employed against Roddy was a mockery of natural justice, with full-time officials blocking his attempts to summon witnesses and relying on hearsay evidence from the local press.

In a blatant attempt to undermine support for a campaign to defend Roddy, general secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe wrote to all branches, smearing Roddy's integrity and repeating the allegations against him as fact.

Clearly, his expulsion is a blow against socialists in the unions generally. We must ensure that the fight for Roddy's reinstatement becomes a focal point for Roger Bannister's campaign.

Fax your protests to Rodney Bickerstaffe at Mabledon Place on 0171 387 6692. Further information, etc. from "Hands off Roddy Campaign", c/o Biggar, 255 Allison Street, Glasgow G42 8AH.

BT CALL CENTRES

New workers – new strikes

WORKERS AT BT call centres staged a one-day strike on 22 November. It was the most widespread industrial action at BT since engineers walked out in early 1987 and marked the first national strike by white-collar workers since privatisation. It also helped shatter the myth that Blair's Britain is a classless society in which low-paid drudges in the "new economy" never fight back.

The action by more than 4,000 Communication Workers Union (CWU) members across 37 sites highlighted the grim realities of working life in what some have already called the "sweatshops of the twenty-first century".

More than 250,000 workers are already employed in call centres across Britain, with the bulk located either on greenfield sites in Scotland and Wales, or in urban areas with high rates of unemployment. Most workers have to suffer Gestapo-style workplace rules, with few perks and no job security.

At BT's call centres operators are under constant scrutiny, both human and electronic. Toilet and cigarette breaks are closely monitored and, at many sites, deducted from hours worked. At BT, failure to complete a customer's call within 285 seconds is grounds for disciplinary action – just one of the issues that triggered the current dispute. Average pay is abysmal, running at less than £13,000 across the industry as a whole, and often tightly linked to performance bonuses.

The widespread use of agency workers has also fuelled anger. In some sections of the BT operation, including fault reporting, up to 50 per cent of staff come from agencies. In the East Midlands the figure approaches 60 per cent.

Hundreds of call centre strikers turned out on picket lines on 22 November. Most were taking part in industrial action for the first time. The very existence of this dispute has refuted the Blairite lie that class antagonism at the workplace is a thing of the past. It has also shown that, despite high levels of turnover and strict discipline, it is possible for such workers to organise collectively and fight back against oppressive conditions.

The CWU has called for further one-day strikes on 10 December and 10 January if BT bosses do not make significant concessions at the bargaining table over the bullying managerial regime and staffing levels.

Union officials treat the strike action only as a bargaining chip, but the level of anger expressed on the picket lines shows there is real potential for sustained action across all of BT's call centre empire.

This could recruit thousands of new CWU members and force BT to concede full employee status to agency workers, with a dramatic increase in the minimum wage, an end to performance pay and substantial improvements in terms and conditions.

HARINGEY

Council workers resist new contracts

WORKERS AT Haringey Council in North London look set for a campaign of rolling strikes in opposition to attempts by the Labour council to impose new contracts. Members of Unison, the single largest union, are likely to be joined by TGWU, GMB and UCATT members across the whole authority for an initial one-day strike on 7 December.

The new contracts are being imposed as part of an £18 million spending cuts package. The Unison postal ballot returned a big majority for action, with 85 per cent voting "yes". The result is not surprising given the scale of the attacks. If management wins, terms and conditions will be drastically worse for the vast majority, while for many workers on former manual grades annual pay will fall by nearly £500.

The new contracts would:

- Axe pay for the first two days of sickness absence, reducing conditions to the bare statutory minimum
- Increase the working week from 36 to 37 hours for all white collar (ex-APT&C) workers - under the guise of implementing the 1997 Single Status Agreement
- Curtail maternity leave for women workers employed prior to 1993 to the levels already imposed on newer staff through an earlier attack and
- Stop all "premium rate" payments for evening and weekend working.

Assistant Branch Secretary Sonya Dakin explained in a recent radio interview:

"The Council is spending £7.7 million a year on the Alexandra Palace debt charges for 10 years. Unison members feel they are having to pay for years of mismanagement."

The Council's Chief Executive, Gurbux Singh, is on a salary of £96,000 a year, while departmental directors have annual earnings of more than £70,000. Needless to say, there is no indication that these axe-wielders are about to take a pay cut.

Unison stewards are confident of a solid strike on 7 December and sustained support for more one-day actions. The branch's strategy will hinge on prolonged and possibly indefinite action by key, revenue-generating sections of the workforce.

While the action is official at present, Haringey members must not rely on the support of national bureaucrats, especially with the looming election to succeed Rodney Bickerstaffe as general secretary. The last thing Dave Prentis, the national executive's preferred candidate, appears to want is an open battle with any Labour-controlled authority.

Council bosses across London and elsewhere in the country will be keenly following events in Haringey, making a victory for workers there all the more vital for local government trade unionists everywhere.

Messages of support, donations etc to: Valentine Prince-Williams, Branch Secretary, Haringey Unison, 48 Grand Parade, Green Lanes, London N8 1AG. Phone: 0181 211 0558; Fax: 0181 880 1429.

In South London in the Tory flagship borough of Wandsworth, 3,000 Unison members staged an effective one-day strike on 24 November - their first action in what promises to be a bitter fight over management's attempts to cut pay or enforce overtime on workers who take more than five days off sick over a rolling 12-month period. Other than saving money, the bosses' stated objective is to cut Wandsworth's already low sickness absence figures to an average of six days per employee each year in order to be competitive with the best (!) of the private sector.

STOP PRIVATISATION DEFEND THE NHS

DEFEND SELLY OAK AND QUEEN ELIZABETH HOSPITALS
Stop the planned closure of Selly Oak hospital and the use of the Private Finance Initiative to fund the merged hospital.
PFI MEANS LOSS OF BEDS AND LOSS OF JOBS.
Demonstrate Saturday 11 December 1999
Assemble 11.00am outside Selly Oak hospital, Birmingham
Affiliate to the campaign: c/o BTUC, The Union Club, 723 Pershore Road, Selly Park, Birmingham

BUZZWORDS ■ Diego Rivera; World Wide Web

Rivera's brush with revolution

Warren Gropper looks at the mural paintings of Diego Rivera in the context of the Mexican Revolution

DIEGO RIVERA's artistic and political life were intimately connected to the Mexican Revolution. After spending some years in Europe, closely following and being influenced by the events of the Russian revolution, he returned to Mexico in 1921.

During his absence Mexico had undergone its own revolution, one doomed to remain a bourgeois democratic revolution in which the heroic struggles of the Mexican workers and peasants were betrayed.

Under the 35 year rule of the corrupt president Porfirio Diaz (1876-1910) the concentration of landownership in Mexico's largely rural economy accelerated rapidly. The vast majority of the country's subsistence farmers were reduced to the status of seasonal farm labourers, often bound to a particular estate (hacienda) through debt.

By the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, 90 per cent of Mexico's rural population were landless and close to starvation. In the still comparatively small industrial sector, real wages declined by 25 per cent between 1898 and 1910.

Attempted strike action, such as that by copper mine workers at Cananea in 1906, and textile workers in Rio Blanco the following year, had been brutally suppressed. The urban middle class had also become increasingly alienated by Diaz's archaic system of rule.



The Distribution of Arms, 1928

The revolution of 1910 involved an agrarian rebellion led by Emiliano Zapata and supported by the forces of Pancho Villa in the South. At the same time, there was an incipient proletarian revolution by urban workers in the factories complete with alliances of self-governing unions and armed "red battalions". The modernising middle class, led by Alvaro Obregon and Plutarco Elias Calles, sought to harness these uprisings of the oppressed for its own constitutionalist purposes.

By the end of the decade, and after the loss of over a million lives, it had become clear that the revolution had largely benefited this bourgeoisie. Political power was now centralised in their hands. Economic power was shifted, but only away from an ageing Porfirian aristocracy to an opportunistic bourgeoisie.

Mexico remained a land of cheap labour and landless peasants. The populist government was revolutionary in name only.

National literacy stood at only 16 per cent before the 1910 Revolution, so the government was obliged to publicise its policies in large wall-paintings rather than written propaganda.

Infused with revolutionary optimism, Diego Rivera stepped forward to meet this need. Alongside fellow painters Siqueiros and Orozco, he led the Mexican Mural Movement for the next 35 years.

Rivera joined the Mexican Communist Party in 1922. He filled his murals of this period with heroes of the Mexican Revolution such as Zapata, who was betrayed and murdered by Constitutionalist troops in 1919, as well as the leaders of international revolution such as Marx and Lenin.

Yet the inclusion of these portraits, if anything, served to give revolutionary legitimacy to a counter-revolutionary regime. On the walls of the Ministry of Education in Mexico City he included John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford as "enemies of the people", yet the Obregon and Calles regimes courted American capital as much as Diaz had in the pre-revolutionary period.

Elsewhere Rivera's revolutionary iconography was not so acceptable. In the 1930s Rivera travelled to the United States. He was commissioned to paint murals for both of the arch-capitalists he had depicted earlier. He ran into trouble with Rockefeller. He was commissioned to paint a mural for the Rockefeller Centre. In the mural Rivera included the head of Lenin. Rockefeller insisted it be removed. Rivera refused, stating "rather than mutilate the conception I should prefer the physical destruction of the composition in its entirety." Rockefeller duly obliged.

Rivera's political development was taking him away from Stalinism. He was expelled from the party in 1929. He had established a close friendship with Leon Trotsky and was instrumental in getting the Mexican government to grant Trotsky exile.

Yet while Trotsky shared his house for some years, the two had numerous political disagreements. Rivera joined the International Communist League, but Trotsky found Rivera incapable of carrying out day to day revolutionary activity under the discipline of the organisation.

In the end Trotsky was proved right and Rivera, who resorted to lurid personal attacks on Trotsky himself, refused to abide by the discipline of a democratic centralist organisation. Rivera was expelled from the League in 1939.

Confusion and weakness within his political work was also reflected in his art. In his Mexican murals of the 1920s and the early 1930s, as well as those he executed north of the border, Rivera demonstrated a completely undialectical grasp of capitalism. His paeans to industrialisation in the United States are one-dimensional in that they fail to register the diabolic contradictions of commodity production under capitalism.

His earlier Mexican murals, despite the inclusion of revolutionary portraits, motifs, symbols, and a more critical depiction of the contradictions of capitalist social relations, were painted during the period of counter-revolution and the consolidation of Mexican capitalism. The Revolution itself was sanitised as an historical event, securely in the past, serving only to legitimise a less than revolutionary regime.

Ultimately Rivera did little to challenge this process of nationalist counter-revolution, and as such, his murals, did not participate in the Revolution – it was effectively over – but in its myth making.

Rivera represented the avant-garde of a bourgeois culture masquerading as a revolutionary one. This is not to deny the aesthetic significance of his work, the way in which he transformed an esoteric modernism of his earlier Parisian years into a form of realism, accessible to an uneducated and illiterate rural Mexican population.

,Rivera's later life continued to reflect his political degeneration. He rejoined the Communist Party in 1954, a few years before his death in 1957. His paintings took on an aspect of nostalgia and conservatism. His subject matter, and increasingly his technique, sought inspiration in the past, not the future.

MEGAPHONE ■ *Colin Lloyd* considers the power of the internet

Internationalism and the internet

The internet was invented 30 years ago, as the ARPANET – a way to link up US military and academic computers in a network that could survive nuclear attack. But the real take-off point came in 1994 when the internet browser Netscape was launched as free software, enabling anyone with a computer, a modem and a telephone to contact any similarly equipped person in the world.

"The internet changes everything", computer gurus promptly pronounced. But the Web was still dominated by techies. Only in the last three years has internet access boomed. Prices of access have dropped as capitalist companies try to create a mass market for internet trade.

For the left and the workers' movement the internet presents altogether different possibilities. For example, we can find out a lot more about the international workers' movement and speed up international solidarity. The Korean unions run a web site that, during strikes, has daily news updates in English!

As well as revolutionising and cheapening the ability of the workers' movement to communicate, the Web has also changed the way we use information. The key works of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky are online. The Nazi book burnings of the 1930s would now be futile. In a few seconds any information on the web can be mirrored onto a thousand sites across the globe.

Today the LRCI carries out most of its international communications using the internet. We can send out resolutions and reports within minutes to every section with one local phone call. The best e-mail I have ever received is a report from Workers Power's Australian section typed by comrades who had just come off a pitched picket line battle between dockers and police, where the balance was tipped by 3,000 building workers marching straight off the job, armed with scaffolding poles. At a national meeting in Britain that morning we read out the details of the victory to cheering comrades!

The Web has also changed some basic models of organisation. One of the spontaneous creations by people using the internet has been "virtual communities" – self-selected groups of enthusiasts who communicate with each other daily. While some of the decision making forums of the workers' movement still need the pyramid structure of the elected committee and the report back, within layers of the structure it is far easier to use the "network"– a defined group within which anyone can communicate with anyone else. Recently the LRCI decided to organise its international trade union work in this way: instead of a committee meeting once a year we have a network that can e-mail each other daily.

Another impact of the internet has been to popularise free information and products. You can still get Web browser software free, and once online there is loads of other software that is free. People in "virtual communities" often make a point of giving each other valuable information, as a counter-culture to capitalism's attempt to commoditise everything on the Web.

The power of the internet for self-organisation is such that the bosses keep a tight rein on what you can do at work. Many office workers have the Web at work but there is heavy surveillance of how you use it.

More worrying is the amount of state surveillance of the internet. Governments have denied the existence of the Echelon project – which allows the CIA to monitor every fax, phonecall and e-mail in the world: it very likely does exist though. In response a whole range of activists have adopted "encryption" technologies to code their e-mails. The capitalist response has been fragmented: while the USA tried to ban strong coding software it is freely available worldwide.

This points to the contradiction of the internet for capitalism: it has the power to make information (and goods) available as if borders didn't exist. As the capitalists invade the net with their "dot.com" companies the state is not far behind trying to collect taxes and impose contract law. At the same time they are trying to censor and monitor the activity of anti-capitalist groups.

We shouldn't pretend that the internet is just another form of communication: it really is changing behaviour. But we should remember how the workers' movement started. Britain generated the first workers' movement in the 1790s: the "corresponding societies" that used hand-written letters, laboriously copied, to inform workers in other towns and other industries of what was going on. They were banned and their members sent into penal servitude.

When you go on the internet and see pictures posted from an Indonesian demo that occurred minutes before you will get some sense of what it must have been like for our predecessors. But you must also remember that is only when they moved from "correspondence" to action that they began to change the world.

marxism

THE BASICS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM

The Russian Revolution of 1917

Kuldip Sandhu explains how the Bolsheviks were able to lead the first successful workers' revolution

ON 25 OCTOBER 1917 the Second All Russian Congress of Soviets voted to take power and established the world's first soviet republic.

The year 1917 had begun very differently. Russia was a developing capitalist country with an autocratic Tsarist state. Large factories, with a small but highly concentrated working class, co-existed with a huge peasant population and an archaic state regime.

The contradictions within Russia were exacerbated by the war. By February opposition to the war and the economic crisis which ensued led to a massive general strike in the capital, Petrograd.

The spark that ignited the strike came from a strike of women workers on International Women's Day.

On the morning of 23 February women workers took to the streets demanding bread. They marched to neighbouring factories seeking support from male workers. By mid-morning ten factories were shut and 27,000 workers on strike, by the end of the day 61 per cent of all factory workers in the Vyborg district, some 59,800 workers, were on strike. In the following days the strike grew and the Tsar sent in troops to quell the workers. Women continued to play an important role as the revolution developed, here described by Trotsky:

"They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: 'Put down your bayonets – join us!' the soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened, a joyous 'Hurrah!' shakes the air."

Soldiers deserted and mutinied. The Tsarist regime crumbled within days. It was replaced by the Provisional Government, made up of bourgeois politicians. But the workers who had made the revolution also built their own organisations: factory committees, workers' militia and the workers and soldiers' soviets.

The fall of Tsar Nicholas only served to deepen the contradictions at the level of state power. A situation of dual power began – that is, power was split between the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the working class on the other. This situation, a feature of revolutionary situations, could not last forever. Either the workers or the bosses would have to become the sole power in the land.

The majority of the delegates to the Petrograd Soviet including its Menshevik (reformist) leaders supported the provisional government. They saw the February uprising as a bourgeois democratic revolution which would logically result in a bourgeois government.

The soviets resolved to form an "observation committee" to watch over the provisional government. They intended to establish strict control on behalf of the working masses who saw them as the voice of their struggles. The bourgeoisie meanwhile looked upon the Provisional Government as their bastion against those very same struggles.

For the working class to triumph they could not merely rely on the maturity of the objective situation, nor could they rely solely on the spontaneous struggle of the masses as had been proved by the failed revolution of 1905. A victorious socialist revolution requires a subjective force; in the subsequent October revolution that force was the Bolshevik party.

The Bolsheviks showed an ability to develop a strategically correct understanding of the February revolution and what followed. This was not automatic, it was forged through democratic debate within the party and through the experience of the living struggle. Initially, many leading Bolsheviks shared a view similar to that of the leaders of the Petrograd Soviet. These included the editorial board of *Pravda*, made up of Stalin, Muranov and Kamenev. They wrote:

"As far as we are concerned what matters now is not the overthrow of capitalism but the overthrow of autocracy and feudalism."

It was Lenin, at the time still in exile, who led the fight against this schematic line of thought. He saw the Russian Revolution as a component part of the international revolution against capitalism itself. In the soviets, militia and factory committees he saw the embryo of a state of an entirely new sort. In his "Letters from Afar" he wrote that the Petrograd Soviet should regard itself as the basis of a new government, counterposed to the provisional government. Anyone arguing that the workers should support the Provisional Government would be "a traitor to the working class", said Lenin.

On his return from exile Lenin codified his position in his "April Theses" arguing that with the formation of the soviets the proletariat had attained a higher form of democracy than could ever be achieved under a parliamentary democracy. The soviets were representative of all the exploited and oppressed groups. They were based on the principle of direct elections, recallability and the abolition of bureaucratic privilege. Lenin described going back to a parliamentary republic from the Soviet of Workers' Deputies as a "retrograde step". The "April Theses" called for the "abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy", and for all of these functions to pass to the whole armed people.

Lenin's allies within the party were the largely proletarian left wing. After three weeks of fierce debate and bitter criticism they eventually won out. The importance of this victory cannot be underestimated. Because of it the Bolsheviks were now armed with a programme with which they could win the masses to the goal of soviet power.

The mass of workers were deeply distrustful of the Provisional Government. Workers' resolutions were sent direct to the soviets. Disenchantment with the war was leading more and more soldiers to join the soviets. By June more than 20 million workers, soldiers and peasants were represented in the first All-Russian Soviet Congress. The leaders of the soviets however, still gave support to the Provisional Government. It was in these circumstances that the Bolsheviks raised the slogan of "All Power to the Soviets!"

The aim of this slogan was to force the soviet leaders, who were still mostly Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (SRs), to fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on the soviets, and to end their compromises with the Provisional Government. The slogan was in no way an indication that the Bolsheviks had illusions in the soviet leaders. Rather it was aimed at breaking the mass of people from their continued support for the reformist leaders.

It worked, Bolshevik support continued to grow. In the naval port of Kronstadt they, along with the Left SRs, had a majority in the soviet and declared themselves the sole power in the city. Fearful of the growing feeling amongst the masses, the Provisional Government invited leaders of the Petrograd Soviet to join them. In accepting this offer the soviet "compromisers" steadily lost support amongst the workers and peasants. The Bolsheviks exploited the contradiction of the reformists' position with the slogan "Down with the ten capitalist ministers against those who had joined the government.

The Bolsheviks were gaining support in Petrograd but they were not as strong in the provinces. Lenin realised this but some on the far left of the party didn't. They raised the call for an insurrection. Lenin argued against it, stating, "if we're now able to seize power, it is naive to think that we would be able to hold it". The basis of any form of revolutionary government would have to be the soviets, in which the Bolsheviks were still a minority.

Despite these warnings the soldiers, workers and sailors could not be restrained. The Bolsheviks were eventually proved right as the ill-timed insurgency led to a serious tactical defeat.

The defeat of the "July Days" ushered in a period of counter-revolutionary repression. Workers and soldiers were beaten up and thrown into the canals. The presses of *Pravda* were smashed up and the Bolshevik headquarters were ransacked and seized. Many leading Bolsheviks were arrested and others were forced underground.

The victory against the workers led to a growing mood of confidence amongst the bourgeoisie. Brusilov, the Commander-in-Chief of the army, demanded the complete and total restoration of military discipline. Kerensky, the leader of the government, whose own survival depended on his ability to balance the interests of the bourgeoisie with those of the soviets, played for time by dismissing him. The resulting right-wing revolt led to an attempted coup by General Kornilov.

At the same time support for the Bolsheviks amongst the workers began to recover. The Bolsheviks won majorities in elections in the working class districts of Petrograd. Of the delegates to the All Russian Factory Committees Conference held in August 82 per cent were Bolsheviks.

As Kornilov's forces marched on Petrograd soviets and factory committees across the city vowed to defend the revolution. The workers demanded arms and Kerensky had little option but to hand them over. The Bolsheviks utilised the united front tactic fighting alongside Kerensky against Kornilov, while keeping up a relentless critique of him and his Menshevik supporters.

These tactics proved a huge success. In September the Petrograd Soviet voted overwhelmingly for a Bolshevik resolution calling for a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government. They steadily won control of the majority of soviets across Russia. The party had become the national party of the Russian working class. The slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" could now only mean a Bolshevik-led seizure of power.

Kerensky tried to shore up his failing regime, proposing a totally undemocratic five-person directorate. Meanwhile, he looked for an opportunity to move against the Bolsheviks. At the beginning of October he attempted to move the garrison out of Petrograd, removing soldiers who were increasingly influenced by the Bolsheviks. The move caused an outcry. A meeting of the Egersky Guards Regiment on 12 October called for soviet power and stated:

"The pulling out of the revolutionary garrison from Petrograd is needed only by the privileged bourgeoisie as a means of stifling the revolution."

On 21 October the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) established by the Petrograd Soviet to defend the revolution announced that no order should be considered valid unless countersigned by the MRC.

On 24 October Kerensky ordered the arrest of the MRC and the Bolshevik leaders, and the closure of the Bolshevik press. By the early hours of 25 October the order had been countermanded and the presses were running again. The MRC had done more than just countermand Kerensky. They ordered the insurrection that was to result in the creation of the first workers' state. The MRC's forces took control of the railway stations, junctions, the telephone exchange and the state bank. The Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky had been overthrown.

Later that day Red Guards and sailors stormed the Winter Palace. Over the coming days and weeks victory was won throughout the towns and cities of Russia.

Such was the mass support of the Bolshevik-led revolution in Petrograd that hardly a shot was fired during the insurrection. Although there was a greater level of fighting in some other cities, across Russia as a whole it was precisely this majority support that enabled the Bolsheviks not only to launch a successful insurrection but usher in a workers' state able to withstand the terrible onslaught launched by the Russian bourgeoisie and its imperialist allies in the civil war that followed.

The Bolsheviks had resolved, in practice, the question that had so vexed the Russian Marxist movement in the preceding decades – namely what kind of revolution would overthrow the Tsar. The answer given by the Bolsheviks was clear, a workers', socialist revolution as part of a world revolution.

IN BRIEF

■ The February Revolution established a situation of dual power in Russia. The bourgeoisie was represented by the Provisional Government. The workers established alternative forms of power, in particular the soviets.

■ The Mensheviks and some Bolsheviks supported the Provisional Government and argued that the working class would have to wait for their revolution. Lenin argued against this "democratic stage" and for the soviets to take power.

■ The Bolsheviks fought with the Provisional Government against counter-revolution, while continuing to politically criticise them for their attacks on workers.

■ The October Revolution was supported by the majority of Russian workers, but led politically and tactically by the Bolsheviks.

REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN

Sylvia – the forgotten Pankhurst

IT SEEMS hard to believe that it is only 70 years since women have had the right to vote in Britain. In 1918 women over 30 were granted the right to vote, but it wasn't until 1928 that full suffrage was finally made law. The Suffragette movement, headed by the Pankhurst family, is usually credited with this reform. There are many accounts of this movement, but most concentrate on the life and work of Emmeline and her daughter Christabel, and give very little attention to the work of Sylvia, the younger daughter.

This is no accident. As Mary Davis illustrates with extensive research into the history of the early feminist movement, Sylvia championed the cause and plight of working class women and their struggles against oppression. This led her to question the bourgeois feminist movement of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and eventually to break entirely with this tradition and move towards communism.

Davis' account of Sylvia Pankhurst avoids the dangers of a purely autobiographical account, and charts the political development of Sylvia's ideas in the context of a profoundly revolutionary period in British history. The year 1909 saw the beginning of the "Great Unrest" - a mass strike wave that was to develop into a period of growing class war and culminate in the pre-revolutionary situation of 1919. During this period, Sylvia organised working class women in the East End of London not only to campaign for the vote, but to fight against poverty wages and sweatshop conditions. She was eventually expelled from the WSPU for this work, and in 1914 set up the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS).

When war broke out, most Suffragist organisations dropped their campaigns and immediately supported the war. *The Suffragette,* the paper of the WSPU now renamed *Britannia,* called for a "war of attrition" and abandoned any commitment to women's rights in favour of support for the "fatherland". Sylvia, on the other hand, resolutely opposed the war. Walter Holmes, a journalist writing for the *Daily Worker* described her work:

"What she aroused in the East End was a mass movement. Not only an enthusiastic following of young working class women joined her franchise campaign, young workers came with them. They filled the streets with their marching. The Red Flag and the Internationale resounded under the dim lights of 1914-1915, Sylvia Pankhurst contributed a powerful opposition to the imperialist war".



Above: Sylvia Pankhurst and a delegation of East End pensioners
Right: A young Pankhurst

Kirstie O'Neill reviews *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics* by Mary Davis, Pluto Press (1999)

The Russian Revolution had a profound effect on Sylvia. Mary Davis describes her move to the left and the transformation of the ELFS into the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF). This organisation along with others played a key role in the establishment of the first Communist Party of Great Britain. (CPGB). However the unity discussions were fraught with difficulty. Sylvia, herself, had developed an ultra-left position on the Labour Party and parliament, arguing against affiliation to the Labour Party and against the participation of communists in the bourgeois parliamentary system. Eventually, after a brief period in the CPGB, Sylvia was expelled in 1921 after refusing to allow her paper, *The Workers Dreadnought,* to come under the editorial control of the CPGB.

Sylvia became increasingly critical of the direction of the Russian Revolution and after a brief flirtation with the Workers' Opposition in Russia, her adherence to revolutionary communism ended with the closing down of the Workers Dreadnought in 1924. Thereafter, her politics moved to the right although she always described herself as a non-aligned socialist. She went on to be a committed anti-racist and anti-fascist.

The weakest section of the book is that dealing with the crucial years of Sylvia's relationship with the young British Communist Party. Davis suggests that Sylvia's increasing frustration with the syndicalism of the British labour movement and the decline of industrial militancy after 1919 explains her sectarian approach to the working class and her eventual disillusionment with communism. Davis fails to mention the impact of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinisation of the CPGB as a possible factor in Sylvia's political break with communism - unsurprisingly since Davis herself stands in that tradition.

However, despite these flaws, Davis has provided us with an informed and useful account of early feminist movements and their relationship to the working class. She paints a picture of a woman who was a leader in her own right. Sylvia Pankhurst built a vibrant and militant working class women's movement and was one of the first leaders to realise the full magnitude of the Russian Revolution and openly support it.

This is Sylvia's legacy to working class women today.

A MARXIST ACCOUNT OF THE WORLD

The dynamics of history

Jeremy Dewar reviews
A People's History of the World
by Chris Harman
(Bookmarks) £15.99

To attempt to present an accessible, materialist history of the world in just over 600 pages is an enormous project. Chris Harman's effort in this book is both timely and commendable.

***A People's History of the World* is readable enough for a school student or anyone new to the study of history. And at the same time, it will not disappoint those with prior knowledge, although it may occasionally infuriate.**

Chris Harman is a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). This starting point forms the basis of the book's overwhelming strengths, as well as some of its major defects. It is worth starting by describing its strengths.

Harman sets out to explain human history from a materialist viewpoint. He shows how it is the way in which people produce the necessities of life which shapes the society they live in. At each crucial turning point in history, Harman relates how and why certain new techniques were appropriated or developed by various societies, how these combined – in new, or modified modes of production – to change the way in which people related to each other, creating new or altered relations of production. It is the struggle between the different oppressor and oppressed classes, heightened or subdued because of the changes, which moves history forward.

But Harman is not guilty of a crude determinist reading of history. He includes the ways in which geography and climate changes, particularly in the pre-capitalist period, affected the development of societies. He also shows how ideologies – religions, philosophies and politics – develop to explain and promote the various class interests within societies and how, in certain conditions, they can become a material factor in changing societies. Harman's account of the rise of Christianity and then Islam is thoroughly materialist and provides very useful weapons against fundamentalists of both stripes.

The chapters on early human history are among the most fascinating. Hunters and gatherers – or "foraging" societies as Harman calls them – existed along remarkably similar lines on every continent, bar Antarctica, for nine-tenths of human history. These egalitarian groupings were only forced to change their way of producing food, shelter and clothing because of global climate change, which made the nomadic lifestyle impossible to continue.

The resulting Neolithic (New Stone Age) "revolution" saw the development of permanent settlements and agriculture. People had to learn how to perfect their tools, pass their instruments and their knowledge down through generations and plan how they could consciously make desired changes to nature (planting crops, domesticating animals, etc.) Humans began to make history. These developments happened at different points across the globe. This is the first of many debunkings of racist myths about the superiority of European white people.

The evolution of the first class societies is also graphically illustrated. The gradual rise in the level of production brought about by the incremental gains in techniques took off in the Middle East (Mesopotamia) and Egypt about 5,000 years ago with the discovery of copper smelting and its alloy into bronze. This led to a surplus product, which had to be stored in case of future crop failures, for the good of society.

While Harman explains how this new ruling class assured itself of the consent of the masses to its rule, built up a state superstructure of an armed militia and administrators, and introduced other classes, he devotes merely a page and a half to one of the most important products of this revolution: the subjugation of women. Considering the richness of debate and research into this and its enormous importance to the fight for socialism today, this is an astounding omission. Unfortunately, it is an error repeated throughout the book – a few phrases on the suffragette movement, three sentences on modern feminism – leaving Harman open to the accusation of having written not a "people's" but a "man's history of the world".

On the other hand, one of the book's great strengths – especially considering the Tories' insistence on history having a British content – is its highlighting the emergence of advanced civilisations outside of Europe and the Mediterranean region.

Not only does he point out that Bronze Age civilisations existed in China, India, Central and South America, but also that

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF KARL MARX

The man behind the movement

Mark Abram reviews
Karl Marx
by Francis Wheen
(Fourth Estate 1999) £20

WHEN KARL Marx died in London in 1883 he was not well known in Britain, the country where he had spent more than half his life. There were a handful of mourners at his funeral.

Yet at Marx's graveside his best friend, dearest comrade and lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels, predicted that "his name and work will endure through the ages".

Engels was spot on. The flood of tributes from workers' political organisations around the world gave a hint of the tremendous legacy he had bequeathed them. Others such as Lenin and Trotsky were to take up and elaborate his ideas, fighting in Russia to bring the working class to power. Unfortunately, Marx also became more widely known as a result of the crimes committed in his name – but owing nothing to his ideas – by bureaucratic dictators such as Stalin.

Despite the incessant propaganda against him by our rulers, polls investigating the people's choice of "man of the millennium" keep putting him top or near about.

His work forces even those who reject his aims to pay attention. Only last year on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto, many hacks of the right-wing press had to admit that it contains a tremendously accurate portrait of the inner dynamics of capitalism. His political pamphlets on the failed revolutions of 1848 or on the Paris Commune of 1871 are unsurpassed pieces of revolutionary journalism and historical analysis.

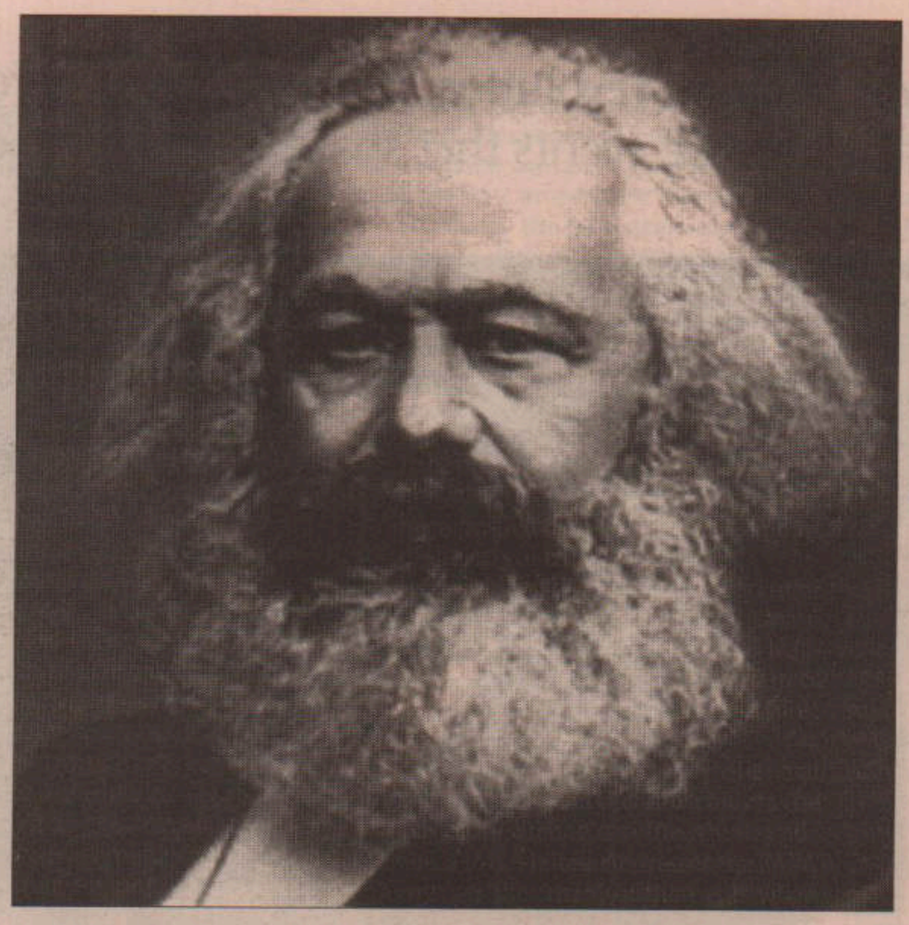
Francis Wheen's new biography treats both the man and his work with evident respect and sympathy.

It is not a biography of political ideas. Wheen does not often venture into an explanation of Marx's intellectual contributions. His early attempt to explain the nature of the dialectic is embarrassing; he makes a better stab explaining Marx's debt to and critique of Hegel and Feuerbach as Marx and Engels laid down the bedrock of historical materialism in the *German Ideology*.

His account of *Capital* is frankly bizarre. He claims that it "is not really a scientific hypothesis, nor even an economic treatise". The reader should treat it "as a work of imagination: a Victorian melodrama, or a vast Gothic novel". The abundant irony, use of metaphor and literary allusions by Marx is taken by Wheen as proof of this claim.

Wheen notes that Marx had the ambition to go beyond the realm of appearances of capitalism to the underlying reality in this work. But the only way the author can make sense of this is to interpret Marx's quest as a journey through the hidden underworld of capitalism, to bring to the reader's attention the grim realities of brutal exploitation that the capitalists try to hide from view.

Marx's scientific method is totally unfathomable to Wheen. Marx's *Capital* is a work which seeks to establish the laws that govern the mode of operation and reproduction of capitalism, above all its contradictory tendency to ratchet up the productivity of labour and at the same time – and because of this – a tendency towards a profitability crisis from which it cannot escape. Marx's concern to go beyond the realm of appearances involves much more than showing the most brutal sides of capitalism. Marx is concerned to show how the nature of capital itself obscures its working, how, for instance, exploitation is disguised, how relations between humans appear as relations between things.



All this it seems is too much for Wheen who confesses himself maddened by Marx's insistence on putting the "most impenetrable chapters first" and having his head "spin uncontrollably" at Marx's dense conceptual presentations.

But you will not buy this book to learn about Marxism; for that read Marx himself. Or if you want a rounded, if dated, introduction to his ideas and life then get a copy of David Riazonov's book *Karl Marx;* and if you want to know what Marx was really attempting in *Capital* read the introductions to the Penguin edition of the three volumes by Ernest Mandel.

Buy Wheen's book for his hugely sympathetic account of Marx's struggles – both domestic and political. Wheen does make the man leap from the page. First we get the young Marx of the 1840s with his huge capacity for enjoying life, his searing polemical skills and haughty arrogance as he makes his iconoclastic way through German philosophy and French socialism to arrive at historical materialism, the Communist Manifesto and a practical if brief involvement in the 1848 revolutions.

Next comes the 1850s – the start of the long exile, the serious study of political economy, the eschewing of practical organisational politics as the ebb tide of revolution gives rise to sects and squabbles in England. Also, a decade of grinding poverty, relieved only by the selfless financial help of Engels, and a series of family tragedies – above all the death of his only son.

The 1860s sees Marx answer the call of duty once more to involve himself in the formation and growth of the First International after 1864. Here, Wheen shows Marx's political skills in fashioning a principled socialist political profile for an extremely heterogeneous and increasingly fractious international movement, but one which succumbed to the defeat, dispersal and demoralisation that came in the wake of the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Poverty now gave way to hardship of the down-at-heel Victorian gentleman who was so trapped within Victorian bourgeois values of how he should bring up his three daughters (private education, entertaining etc.) that the Marx household remained well known to the pawnbrokers.

The rest of the 1870s sees Marx in a more backroom role, inspiring the formation and growth of a truly mass socialist party in Germany grounded in his ideas. Marx's last five years were not very fruitful intellectually. His illnesses, many of them brought on by stress and tiredness, increasingly overwhelmed him. The early death of his daughter Jenny and then his wife, broke his health. He spent the last year of his life seeking respite in Algiers, France and the Isle of Wight before returning home to die.

On 14 March 1883 the "greatest living thinker ceased to think", said Engels in his oration. He concluded:

"Marx was above all else a revolutionary. His real mission in life in one way or another was to contribute to the overthrow of capitalist society and the forms of government which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the present day proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and needs, of the conditions under which it could win its freedom."

Until that freedom is finally won Marx's life and work will continue to teach and inspire.

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the Iron Age first took root in Asia, which remained the most advanced region of the world for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The ancient Maurya and later, medieval Mogul empires in India developed advanced mathematics, including the perfection of the decimal system, calculation of the number π and use of the number zero, which was unknown to the Greeks and Romans.

The achievements of the various Chinese civilisations are detailed: steel, textiles, printing, water mills, gunpowder and sailing ships. Their infrastructure of roads and canals far exceeded even ancient Rome's at its height.

Harman goes on to tackle the question of why fully fledged capitalism developed in Europe rather than in China or India, contrasting the role of the merchant and manufacturing bourgeoisie in Europe with that of the trading and artisan classes in Asia, dependent on and tied to the state bureaucracies of the empires. In Europe and North America it was precisely the absence of a huge, all-embracing empire which enabled the merchant and manufacturing bourgeoisie to develop in the womb of the old society.

The last half of the book rightly centres on the development of capitalism and the growth of the workers' movement. However, it is here that Harman's – and the SWP's – errors come to the fore.

Explaining the development of imperialism as the new capitalist countries of Western Europe colonised the world, Harman concedes that this simultaneously led to improvements in the living standards of the metropolitan heartlands:

"To put it crudely, the growth of profitability which had produced a recovery from the 'Great Depression' [of the 1870s, and 1880s] and enabled capitalism to concede some improvements in living standards to its workers depended upon the spread of empires." (p.398)

But he then goes on to deny that this led to the creation of a labour aristocracy – a layer of skilled workers with higher than average wages, greater job security and a degree of control over their work. In particular, Harman is keen to deny that this layer formed (and still forms) a material base for the continued strength of reformist ideas in the workers' movement – a position both Engels and Lenin held. He does so by pointing to their periodic militancy.

But Lenin understood full well that the labour aristocracy was capable of militant struggle in defence of its gains. Harman himself shows that the strikes of the 1890s were the result of the bourgeoisie's attempt to take away these workers privileges!

The problem this leaves Harman is explaining why workers still persist with reformist leaders, sometimes even in a crisis. Trying to give an answer as to why reformist leaders were able to head off revolution in Western Europe in the early 1920s, he describes them thus:

"They were in a position in some ways analogous to that of the late medieval merchants and burghers, who combined resentment against the feudal lords with a tendency to ape their behaviour and their ideas. Many of the feudal lower classes had tolerated such behaviour because they took the existing hierarchies for granted. So too the rank and file of the workers' movement were often prepared to put up with their leaders' behaviour." (p.440)

Harman abandons materialism precisely when it comes to the struggle between reform and revolution.

His other glaring mistake is in his misunderstanding of Stalinism. The SWP and its forerunners have always argued that the USSR and the other Stalinist countries were/are state capitalist. He explains how this social counterrevolution took place after 1928:

"Stalin's logic was the same as that of any capitalist who faces competitive pressure from a bigger rival – to tell his workers to make every conceivable 'sacrifice' in order to compete. For Stalin the way to 'catch up with the West' was to copy all the methods of 'primitive accumulation' employed elsewhere." (p.477)

But the same could be said of rival Bronze Age and Iron Age societies and certainly of warring feudal principalities. They too had to accumulate resources in order to protect their borders – as, indeed, would a healthy workers' state. The point is, to prove that the Stalinist states were capitalist, Harman would have to show that they were accumulating capital, which they then used to create commodities for the market. But the fact that Stalin's USSR produced according to a (horrifically distorted, bureaucratic) plan means Harman cannot and does not go on to prove this.

This leads him into trouble when he tries to explain that Hitler was qualitatively worse than Stalin:

"Millions suffered under the national chauvinism and anti-Semitism to which Stalin resorted to bolster his rule, but the majority survived to talk about it. Few of the millions of Jews and Gypsies who suffered under Hitler survived." (p.512)

This paradoxically leads to an underestimation of the crimes of Stalinism. Harman is left with a liberal bourgeois method, not a truly materialist and scientific one which understands that the property relations in the USSR could be worth defending at the same time that the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy had to be consistently attacked.

Thus Harman falls down on precisely the two phenomena that have together been responsible for preventing workers' revolutions in the twentieth century: social democratic reformism and Stalinism.

Nevertheless, this does not make his book worthless. Far from it. It is an excellent introduction to world history and a welcome addition to any worker's or student's socialist library.

The epoch of wars

Growth and destruction, war and revolution, repression and heroic resistance. *Lesley Day* and *Richard Brenner* look back at the decisive events that shaped the course of this dramatic and contradictory century

Vast technological changes took place in the last hundred years: from electrification and powered flight, via splitting the atom and space travel, to the internet and mapping the human genetic structure. These technological revolutions, and their application to production through the assembly line and computerisation, have shaped human life in every corner of the planet. Consequently the world's population has increased with incredible rapidity. But under capitalism these triumphs of human skill, ingenuity and labour have never attained their full potential.

Instead of reducing the burden of labour they have intensified it. Instead of obliterating poverty and inequality they have increased it. Instead of bringing lifelong security and meeting humanity's elementary needs - food, clothes, housing, health - capitalist development has brought insecurity to millions.

Even in the USA, the richest nation on earth, one in seven people cannot afford basic health insurance. In the federal capital Washington, infant mortality is higher than it is in Kingston, Jamaica. Everywhere, wealth and poverty exist side by side.

Even the most optimistic pundits of the ruling class are not predicting limitless progress and human improvement in the new millennium, in contrast to their predecessors at the start of this century. The reasons are obvious. A century which spawned the horrors of the two world wars and the intervening world slump, the holocaust and a seemingly endless cycle of genocidal regional wars can hardly be cited as proof of capitalism's capacity to bestow universal peace, harmony and prosperity for time immemorial.

If the early years of the century saw the beginnings of the welfare state, of mass trade unionism and universal free education, the later twenties and thirties gave us the greatest economic crash in capitalism's history. In the worst hit countries this crash was the economic motive driving the ruined and hysterical middle classes into the arms of fascism and prompting big capital to back its rise to power.

In turn the rise of fascism led to the unparalleled depredations of the Nazis – six million Jews, millions upon millions of Poles, Russians, Ukrainians and Roma exterminated, and the destruction of half of Europe's industries and communications. And this uniquely destructive conflict led – this time at the hands of the "democratic" victors – to the deliberate mass murder of the population of the major cities of Germany and Japan by way of both conventional carpet bombing and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The lesson of this for the 21st century is that such periods of global crisis are not prevented by the technological revolutions or the civilising influence of culture and democracy.

True the "midnight of the century", symbolised by Auschwitz, the Gulag and Hiroshima, was succeeded by the what the French call the "thirty glorious years", the English the "Long Boom" and in the USA the realisation of the "American dream".

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the propagandists of the ruling class proclaimed that it was possible to create a world without unemployment, poverty, insecurity and indeed to transcend capitalism itself without revolution and even without class struggle.



Lenin addresses revolutionary crowds in Russia

But the idea of limitless betterment within capitalism proved to be a mirage when the expansionary phase petered out into an equally long lasting one of stagnation, inflation and cyclical crises. The Golden Age of the mid-century boom gave way rapidly to the Iron Age of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, of the New Cold War of austerity packages, downsizing, privatisation, neoliberalism and globalisation.

The 1980s ended with the collapse of Stalinism and the revolutions of 1989. The lack of an organisation and political programme with which the working class could seize the opportunities presented to it by these events led to the restoration of capitalism. In Russia this meant a slump greater in scope even than the 1929-33 depression. In the USA this coincided with a sustained economic upswing and a technological revolution.

But those hired to sing hymns of praise to capitalism had no sooner got into full voice about the new economy and the new democratic world order than a series of wars and genocides began and a serious crisis gripped Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. The world financial institutions held their breath as an overvalued. Wall Street spiralled upwards.

Today capitalism's defenders, politicians and professors alike, suggest that the capitalist order is a given, an inevitable feature of life in the new millennium. Yet because they have to acknowledge that capitalism cannot deliver prosperity for the majority, they insist that insecurity and glaring inequality are an inevitable and vital spur to economic life.

Doomed by globilisation

All the previous attempts in the "three worlds" to create stable jobs, social services, education, are proclaimed doomed to destruction by "globalisation". The same song is sung – with nationally different lyrics – by Clinton and Blair, Schroeder and Jospin, Yeltsin and Zhu Rongji. You workers and farmers cannot buck the market. If you don't lower your wages, pensions or give up job security then the transnational corporations will move to where people will.

But as the century draws to a close we see the rise – not without setbacks and bureaucratic sabotage and betrayal – of resistance to the effects of globalisation and privatisation from the USA to the former USSR.

Indeed the history of the 20th Century would seem a post-modernist joke or a pessimistic moral fable – aimed at dispiriting the fighters for human freedom or driving them to acts of nihilistic rage – were it not for the history of the class struggle, an ongoing and unquenchable struggle.

Time and again the working class and the oppressed world wide have stood up to their exploiters

The 20th Century has been the century of capitalist crisis and wars – but also the century of revolution. Time and again the working class and the oppressed world wide have stood up to their exploiters. From the great workers' revolution of 1917, through the mass resistance to fascism to the great revolutionary movements against colonial oppression, from the early fight for women's suffrage to the modern movements against racism, women's and gay oppression, opposition has been a constant.

This struggle is unquenchable because capitalism constantly recreates the working class and constantly creates resistance. It plunders and oppresses those on whose labour it depends for profit. Workers are driven by this to fight back. Their vital role in, and organisation by, production makes this resistance inevitable and radical – going to the roots of the very system. The working class is and remains objectively drawn to destroy and replace capitalism.

Time and again the bourgeoisie's spokespeople have written off the working class only to find it regrouping, regaining its strength and relaunching its struggles. In the last decades of the century, the decline in the numbers of industrial workers in the USA and Western Europe has been used to say "farewell to the working class" or to proclaim the "forward march of Labour" halted. This ignores the fact that the working class, as the objective force of waged/salaried workers in production, exchange and distribution, is constantly changing its composition as capitalism transforms itself.

Just as 20th century capitalism saw old industries disappearing and new ones arising, so too the working class changed. If artisans, millhands and miners dominated the workers' movement of the 19th and early 20th century, and metal workers, engineers or carworkers that of the mid-century, then new sections will do so over the coming decades.

The last decades of the 20th century saw thousands of women workers drawn into paid work and organised production. In the countries of the "Third World" vast armies of new industrial proletarians were created as the impoverished and landless streamed into the cities and as capital, ever in search of the most profitable sites for production, expanded its factories in Asia and Latin America.

If the working class itself changes, so too does the conscious organised expression of the working class, the trade union and political labour movement. The task of Marxists is to analyse and register these changes and to renew the organisations of our class, to learn the lessons that generations of working class fighters have bequeathed to us.

These lessons include the mass actions of the working class that marked every decade. These actions are sometimes misleadingly called "spontaneous", as if deliberation, creative thought and will did not go into their making, as if there were not working class fighters conscious of the need to resist at the heart of every strike called.

This creativity created the mass strikes of 1905 in Russia, the factory occupations in Italy in 1919-20, the British and Chinese workers' mass strikes of the mid-twenties and the Spanish, French and American workers in the mid-thirties. So too with May 1968 and the mighty strikes in the 1970s and 1980s, including the occupations of the Polish shipyards and factories, the Great Miners' Strike in Britain and the million strong stay-aways and formation of COSATU in South Africa.

Without this "spontaneous" creativity the workers' council – a phenomenon of most developed revolutionary crises in the twentieth century, at least in an embryonic form – would not have become such a widespread feature of struggle from Russia in 1905 to Poland and Iran at the beginning of the 1980s. Not only has the workers' council, the soviet to use the old Russian term, proved the most effective organisation for rapidly raising the great majority of the hitherto passive workers to class action but it also proved to be the only means of enabling the working class to take power into its own hands. This is one of the vital lessons taught by the workers of the twentieth century to their successors.

But even the workers' council proved capable of misleadership and bureaucratisation. The story of the 20th century is also the story of the bureaucratic degeneration of the workers' movement and the struggle against this. It is the story of the fight for revolutionary leadership: a fight over the ideas, the programme and party needed in the working class. It is the story of struggle to rebuild and renew, to learn from both the mistakes and highpoints of the past.

Battle of ideas

At the start of the century, the workers' movement was already armed with the ideas of Marxism. Marx, Engels and their worker comrades in the First International had already shown that capitalism had to be overthrown. The experience of the Paris Commune in 1871 had revealed that the existing state machine could not be reformed, it had to be smashed through a workers' revolution.

s and revolutions

The 20th century has seen a constant battle of ideas within the workers' movement between those who have tried to build on that legacy, and those who have succumbed to the pressures of capitalist society. Indeed, capitalism would not have survived were it not for the betrayals by the leaders of the movement and the ideas of reformism, the mistaken belief that capitalism could be tamed.

In the early years of the 20th century, the Second International played a major progressive role in creating a mass workers' movement in Europe and initiating such movements in the Americas and Asia. But its leadership rejected the revolutionary lessons of the previous century. It fell victim to the triple plagues of bureaucratism, national-centredness and reformism. These mutually reinforcing afflictions were fought from within by figures such as Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky and many others who formed a revolutionary wing.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks from 1903-1917 fashioned a wholly new conception and practice of what a working class political party should be.

First, it had a programme and strategy which rejected all subordination to the liberal bourgeoisie and which was capable of analysing and taking on the new goals, organisational forms and methods of combat which the revolution posed (the general strike, soviets, defence of the rights of oppressed nations, rejection of patriotism in war, the goal of working class power).

Second, it was an organisation of combat, not a parliamentary, bureaucratic apparatus. It was a disciplined and democratic party whose members became leaders in mass struggle because these masses recognised their capacities and accepted their tactics and strategy.

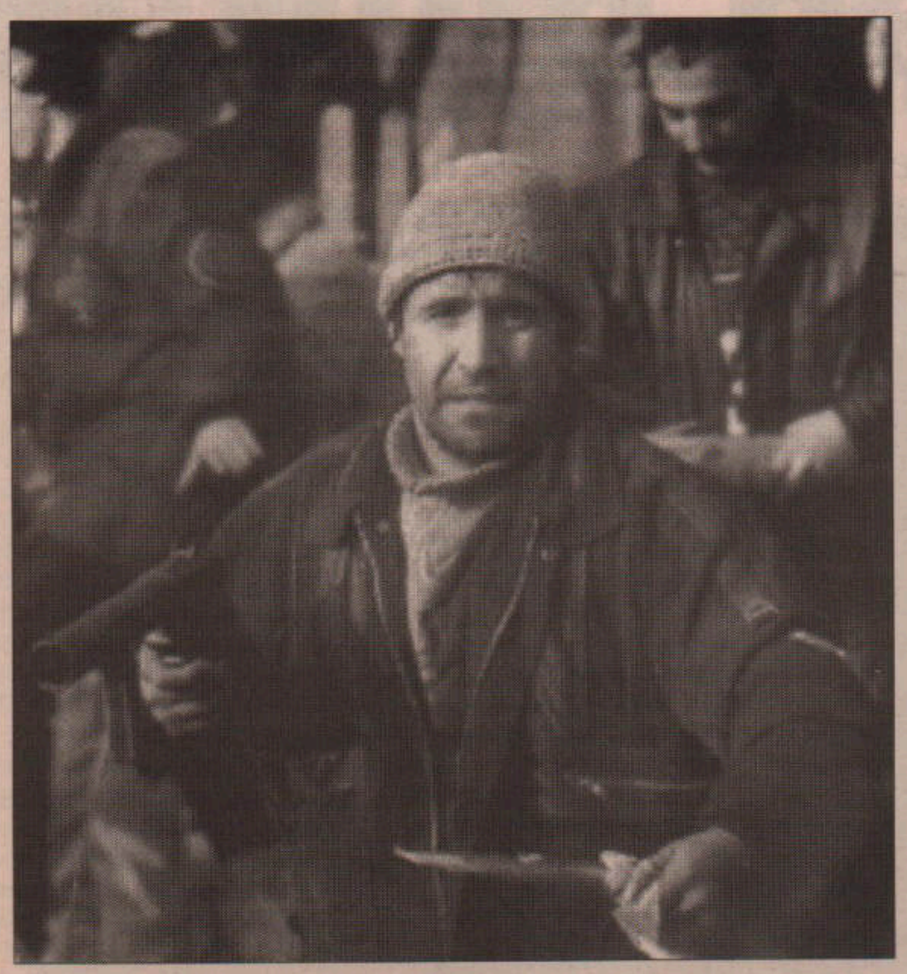
This party led the first successful workers' revolution and created the first workers' state.

Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky were not able to save the Second International from shameful collapse in 1914 but they did go on to create a new Third International, which also attained a mass and revolutionary character under the impact of the Russian Revolution.

The isolation of the Russian Revolution, the bureaucratisation of the young workers' state, the eventual destruction of the soviet system and the Bolshevik Party by Stalin doomed the Third International to collapse. Tragically, before its collapse it played a fatal role in crippling the German workers' unity in action which alone could have prevented Hitler's coming to power.

Leon Trotsky and his co-thinkers, the Russian and International Left Opposition and then the Fourth International, had and have enormous historic significance, despite the bloody defeats they suffered in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite their ultimate martyrdom they developed a scientific critique of Stalinism and a programme to combat it. They predicted that unless it was defeated counter-revolution, imperialist war, the restoration of capitalism in the USSR would set the working class back for many years. They were right, and indeed the Trotskyist movement itself, the Fourth International, underwent degeneration and fragmentation.

A fundamental recovery from this truly historic defeat will not be accomplished without the foundation of a new world party of the socialist revolution. The fact that this will be the fifth time that the working class has taken up this task need not daunt us. Marx foresaw this when he said that "proletarian revolutions ... criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again more gigantic before them".



Romanian miners: Faced years of Stalinist oppression now leading the fightback against the effects of privatisation and the market

In the struggle for the new international, revolutionaries will have to combat all sorts of misleading ideas about the current period and its tasks.

Some people who mistakenly call themselves Trotskyists announced in the aftermath of Yeltsin's destruction of the USSR that "the epoch of the October Revolution had ended". In so doing they revealed that they identified the October Revolution with the Soviet State and, what is worse, with the bureaucratic monstrosity created by Stalin's political counter-revolution of the 1920s and 1930s.

The destruction of the workers' soviets and the Bolshevik party of Lenin was indeed a historic defeat. It led directly to the triumph of Hitler over the next most powerful revolutionary movement in the world (the German Communist Party), to Stalin's great purges, to the Second World War with the Holocaust and 20 million dead in the USSR alone. But this defeat is half a century behind us.

That the Soviet Union survived these events was a tribute to the strength of the economic foundations laid by the October Revolution and to the impetus it gave to revolutionary movements around the world for the next three quarters of a century.

Apparently powerful and successful states like the USSR and China; heroic and successful struggles against imperialism led by Stalinists like Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in one sense encouraged the spread of the example of October but in a more profound way they obscured and weakened it. They identified it with the baleful doctrine of socialism in one country.

This meant chopping up the world class struggle into isolated fragments, breaking up the expansionary spread of a world revolution. Only where defensive and thoroughly bureaucratic "revolution from above" prevented the creation of workers' and peasants' soviet power – the central legacy of October – was a replica of Stalin's dictatorship of the bureaucracy established. Everywhere else promising revolutionary situations were aborted or subordinated to the defence of the USSR, China, Cuba and so on. Shameful deals were done with imperialism.

But the lesson of the Russian Revolution is that the forces can be rallied, organised, educated to defeat and destroy capitalism

The World Communist Movement, which succeeded the dissolved Communist International, sank into a species of reformism, no less treacherous than its Social Democratic elder brother. Countless revolutions (Indo-China, Portugal, Afghanistan, Iran) were betrayed; some, like Indonesia (1966) and Chile (1973) with great bloodshed. At the same time the attempts of workers and intellectuals in Eastern Europe and China from 1953-1989 to bring about a revolution that would place political power in the hands of the workers were repeatedly, as in Hungary, bloodily crushed.

The only hope of saving the economic foundations laid by October 1917 (the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the rudiments, albeit with terrible distortions, of planning) was squandered. When the bureaucracies finally realised that bureaucratic planning was heading for collapse, first in China and then in Russia, they set about dismantling and privatising, only restrained by fear of the working class response and the desire to save their own political power and grab the state property for themselves.

Of course the bourgeoisie wants workers to draw only negative lessons from the collapse of the Stalinist states, the misnamed communist countries. In schools, in the media, in the pulpits and temples, the same message is hammered out: communism failed, "human nature" is too greedy and selfish, rebellion leads to catastrophe, workers cannot run things for themselves.

We draw opposite lessons. The degeneration of the USSR, the rise of Stalin, the terrible consequences of Stalinism and "socialism in one country" teach us that the New International in the new century must above all stand for workers' democracy and revolutionary internationalism.

Socialism or barbarism

What, in summation are the positive and negative lessons which the twentieth century leaves to its successor? Capitalism is still a vicious an exploitative system that cannot bring peace, prosperity, social security or equality to the vast majority of humanity. Its phases of economic expansion threaten the human environment with degradation and its periodic crises take the livelihood and lives of millions and lead to wars where high technology means an ever lower descent into cruelty and barbarism.

Nor can capitalism raise the human personality to higher levels of artistic and scientific creativity for and by the millions. It can perform this cultural enrichment only for a few and at the expense of degrading and drugging the majority with a noxious cocktail of consumerism, religious national and racial hatreds and the disabling neuroses and obsessions of sexual oppression.

But the lesson of the Russian Revolution as well as the other great liberatory movements since the Second World War, is that the forces can be rallied, organised, educated to defeat and destroy capitalism. If during this century imperialism has become more and more global, if it has rendered the nation state obsolete as an instrument for the exploited and oppressed majority it has also created a truly world working class. Our task is to create a conscious, revolutionary world working class movement.

Of course the debilitating legacies of the 20th century still hold sway over the weakened official labour movement. In Western Europe, Social Democracy and (New) Labourism exert a paralysing near-political monopoly. The poisonous remnants of Stalinism, though enormously weakened, remain. Indeed in Russia and Serbia they have taken on an ever more fascistic aspect: chauvinism against national minorities, anti-Semitic outbursts and even blocs with openly fascist parties.

In countries as different as the USA and Argentina corrupt and undemocratic union bureaucracies block the creation of independent workers' parties and keep the workers' movement tied to the parties of their exploiters. Even in countries like Brazil and South Africa where, in the 1980s, powerful new trade union movements arose in the struggle against dictatorship, bureaucracies have emerged and hardened, opting for reformism and sabotaging workers' struggles.

But despite the continued strength of these agents of the bourgeoisie within the workers' movement stirrings of new forces and new organisations can be seen in South East Asia and in Africa. "Spontaneous" struggles of great dimensions have broken out in Latin America and rumblings can be felt in continental Europe east and west.

Across the world young people are voicing their discontent with "global capitalism" and the new technologies (websites, email, video etc.) are leading to a new spirit of self-organisation and activism which transcends national frontiers and even those between the "three worlds". Of course such spontaneity and self-organisation will not of itself fully regenerate a fighting international movement of the exploited an oppressed.

But it does provide, alongside the militants of the old and newer labour movements, the milieu, the ferment from among which a new international party of world revolution can and will be built. We are convinced that the revolution of the twenty first century will be a global revolution, just as the class struggles and crises of the century will be more global than those of the twentieth.

Of course this does not mean that it will be simultaneous, but it does mean that the great velocity of economic and political events themselves, as well as the near instantaneous means of information and communication, will increase the combined character of this revolution.

The young militants of such a party will turn their faces to the future, full of confidence that our final victory lies in the twenty first century. In any case the manifest barbarism of global capitalism drives us on. But we will return time and again to the October Revolution – the central defining event of the twentieth century – to the soviets and the Bolshevik party which made it possible and to the deeds and words of its two most crucial leaders Lenin and Trotsky.

Then we shall hear words spoken such as these, the words with which Lenin announced the seizure of power to the Congress of Soviets. These words ring into the twenty first century like a call to arms:

"Comrades, the workers' and peasants' revolution, about the necessity of which the Bolsheviks have always spoken, has been accomplished ... Its significance is, first of all, that we shall have a soviet government, our own organ of power, in which the bourgeoisie will have no share whatsoever. The oppressed masses will themselves create a power. The old state apparatus will be shattered to its foundations and a new administrative apparatus set up in the form of soviet organisations. From now on a new phase in the history of Russia begins ... We must now set about building a proletarian socialist state in Russia. Long live the world socialist revolution!"

COLOMBIA

USA steps up aid to Colombian military

At the beginning of last month an estimated 12 million people took to the streets of Colombia to demand an end to the civil war that has claimed over 35,000 lives in the last decade. With the USA increasing its covert military intervention *Keith Harvey* looks at the prospects for peace.

The world's most tenacious guerrilla army and the world's only superpower are squaring up to each other.

For the last 40 years the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been fighting against landowners, their paramilitary squads and their friends in government. The civil war has been provoked by the landowners who have ruthlessly herded and murdered peasants in order to grab land for themselves. Around 1.5 million Colombians have been forcibly displaced during the civil war.

Over the years, the rebel army has concentrated on protecting poor farmers in the south who grow coca and opium (the basis of cocaine and heroin) to support their families. The FARC has up to 20,000 members, with around a quarter of this total active and armed at any one time.

They have forced the government onto the defensive and now control large parts of the south. Together with the actions of the smaller groups, the ELN and EPL elsewhere in the country, some 40 per cent of Colombia's territory is outside the control of the government.

The quick and just solution to the civil war would be for the government to disarm the right-wing paramilitaries (AUC) who wage a war of intimidation and destruction against peasants, and to give peasants their land back. But the army and landowners will not do this. So the government follows a two-pronged strategy.

On the one hand, it sues for peace. President Pastrana is seeking to persuade the FARC to follow guerrilla groups like the FMLN in El Salvador and hand in their weapons in return for some moderate social reforms and a place in the constitutional reform process.

But this has been tried before, leading to the massacre of hundreds of ex-guerrillas. This time around a large section of the bourgeoisie wants to smash the guerrillas, not negotiate with them.

Given the slump in world prices for traditional agricultural products, and the collapse of demand for many traditional products made by Colombian small farmers, growing coca is the best option for many. Groups like the FARC provide protection in return for cash and this helps finance the armed struggle.

According to US officials, 80 percent of the cocaine and 80 per cent of the heroin in the USA come from Colombia. Since 1985, nearly 500,000 acres have been sprayed with chemicals by US-backed anti-drug squads, and the environmental damage is incalculable. But the Colombian drug crop has expanded to almost 300,000 acres of coca and 7,000 acres of opium. The real aim of the "war on drugs" is to defeat the FARC and prevent it providing a positive example to others fighting social injustice to others in Uncle Sam's backyard.

Earlier this year the CIA and the US State Department decided to ratchet up their financial and military intervention. In 1996 the FARC scored some spectacular military victories. In August they attacked and captured a military base in the south, killing 26 soldiers and taking 60 others prisoner. In March 1998 the FARC killed 83 soldiers in battles during the Congressional election campaign.

FARC success in the field prompted more aid from Washington. US aid to Colombia rose from $95.7 million in 1997 to $289 million in 1998. Now, US senator McCaffrey wants a billion dollars in "emergency assistance" for fighting drugs in Colombia and other countries. Republicans in Congress are pushing for $1.6 billion.



Colombian President Andrés Pastrana (left) and US General Charles Wilhelm attend opening of new naval base in August

In addition, at any one time there are about 300 US military personnel in Colombia. Special forces are busy training the Colombian army – the 1,000 strong Anti-Narcotics Battalion is now up and operational. The US recently upgraded Colombia's entitlement to military hardware and now supplies spy planes, helicopters and other equipment.

Washington has put diplomatic pressure this year on the surrounding states in the region to move troops to the Colombian border closest to the FARC strongholds. Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and recently Brazil have moved troops to their borders with Colombia to restrict the cross-border operations of the FARC, while turning a blind eye to the murderous activities of the death squads.

It is unlikely that the US will send in its own combat troops on the ground against the FARC in the short term: US military operations are still circumscribed by the "Vietnam syndrome". In the short term it is aiming at containment and forcing the FARC to negotiate.

But what will the FARC settle for?

The FARC's political roots lie firmly in Stalinism. As such the FARC 's strategy has always been to create a coalition government which embraces themselves and "patriotic" sections of the ruling class, marginalising the "reactionary" sections.

For the FARC the main enemies are the parties bound up closely with the big landowners and the parts of the army tied to the drug cartels. The FARC has no programme for a root and branch destruction of the armed forces themselves or the institutions of the bosses' state. Rather, the guerrillas seek to be incorporated within the bourgeois state in order to push for social reforms.

The FARC dispensed with much of the "socialist" rhetoric attached to its programme in the wake of the collapse of Stalinism after 1989. Its demands in the current process of negotiations include: sweeping land ownership reforms, an end to free market economic policies, greater social spending and limits on foreign ownership and exploitation of the country's oil reserves.

This platform is aimed to appeal to a broad coalition of classes, including some employers. Naturally, the biggest beneficiaries would be the displaced and land-hungry peasants; this is the main social base of the FARC. But the guerrillas would aim to form a government with those sections of the capitalists that could be found to reverse decades of neo-liberal economic policies – privatisations, cuts in social expenditure, lower taxes on business, deregulation etc.

For the working class this plan is a disaster. Even if such a section of the Colombian capitalist class existed, its agreement to agrarian reform with the FARC would come with a price tag – namely, leaving the policies for industry and finance intact. This would spell continued misery for the urban working class.

The attempt to categorise the Colombian ruling class into progressive and reactionary sections is completely unrealistic. The economically dominant and politically leading sectors of the Colombian bourgeoisie are locked into US imperialist interests.

The only conceivable way that the FARC would find itself in government is if it dropped the key parts of its anti-capitalist demands and settled for a moderate version of agrarian reform. But even here the experience of El Salvador, where rural-based guerrilla armies surrendered their arms in return for incorporation into the "political process", is a bad one. Ten years on, the masses are still waiting for serious agrarian reforms to be put into practice. But one neo-liberal austerity package after another has been pushed through with the support of the ex-guerrillas.

Would the FARC act any differently? Last year one of Wall Street's top financial barons, R Grasso, met FARC leaders in Colombia to hear reassurances that FARC had no evil intentions against US investments.

What is the path to social justice and political change in Colombia today? The axis of the struggle in the countryside needs to be shifted. At present the FARC engages the enemy at moments when it thinks it can score headline making successes. But the masses in their villages remain largely defenceless in the face of retribution by the right-wing paramilitaries. Self-defence organisation is a priority.

This can only be done effectively if the FARC put their weapons and command structures under the control of the population in the villages, starting with the areas that the army has ceded to them. When the balance of forces allows for it, then the displaced masses and land hungry need to organise the takeover of the big estates and destroy the death squads in the process.

The key to the success of the struggle lies in the urban centres where the working class is found – places such as Barrancabermeja, a city based on the oil industry; places such as the plantations where workers with a history of organisation and struggle exist. At present the workers are led by union federations such as the CUT. This federation, along with two other smaller ones, has had more than 2,500 of its members killed by the state and paramilitaries over the last 12 years. There is no doubting their heroism, including that of its leaders.

They have organised a series of protest strikes against pay cuts, sackings, privatisations and social spending cuts which have delayed and occasionally thwarted the plans of government. But they have taken place in the context of a self-defeating strategy.

Organisations such as the CUT refuse to criticise the shortcomings of the guerrilla groups and thereby abandon any attempt to influence the direction of the peasants' struggle or actively link it up with that of the workers in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government. Implicitly, at least, the leaders of the CUT agree with the FARC's strategy of bringing about a government of all "fair-minded" sectors of society; the CUT imposes the same limits upon the struggle of the workers as does the FARC.

What is missing is a revolutionary internationalist party that aims to forge a fighting unity of the poor peasants and workers in Colombia, that devises a co-ordinated fightback embracing all aspects of the struggle to expropriate the big estates, raise wages, defend and extend social services. It would link the present struggles with the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, organised through delegate councils and defended by a mass, accountable workers' militia.

WHAT WE FIGHT FOR

● US advisors and bases out of Colombia. No funding or training for the Colombian military. Cancel Colombia's debts to international creditors.
● Money without strings for emergency housing and jobs for the displaced. For mass demonstrations in the US and Europe demanding an end to US support for Colombian government and army.
● Halt all privatisations. Renationalise all privatised companies without compensation under workers' control. Expropriate all operations of foreign multinationals. Massive profit tax on business. Stop the flight of capital.
● For massive increases in social spending on projects devised and directed by the masses of the city and countryside. Nobody without a job, nobody working more than 40 hours. For a minimum living wage of $500 a month.
● Take over the big landowners' estates and turn them over to those that work the land. For state credits to help them work it.
● For mass vigilance and armed self-defence in the villages and the workers' barrios in the cities to crush the death squads.
● For a workers' and peasants' government elected and accountable to the mass organisations of the people. For a socialist federation of Latin American republics.

PEACE PROCESS

Can the new Northern Ireland deal last?

AS WORKERS Power went to press Sinn Fein was on the eve of sitting down with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)in a joint devolved government for Northern Ireland. David Trimble won the vote at the Ulster Unionist ruling council to sanction this, in advance of IRA arms decommissioning, only by creating a new three month deadline for decommissioning.

If, by February, the IRA haven't begun decommissioning the Council will revoke its decision and walk out of the executive. This deadline has no justification, either in terms of the Good Friday Agreement or the newly brokered deal, as a furious Gerry Adams pointed out.

But it was the only way that Trimble could outflank the hard-line Orange resistance to the deal. In effect he has now put Sinn Fein and the IRA on trial. Any further problems for the peace process - Trimble will now claim - cannot be blamed on Unionist intransigence. As he said to Gerry Adams, "over to you".

The IRA has promised to nominate a representative to the arms decommissioning body under Canadian general de Chastelain, so the current phase of the peace process can now commence. But the February deadline could well cause further major problems.

Nevertheless, the press was jubilant – but for anti-imperialists it is just the latest in a long list of concessions made to British rule by the Republican movement in return for little tangible results.

The present peace process, centred on the Downing Street Declaration and the Framework agreements, is the third major attempt by British imperialism since the partition of Ireland in 1922 to establish a "power sharing" government in Stormont.

The first was the Sunningdale agreement of 1973 and the second was the Anglo Irish Agreement of 1986. A main reason why the present peace process is more serious and shrewd than either of these is that Britain and its collaborators in Southern Ireland have learned from their previous failures.

In all cases "power sharing" is the euphemism for getting the bigoted leaders of the Protestant community to even contemplate democratic reform of the sectarian state that they have run as a "Protestant state for a Protestant people" since 1922.

Why has the present "peace process" apparently succeeded where others failed?

First, the Protestant population is politically splintered. Second the UUP – the main party of the unionist ruling class – is in the talks and the peace process; and is likely to stay in there despite the inevitable hiccups. Third the talks are taking place in the context of a lasting ceasefire by the IRA. Fourth, Sinn Fein and the IRA have effectively abandoned their goal of a united Ireland and implicitly accepted partition, in return for a place in the government and the release of prisoners.

It was clear however that the issue of IRA decommissioning , would, sooner or later, have to be faced as a crunch issue. This is because Trimble couldn't keep his followers in the UUP aboard without first a promise and then the actual beginning of decommissioning. It would be difficult for the IRA leadership to deliver decommissioning without a split which could threaten the whole process.



Sinn Fein's historic compromisers

The issue of the actual establishment of the power sharing executive last Summer brought these contradictions forward. When Trimble retreated, under pressure from UUP members, and drew the line at the slogan "No guns/No government" the peace process was deadlocked.

Britain had too much to lose – politically and economically – by letting the peace process go the way of the two others. So US senator George Mitchell was called in for the second time as the best that the imperialist rulers of Britain and the US had to offer in terms of a political trouble shooter.

It has taken Mitchell two months to get the peace process back on the rails. Mitchell has done this by getting the UUP, Sinn Fein and the IRA to make important new concessions. Sinn Fein's position prior to this was the Good Friday Agreement did not link IRA decomissioning to Sinn Fein getting seats in the new government. Their right to ministers on the power sharing executive, Gerry Adams argued, was a result of the hefty vote they received in the elections to the new assembly.

During October and November Sinn Fein shifted from this in order to prove its commitment to the "peace process" to both the Unionists and the British. A statement on 16 November said "SF accepts that decommissioning is an essential part of the peace process".

In turn the IRA in its statement of 17 November "acknowledges the leadership given by SF throughout this process". More importantly the IRA states:

"Following the establishment of the institutions agreed on Good Friday last year, the IRA leadership will appoint a representative to enter into discussions with John De Chastelain and the Independent International Commission of Decommissioning."

This representative is directly from the IRA, unlike Martin McGuinness who was a De Chastelain representative from SF. The move can have only one meaning: the beginning of IRA decommissioning.

In response to these important new concessions from Sinn Fein, Trimble has abandoned his position on "No guns/No Government" and has moved to support the formation of the power sharing executive and the North/South bodies.

Trimble does this however in the context of considerable dissent in the UUP and an absolute opposition from the other big party of the Orange ruling class, the DUP.

Northern Ireland secretary Peter Mandelson helped Trimble win a 58% majority at this crucial meeting by assuring him, behind the scenes, that the power sharing Executive will be suspended if the IRA has failed to start decommissioning within eight weeks of devolution. This again is a total backtracking from the position that Sinn Fein was elected, like every other party, and has a right to be there whether or not decomissioning starts.

Meanwhile Irish prime minister Bertie Aherne has committed the Dail to unconditionally abolish Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 constitution – which lay claim to the North as part of the national territory – on the day the Executive starts.

And these are only the "assurances" that are known about already. Behind the scenes Trimble's second in command John Taylor was moved from his refusenik position on Sinn Fein participation by "a number of private assurances". What these can be we can only guess at. But a politician like Mandelson, capable of bouncing the Queen into awarding the murdering bigots of the RUC a George Cross as a public relations stunt, is clearly able to deliver it.

In addition to this new investment plans are all of a sudden found to be in the pipeline from Britain and even more strongly from the USA – including a plan to give visas and subsidies to 10,000 young people from the border regions of Ireland for computer and IT training in the US.

And this is not to mention the growing stream of investment flowing into Northern Ireland from the booming economy in the South.

Two obstacles lie in the way of making the agreement stick. First, the IRA will find it difficult to decommission completely without a split that could, in the longer term, be one of the premises for a serious new phase of guerrilla struggle especially if it engaged in joint action with the Real IRA, the Continuity IRA and the INLA. Secondly there is the difficulty of implementing the Patten Commission's proposals to reform the RUC in a way that will keep Sinn Fein and the IRA aboard the peace process while not undermining Trimble.

Workers Power is against this peace settlement. We do not argue that the Republican movement should launch a new guerrilla war – that would be a return to a self defeating strategy that precisely failed to unite Ireland last time around. But we do argue that this settlement is a victory for Unionism, a victory for British imperialism and its friends in the Republic.

We reject the stance of the trade union and Labour leaders – and much of the so-called left – that says "At last we can get on with the class struggle".

In the first place, the struggle against British rule and the oppression of the anti-unionist community is part of the class struggle.

So is the goal of a united Ireland: it is a goal revolutionary socialists share with republicans, although for us it can only be achieved by mass working class struggle and must be linked inseparably to the fight for a 32 county workers' republic.

Those who argued that the working class should concentrate on the economic struggle and remain "neutral" from the anti-imperialist struggle were proved wrong: it was Britain and its Orange watchdogs who always introduced sectarianism into any workers' struggle that threatened to topple the status quo. So long as the border remains they will be able to play this card again in the future.

Secondly, the peace has not led to "improved conditions" for the class struggle. Yes the North is more peaceful, with a scaled down troop street presence and a more normal atmosphere for the middle class. But the proposed settlement is designed to stifle the class struggle and channel it, wherever it rises up, into sectarian politics.

In the devolved Assembly, parties must declare themselves Unionist, anti-Unionist or "neither" in order for power to be divided up. Now in the Executive both sides are locked in by the peace process. Sinn Fein and the SDLP may protest verbally against attacks on workers' rights or cuts in spending, or police brutality: but they cannot walk out without bringing the peace process down. Thus the Republican movement – which still paints Armalite toting guerrilla murals across Belfast and Derry – will in reality be in the Government whose armed wing is the RUC and the British Army.

The whole of politics will be reduced to a sectarian head count. Any idea of winning over the Protestant community to a more progressive social reformist party – the cherished utopia of reformists for 80 years – is ruled out in advance: the Unionists must be represented by Unionists, the anti-Unionists by Sinn Fein and the SDLP.

It is the opposite of a real democratic solution. And while Sinn Fein clings onto its place in the Executive it will go out of its way to stifle any struggles from below that threaten to destabilise the situation. Tacitly, as well, the British government will cede street level control to the Republican movement in the inner-city ghettos. While socialists have no truck with the reactionary campaign that says the IRA must be excluded from talks because of the punishment beatings to drug dealers and anti-social elements, neither do we trust the Republican movement to police the anti-Unionist communities. That is a job for a democratic militia, accountable to the mass organisations of the working class.

For all the rhetoric of socialism in the mid-1980s – now mostly disappeared from official Republican politics – the elitism of the guerrilla strategy always meant "socialism from above". Today it means that Sinn Fein will promise Britain that it will keep "order" in the Catholic working class communities: doing the state's dirty work against youths who take drugs, against gays, and very probably against dissident Republicans who reject the deal.

For all these reasons the power sharing Executive is a defeat for the Irish working class. Once Sinn Fein is locked into the deal the British state will wield the big stick again. It will crack down on Republican dissidents, despite the fact that they remain on ceasefire. It will water down and delay reforms to the RUC.

Meanwhile the mass Unionist opposition to the deal will carry on, with pipebomb attacks against Catholic homes unabated. To wreck the deal it is likely that the Orange die hards will stage spectacular provocations against the Republican movement – all of which Adams and McGuinness will have to sit and ignore.

Northern Irish workers deserve better than this imperialist peace and this sham democratic Assembly. Britain should quit Ireland and let the whole Irish people decide their own future. As Sinn Fein goes down the road of so many middle-class led anti-imperialist movements, there has never been a greater need for a revolutionary working class alternative to Republicanism and Unionism.

CHECHNYA

Yeltsin's graveyard?

Dave Stockton exposes the myth that Russia's war in Chechnya is a war against Chechen "bandits"

THE RUSSIAN army is on the rampage in Chechnya. They have captured the second city, Gudermes. The capital, Grozny, is being surrounded and shelled. The relentless bombardment has driven the remaining population underground. Grozny is a city in ruins. Russian officials have admitted that by the time it is "liberated" it might well be too badly damaged to rebuild.

The Russian forces have advanced slowly through the heavily populated plain of northern Chechnya, indiscriminately shelling or bombing each Chechen town and village. The Russian immigration service recently put the number of Chechen refugees who have fled the country at 222,000; between one-quarter and one-third of the total population.

Russia claims it is liberating Chechnya from the rule of bandits. Yet the leader of the pro-Russian puppet government in waiting has just been dragged out of a Russian jail, where he was imprisoned for banditry!

The Chechens have little reason to love their Russian "liberators". They were deported en masse to central Asia by Stalin in the Second World War: hundreds of thousands perished. The true scale of this was only revealed to many younger Chechens after Gorbachev's glasnost allowed its history to be uncovered. When independence came Chechnya was subjected to a Russian economic blockade. The economic hardships and disruption of the economic connections and life of the former USSR drove ever larger parts of the population into smuggling and crime.

In the 1994-1996 war 80,000 Chechens are estimated to have been killed. After Russia withdrew, defeated, the schools, universities, factories and hospitals were in ruins. The Russian blockade was intensified. This was despite the fact that the Russians signed a peace agreement, witnessed by the OSCE, renouncing the use of force, confirming that the territory is entitled to self-determination and promising to negotiate a treaty on its status by the end of 2001. All of these promises were broken.

Thus the nationalist Shamil Basayev, and the Islamist Khatab and their guerrillas, were not simply launching a "jihad" when they invaded Daghestan in August 1999. They were trying to break the encirclement of the republic. Of course, they hopelessly misestimated the appeal of Islam in neighbouring Daghestan and the fact that nationalism has little unifying appeal in a country with 30 ethno-linguistic groups.

The guerrilla actions of the Islamists, the banditry of some of the Chechen clans (with high-profile kidnappings), have more to do with the desperate plight of the Chechens, than either an Islamist jihad or the supposed take-over of the state by a mafia. The big time embezzlers and gangsters are in the Kremlin.

This is not to underestimate the terrible effect of banditry and corruption on the Chechen people. But we must be clear that the root causes lie in Russia's adamant refusal to allow the Chechens to determine their own future.

In the present war 3,000-4,000 civilians have been killed in the urban areas. The death toll amongst the refugees is unknown but they are living 20 to 30 to a room or tent, subsisting on a barely adequate diet, without regular access to running water, in sub-zero temperatures. The likely death toll from exposure or epidemics is considerable.

Interviews with soldiers at military hospitals, however, reveal that the military operation has not been successful. Those interviewed said the offensive has managed to destroy everything in sight – except significant numbers of guerrillas. One officer said the official government estimates of thousands of guerrillas dead is, at best, an exaggeration, and some said they saw very few, if any, dead guerrillas.

The Russian ground troops in the "liberated" areas sit nervously in trenches or tents, fearful they will be picked off by snipers, afraid even to light a cigarette. Their rations are poor: watery porridge and the only meat they get is what they themselves butcher from cattle stolen from Chechens. They are short of warm clothing.

Russia says 462 soldiers have been killed and 1,486 injured, but lists in the former category only include those killed on the battlefield. It does not reveal the number of interior ministry forces killed.

The near universal nationalist euphoria in Russia has resulted in higher morale amongst troops than in 1994-6 when defeatism was widespread. But a prolonged campaign in the depth of winter in terrain suitable to the guerrillas will eventually erode morale.

On the world stage, Russia's leaders are defiant of Western criticism toward their campaign, and resolute in their determination to press on to final victory. Events in Chechnya led to a clash between Yeltsin and Clinton at the Istanbul OSCE summit. Yeltsin tore off his translation headphones, exclaiming "son of a bitch!"

Any criticism of Russian bombing and terrorising of the civilian population is of course difficult for the man who bombed Belgrade and Baghdad.

The Russian socialist Boris Kagarlitsky says that the Russian war effort is doomed to run into the mud. The guerrillas may make the Russians pay a heavy price for Grozny and due to stretched communications and lack of troops able to wage a guerrilla war, the Russians will suffer even more in the south.

Their mistreatment of the civilian population will make it impossible to create a puppet civilian administration in northern and central Chechnya. Then the chauvinistic hysteria in Russia will subside, the casualty figures will emerge and the voices of opposition – now almost reduced to the courageous Soldiers' Mothers organisation – will become louder. Once it is revealed that the war is a bloody failure, there will be serious political consequences.

Kagarlitsky says: "All of these failures will be obvious as spring approaches. Possible consequences range from lasting warfare with invisible guerrillas to a general retreat and total decay of rule, as occurred with the French in 1812. Lost wars have always been at the core of Russian revolutions and reforms. In this sense, the Chechen crusade may trigger new upheavals within Russia itself.

It is this seemingly unanimous support for the war that ensures a profound crisis if the war is lost. Meanwhile, Yeltsin's generals are walking cheerfully into the traps prepared for them. But it is the soldiers who will pay."

The Chechens are paying an even higher price. Russians should do everything in their power to help them get rid of Russian rule. For if the Russians were to win, then the victory of the national-chauvinist Putin in the presidential elections and the enhanced role of the army are assured. That would be a disaster for the Russian workers who are resisting mass redundancies and the privatisation of their factories.

That is why all Russian workers should oppose the war, support the right of Chechnya to independence and give solidarity to those fighting against Yeltsin's war machine.

CHINA

WTO deal spells misery

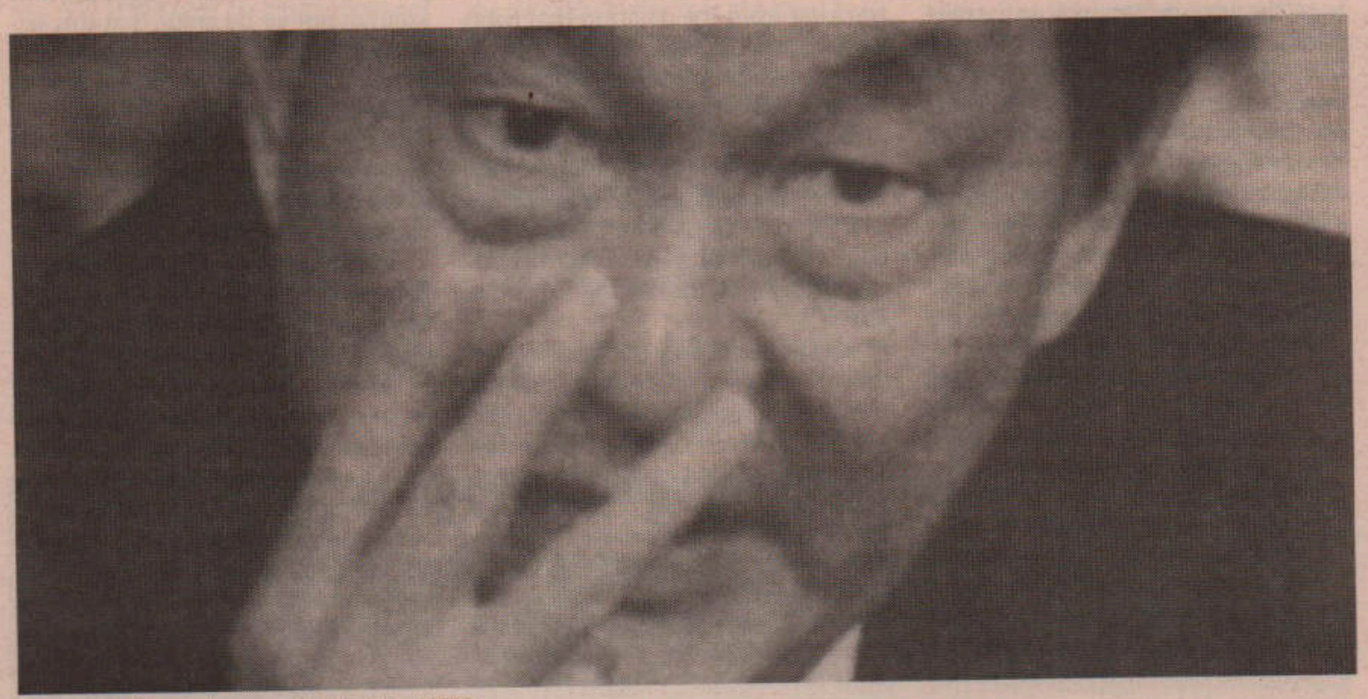
Peter Main explains the significance of China's deal to join the World Trade Organisation

THE US has ended its long opposition to China's membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

In exchange for a phased reduction in US import quotas on, for example, textiles, China has agreed to open her own markets for agricultural, manufactured goods and financial services and has agreed to drop the 49 per cent limit on foreign ownership of high tech companies. In addition, foreign banks will be allowed to open for commercial business anywhere in China immediately, and for personal banking within five years.

Last year, Chinese premier Zhu Rongji helped save the world economy from a slump by agreeing not to devalue the Chinese currency, the renminbi. As a result, annual growth in 1998 dropped into single figures for the first time in 20 years: it was officially 7 per cent last November but calculated at 5.5 per cent by the IMF. Exports were hit, falling from $70bn to $50bn to the USA.

In order to offset the loss of overseas markets, Beijing announced a massive state spending programme in August 1998. This took the form of a 100 billion renminbi investment in infrastructure development and a further 100 billion in credits to state industry to maintain production. However, this re-assertion of state economic control had significant consequences, both economic and political, for the conflict within the Communist Party bureaucracy that still rules China.



Zhu Rongji: welcomed into the WTO

Zhu wants to break up the state sector as a preparation for restoring capitalism throughout the economy. But a section of the bureaucracy opposes this. This faction was strengthened both ideologically and politically after the return to state subsidies.

For the first time, China is confronted with a crisis of deflation: falling prices, falling investment, falling sales and falling interest rates alongside massive uncleared stocks of goods and rising bank savings.

Higher subsidies to the increasingly obsolete heavy industrial state sector are the biggest obstacle to the Beijing leadership's aim of restoring capitalism within China.

This is where the WTO deal comes in. Having failed to create the domestic economic and political forces to defeat his opponents, Zhu is turning to the imperialists for help. China will remove its controls on foreign manufacturing investment, it will allow in foreign retailing operations, drastically reduce duties on imported farm products and require state-owned industry to buy from foreign suppliers if they are cheaper.

The opening of China's vast markets and equally vast resources to imperialism will have profound implications both inside and outside its borders.

The power of the Communist Party, its ability to hold down the Chinese working class as it did after the Tiananmen Massacre, is rooted in its control of the state-owned economy and its army's social base within the peasantry.

Although the attempt to force through the decisive stages of capitalist restoration will bring terrible threats to the livelihoods of millions, it will also undermine that dictatorship and give workers the opportunity to settle scores with the old regime.

Thus Zhu's chosen road to capitalist restoration also opens the road to a revolutionary struggle that can stop it. In this the working class should have no truck with an alliance of Stalinist dinosaurs and generals.

Only workers' control and workers' democracy can save China from the becoming a cheap labour playground for the world's multinationals. One in five of the world's population lives there: to the global capitalists that represents the unmined motherlode of profit that could keep the system going into the next century. Only a new revolutionary communist party can stop it. That is how high the stakes are in the Chinese struggle for working class power.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Fighting the new bosses

Ten years after the fall of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia the new capitalist system is in crisis and the workers are on the streets. But in the wings lurk the danger of a parliamentary "coup" and the growing threat of fascism. The LRCI's new section in the Czech Republic sent us this report on the current situation and an account of their own development as a political organisation.

CZECH WORKERS have had enough of capitalist restoration. Ten years ago workers helped make Czechoslovakia's "velvet revolution" against Stalinist rule. Since then, while capitalists and gangsters have got rich, conditions for the majority have got worse.

In the space of ten years, the former Czechoslovakia's new rulers have attempted to create what took 200 years of capitalist development in the west: rampant competition, the rule of the banks and corporations, a filthy rich ruling class and all the necessary cultural baggage of individualism, petit-bourgeois egoism and hypocrisy, and a "dog eat dog" mentality. In the process, the country was split into two national republics: Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

But the capitalists' project is not going well. Both countries are wracked with economic and political crises.

In the Czech Republic workers see their lives being demolished by the new system. In the universities, while professors have to survive on $350 a month, 10 per cent of women students are so poor that they have been forced into part-time prostitution.

The new ruling class is split into two:

- those connected with the western multinational companies and banks
- the former Stalinist bureaucrats who privatised state property by giving it to themselves and whose businesses depend on state subsidies to survive.

This second layer is pushed towards bankruptcy by the ending of state subsidies and a credit squeeze. They have constructed a huge corruption network to ensure the state handouts and state contracts continue. They and their friends in government also need to stop the introduction of EU legislation that would finish off their businesses.

The political representative of this "crony capitalist" sector is Vaclav Klaus and his party, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), who are fighting to restore the vast subsidies, to hold back the EU bulldozer, to keep state contracts for Czech-owned capital, and to ensure protection of their markets against global businesses.

On the other side stand the social democrats (CSSD). Since coming to power in June 1998, the CSSD has sided with the pro-imperialist section of the ruling class. They tightened a credit squeeze on crony-owned enterprises, and invited in the multinationals to do as they please. They have slashed both personal wealth taxes and corporation tax.

But their programme has hit the buffers. The working class won't take much more; large layers of the middle class are politically disaffected and even the crony capitalists are mouthing opposition to global imperialism.

Large numbers of workers have, over the last 12 months, swung away from CSSD to the Communist Party (KSCM). This growth of support for the KSCM has horrified all sections of the bourgeoisie.

However, the fundamental divide between the cronies and pro-imperialists stops them from forming a satisfactory coalition arrangement to replace the CSSD government and to head off the rise of the KSCM. The cronies and ODS want the subsidies back, whilst the pro-imperialists, including those around velvet revolution leader Vaclav Havel, are unwilling to make major concessions over subsidies.

But neither wing is able to carry on supporting the crisis-ridden CSSD government. The question is what should replace them. Whatever the eventual shape of the crony/pro-imperialist alliance, some type of unelected coalition is likely. A national government – in reality, the first stages of a Bonapartist solution – is on the cards.

In the Czech Republic we need a revolutionary party of workers and youth

In the short term the bosses need to head off the outbreak of mass strikes in industrial areas like Northern Moravia, where there is 17 per cent unemployment. For that, anti-strike decrees, issued without parliamentary approval, will be crucial. The bosses are lobbying for compulsory six month "cooling off periods" after strike votes!

Strengthening the existing "anti-extremist" laws will be another way the bourgeoisie reduces democracy. The new laws will be mainly aimed against far-left organisations, but they will also be used to some extent to keep under control the growing fascist movement in the Czech Republic, which is conducting a campaign of mob violence and murder against the Roma.

Also on the agenda will be the removal of controls on maximum rents and utility prices. There will be swingeing cuts in education, social and health programmes. This part of the neo-liberal programme suits both wings of the ruling class: the budget cuts could then be used to restore state subsidies to the crony capitalist companies.

The pressure on the reformist leaders to keep their mouths shut in parliament and to keep their members off the streets will be enormous.

The Socialist Workers Party (SOP), the Czech section of the LRCI, is fighting for rank and file workers to reject any climbdown and accommodation to the bosses' plans.

The strike wave brewing in North Moravia and North Bohemia must be stepped up, not cooled down. A real strategy must be worked out of co-ordinated strikes and mass occupations. To achieve this, rank-and-file forums need to be built.

The almost complete lack of union democracy must end. All leaders who continue to betray the fight of the workers have to be kicked out and replaced with serious militants from the ranks. Union positions elected for three to five years must be ended and replaced with a regime of automatic re-election. Full time union reps should be paid only the average wage of a skilled worker.

The key plank of our programme in the face of the bosses' wrangling over state subsidy versus rampant multinationals must be: nationalisation without compensation.

Workers in the Czech Republic are not unaware of the actions of paper mill workers near St Petersburg, in Russia, who occupied their plant and waged gun battles with special police squads, and instituted a factory committee with right of veto over all management decisions.

We need to emulate that kind of resistance – but such action needs to be generalised and taken further to expropriation: workers' power "in one factory" cannot last indefinitely.

The SOP also fights for a CSSD/KSCM government: i.e. a government of the mass reformist workers' parties with no bourgeois allies. We have no illusions in the reformist leaders – but millions of Czech workers do, and these must be put to the test.

There is a left wing within both the CSSD and the KSCM: they must be forced to fight the current leaders and the rank and file can be won to real revolutionary communism.

We want to put the CSSD and KSCM to the test in power. Workers should organise to force them to deliver the urgent measures needed: generalised nationalisation without compensation where any job losses are threatened; massive taxation on the rich and multinational corporations; and a programme of public investment in infrastructure carried out under workers' control.

An internationalist perspective on the bosses' quarrels over the EU is needed: no to the bosses' Europe, yes to a workers' Europe. Workers must reject both the nationalist protectionism and multinational robbery on offer.

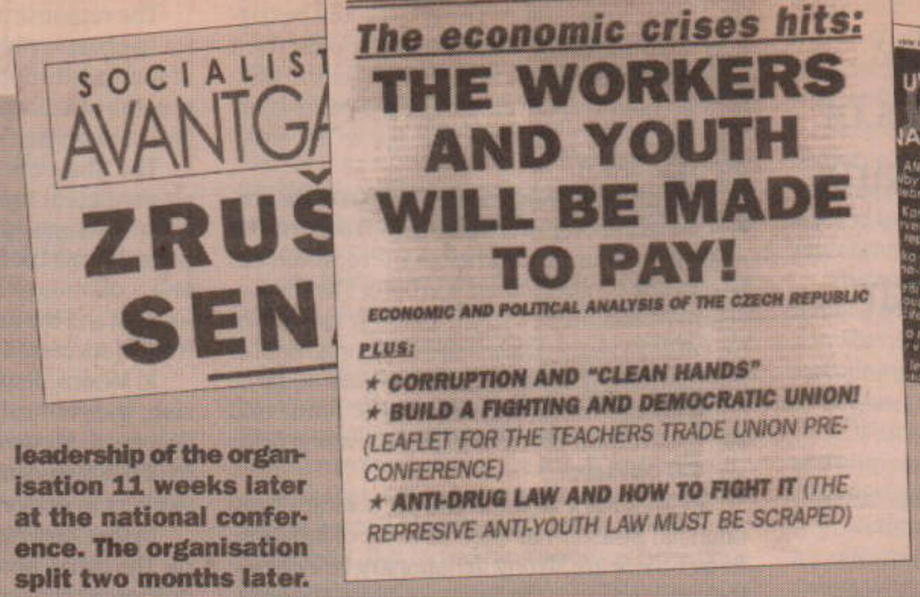
A socialist/communist party government cannot on its own solve the crisis: the depth of the crisis precludes viability of any "advanced" left reformist programme in government, just as it did in Chile in the 1970s. The multinationals desperately need to continue sucking out vast super-profits and intend to "fire-bomb" – as they put it – the bankrupt enterprises.

In the Czech Republic we need a revolutionary party of workers and youth, not the parliamentary passivity of the CSSD/KSCM – and our objective must be to smash both imperialist capitalists and the home-grown "cronies".

The return of capitalism to the Czech republic means: semi-colonialism, third world wages, and permanent mass unemployment, alongside crisis and semi-dictatorial regimes that could open the road to fascism.

We fight for:

- Reject the Bonapartist manoeuvres. New elections without delay.
- Rank and file control of the unions
- Mass strikes, occupations, and factory committees.
- For a KSCM-CSSD government – but organise to fight: force the workers' parties to enact an emergency programme to meet the needs of workers and youth.
- Build an internationalist revolutionary party of workers and youth.





THE SOCIALIST Workers Organisation (SOP), joined the League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI) in September 1999, following a two-day conference, which discussed the international programme of the LRCI, the Trotskyist Manifesto. This came after 11 months of discussion, contact and joint international action (such as on the Euromarches of December 1998 and May 1999).

Before joining the LRCI, the SOP formed part of the International Socialists, the Czech sister organisation of the SWP. We formed a faction in January 1998, following disagreements over the organisation's reaction to the intensified class struggle and youth uprisings against fascist murders.

We helped turn the anti-racist uprising into the first ever organised anti-racist movement in the Czech Republic, which gained national prominence. We rejected passive propaganda activity and insisted on a united front with the rest of the left and workers' movement – an approach that proved a complete anathema to the sectarian and passive propagandist supporters of Tony Cliff. A faction struggle ensued, culminating in us taking over the leadership of the organisation 11 weeks later at the national conference. The organisation split two months later.

Because we knew that building a revolutionary organisation in one country is a reactionary fallacy, we sought to join an international organisation. We first sought contact with the USFI (Socialist Outlook in the UK), despite realising it was a right-centrist, opportunist organisation. We felt we could locate ourselves within its left-wing. Contact with them, however, indicated the left wing wasn't serious, and had no intention of fighting the bankrupt leadership internationally.

At the SWP's Marxism 1998 conference we met LRCI comrades, had serious discussions with them and took away issues of Trotskyist International. We were impressed and a series of international discussions took place, centring around the Trotskyist Manifesto.

Following our attendance at the LRCI's International Executive Committee in December 1998, we produced a joint international statement with the LRCI on our plans for fusion and the need to build a mass revolutionary communist international with a common programme and democratic centralism.

Our organisation is growing. We are having a substantial impact on the radical and militant youth and on KSCM (especially its youth wing, the KSM), and have been able to build several militant campaigns.

Joining the LRCI on the eve of the twenty-first century, we look forward to the world-wide proletarian revolution and the building of a mass revolutionary international.

APPEAL FOR FUNDS

The LRCI's work in Eastern Europe is expanding. We are aiming to hold an international conference of revolutionary groups in Eastern Europe some time in the year 2000. For this we need money. A few pounds could buy desperately needed resources and fund travel for comrades working to link up our contacts in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Send all you can to East Europe Fund, LRCI, BCM Box 7750, London WC1N 3XX. Cheques payable to Workers Power.

THEORY&PRACTICE

A balance sheet o

One year ago the International Executive Committee (IEC) of the LRCI outlined its perspectives for the class struggle in the year ahead. We predicted a year of turbulent struggle in the semi-colonial world and in the former Stalinist states, underpinned by a stock market crash that would seriously destabilise the response of the ruling class. We were only half right: the stock market crash still lies ahead of us, and its impact may be less dramatic because some of the world's weakest economies have had a further year to recover.
Here we outline the revised perspectives of the LRCI as it prepares for its Fifth World Congress in the year 2000.

THE PERSPECTIVES passed at the December 1998 IEC contained serious errors at the economic level. The core of these lay in our underestimation of the USA's ability to delay the "major correction" of the stock exchange which we saw as overdue and imminent.

We said:

"A violent 'readjustment' between the vastly inflated stock market and the shrinking rate of profit is inevitable in 1999. This will tip the US into open recession."

A year later, that has not occurred. Instead the North American economy and stock exchanges have continued to expand. The European economy also went into an upward phase. And most of Asia began to pull out of recession.

Only a major crash on Wall Street and an immediate slide into recession, if these occur within the next six months or so, are now likely to produce the severe world recession which we thought was imminent at the turn of the year. This combination is not impossible. Certainly the US stock market is vastly overvalued. The expansionary phase of the US cycle will end in the near future – but the downturn may not be on a scale sufficient to create a world slump.

In the first six months of 1999 the US stock market continued to set new record highs. However, by the second half of 1999 the speculative bubble began to shrink and by November Wall Street was back at April's levels. This reflected the slowdown of capital flowing into Wall Street: the 1997 Asian collapse and the collapse of stock markets in Russia and Latin America in 1998 all stimulated a "flight to quality", flooding the US stock market and hiking prices. The flight to quality has ended and even begun to be partially reversed.

By historical standards Wall Street remains hugely overinflated. But the significant factors in the last six months are that profits have revived (with US firms posting their best figures for two years) and productivity is up. Naturally these reduce the gap between the "real" value of shares as measured by expected profits and their speculative value, which is a result of too much money chasing too few stocks.

A stock market crash or slide that knocks one third off the value of the world's stock markets is not excluded. If it happens it will plunge the USA into recession. The crash could be triggered through one or more developments: a sharply increased flow of capital out of the USA; further interests rate hikes; a spate of profit warnings and losses; a falling dollar due to the growing trade deficit.

Everything will depend on the scale of the correction and of over what time-scale it occurs. The end result also depends whether the recession can be offset by US government's actions. The US government has money in the bank: it can afford tax cuts or a renewed arms spending programme. Alternatively, it could engineer a lower dollar to compensate for falling demand at home and launch an export offensive in the recovering Asian and EU markets.

An important factor in the USA's escape from financial disaster has been absence of inflation. In fact there are strong deflationary tendencies: the very tendencies the *Financial Times*, the *Economist* and a whole string of stock broker analysts were so worried about last year. This deflationary tendency (falling prices of raw materials, falling or stagnant real wages, falling business costs as new technology enables job losses and productivity gains in the white collar sector) already allows the USA to operate with very cheap credit, bringing low savings and massive private debt.

The strength of the US economy allowed the world's financial institutions to launch successful rescue packages for Indonesia, Brazil and Russia. Each of these threatened a financial collapse that would bring down the world credit system with it.

In 1998 we thought that these crises might severely stretch the resources of the IMF and World Bank, especially if the US recession materialised. But the IMF was able to meet the exigencies of the crises in Asian and Latin America. It pumped money into Russia and propped up the billion dollar investment funds that were threatened with bankruptcy.

US economic strength also lay behind Clinton's agreement with Beijing that the Chinese renminbi would not be devalued. If China had devalued its currency and launched an export offensive this would have worsened the Asian crisis. In the end, China's refusal to devalue (an act set to be rewarded by admission into the WTO) headed off the Asian slump we predicted. As a result, another part of our economic perspectives were proved wrong. A marked recovery began in Asia in the second quarter of 1999, with the exception of Indonesia which is still in recession in real terms.

Despite the errors we made in 1998 on the economy, much of our political perspectives were correct. There has been no general trend towards stabilisation on the world political scene.

The attempted genocide and an imperialist war of intervention in Kosova; struggles by youth and students in Greece, Britain, France, Iran, Mexico, Indonesia, Zimbabwe; workers' and students' demonstrations in Iran; the war between India and Pakistan; two governmental crises in Russia and the launching of a second Chechen war; the attempted genocide in East Timor and the Australian-led intervention; the eruption of political struggle in Indonesia over the presidential elections; the mass mobilisations and continued guerrilla war in Colombia. All of these show that we are in a period of major upheavals, not one of peace and quiet.

It was the absence of an underpinning economic crisis that allowed imperialism to "keep its cool" in the face of severe political and military challenges in 1999.

Latin America

We underestimated the effects of the currency devaluation and of the huge stabilisation package that the IMF had already undertaken in Latin America. Brazil's GDP dropped not by 5 per cent but by only 0.8 per cent. Again the IMF rescue package acted as a firebreak preventing the crisis spreading to Mexico or the USA itself.

However some countries – in particular Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina and Chile – were severely hit. Venezuela's GDP fell by 9.6 per cent; Colombia's by 7.6 per cent; Argentina's by 4.9 per cent and Chile's by 3.7 per cent.

The response to the recession in Latin America has been a radicalisation of politics, in terms of increased support for the "left" official parties, the re-emergence of populist "left nationalism" and in massive street protests.

The Chavez regime in Venezuela did not (as we predicted) rapidly betray and disillusion its voters by surrendering to the IMF. Chavez supporters swept the Constituent Assembly elections and took radical measures against the old parliament and the judiciary. Chavez was in the forefront of successful moves to raise world oil prices.

In Mexico, despite continuing economic expansion, the political difficulties of the PRI regime deepened. Mexico City University was occupied by 350,000 students who won active support from workers in demonstrations and mass pickets.

In the Corrientes province in northern Argentina, the urban poor and small farmers protested and forced concessions. In Chile there were militant student demonstrations and a dock workers' strike against privatisation. The Socialist Party candidate is running miles ahead of the right in the polls before the presidential elections and there is widespread talk of arraigning Pinochet in Chile.

Meanwhile in Colombia the military has launched a new wave of repression against the left wing guerrilla movements, sparking a protest march of hundreds of thousands on the streets, but leaving the FARC guerrillas in control of one third of the country's land.

The war in Kosova

The Kosova war demonstrated a central paradox in the global military balance. The collapse of the USSR has left the USA as a world power of overwhelming military predominance. It can act unilaterally, and its allies are powerless to act without it, except where they are facing low-tech opposition. Yet the USA has not overcome the Vietnam syndrome.

A forced entry into Kosova would have tested Nato very severely as the disputes between the US military and the Administration showed clearly (for example the sacking of Wesley Clarke, the refusal of Britain's paratroops to obey Clarke's order to seize Pristina airport etc.). As long as the EU imperialists have not established an effective strategic military force we are unlikely to see an open split between Europe and America on the political-military level.

Probably the most destabilising consequence of the Kosova war, in the longer term, is the deterioration of relations between the USA and Russia and China. Fear of US military might has driven the political and social forces running both Russia and China into a more independent foreign policy vis-a-vis the USA, one in growing conflict with imperialist interests.

We can expect a continuing deterioration of relations between Russia and the US. Clashes over the oil supply in the Caucasus and Russian assertiveness in Central Asia, are highly likely. Open clashes between the USA and China will be fewer, because of the need for a continued trade relationship. However, sabre-rattling over Taiwan could continue since it plays a significant role in the internal conflicts within the Beijing bureaucracy.

The former Soviet Union

Russia was able to put off the danger of a total economic collapse in 1999, but this failed to stop the ever-deepening political crisis of the regime. Yeltsin not only had to change his government twice this year: he is isolated within the elite and his camarilla is ridden by factional struggles.

This deep political crisis forces the regime to look for a way out by more and more adventures. The invasion in Chechnya and the whole Caucasus crisis is a clear expression of this. The failure of the attack on Chechnya or its conversion into a bloody embroilment in guerrilla war, would quickly deepen the crisis of the regime.

From 1991 up to August 1998 the Russian restorationist regime was built on a certain social base: the new capitalist class (called the "oligarchs") and the pro-capitalist bureaucracy plus the new (but small) middle layers. The onset of the crisis one year ago destroyed this restorationist alliance. It signalled the decline of the power of the oligarchs, bitter factional struggles inside the ruling elite, the impoverishment of the middle layers, the end of the smooth collaboration with Washington and the IMF. Last but not least, it stimulated a new wave of working class resistance.

While there are several reports of militant and sometimes successful strikes in enterprises, by and large the working class has not played a significant or independent role in Russian policy since the miners' strikes and blockades last summer. The economic crisis – and the betrayals of the CP and trade union leadership – have led to a setback.

The terrible social atomisation of the working class, inflicted by seventy years of Stalinist rule, also remains a barrier to resistance. But there are reports of regional strike committees, proto-soviets and union and political forces attempting to build a workers' party. The poor state of the Russian left and the isolation of these struggles makes it difficult to judge whether we are in for a major fightback across Russia in the next 12 months.

In the absence of mass workers' resistance Russia could go down the path of an authoritarian regime led by the most intact national institutions – the security services plus sections of the military apparatus. Prime minister Putin is promoting himself as the embodiment of that solution. This would be a kind of bonapartist state-capitalist regime trying to resolve its crisis through an nationalist-adventurist foreign policy and open suppression of the working class.

A second alternative would be a peaceful handover of power to the Luzhkov/Primakov bloc – consisting of nationalist new rich politicians and remnants of the Stalinists – who could retain, at first, some of the trust and illusions of the working class.

f our perspectives



Not devaluing Chinese currency prevented chaos on the Shanghai stock exchange

China

China's agreement not to devalue the renminbi was obtained at the cost of allowing a continued increase in its trade surplus with the USA, which is expected to reach $70 billion in the current year. However, this has not made up for the loss of exports to other Asian markets and production within China has been maintained by a continuation of subsidies to state industry and increased investment in infrastructure and other big projects.

Officially, economic growth is running at 7.4 per cent which is significantly lower than previous forecasts above 8 per cent. Even if the figures are true, this is perilously close to the minimum growth rate necessary to keep pace with population, rather than the signal of a buoyant economy that it would be practically anywhere else.

Politically, the resort to state subsidies has strengthened the more conservative wing of the bureaucracy in their opposition to further market reforms.

Current policy is towards the creation of "asset management corporations" which will undertake debt-equity swaps with the indebted banks and state enterprises, thereby, theoretically, freeing them from the burden of debt and allowing them to adopt more "commercial" attitudes. Past experience suggests that in many cases this new device will simply be used to allow bankrupt firms to continue in business and run up new debts.

Opposition from bureaucratic conservatives and managers was not the only factor in forcing Beijing to sanction a further lease of life for state industry and a round of state investment. Urban and rural unrest has been widespread in China for the last two years and, while all workers' self-organisation has to be clandestine, it is likely that the working class has developed sophisticated networks of activists and militants, as it did after the Tiananmen massacre.

East-Asia

In Indonesia the attempt by the political élite to keep Megawati Sukarnoputri from becoming president led to violent disorder throughout Java and Bali. Megawati's inclusion, alongside Wahid, as vice-president was necessary to stabilise the situation. This was because she and her party, the PDI-P, are the focus of massive expectations among the workers, the poor and the students.

Economic recovery and the Wahid-Megawati government will probably now bring a "honeymoon period" of six months to a year in Indonesia. The expectations of the masses in her and Wahid are considerable – yet this will not stop the IMF demanding that debts run up during the last three years be paid for by the poor. The military may have withdrawn only to the wings but ultra-reactionary forces amongst them will doubtless try to destabilise the new regime.

In the longer term the students and workers will learn by bitter experience the inability or unwillingness of Megawati and Wahid to meet their basic demands. New unrest will probably focus on political questions particularly the demand for a trial for Suharto and other corrupt bureaucrats and the end of dwinfungsi, (a constitutionally guaranteed role of the army in civilian affairs).

Despite our short term errors of economic prediction, on a world scale the objective foundations of an openly revolutionary period are increasing

The central problem remains the crisis of leadership. In practice this is posed by the danger of the separation of the workers and students: with the workers focusing on economic reform and students on political change.

In South Korea the political crisis has lessened considerably. The Kim Dae Jung government clearly generates many more illusions than the previous right wing and military governments could ever do. It can trade on its "democratic" credentials to persuade workers to make more sacrifices and limit the scope of their resistance to austerity.

Until the working class builds its own political alternative to the ruling bourgeois parties it will be condemned to rally to the flag of middle class-led opposition.

While there seems to be no progress in the formation of a workers' party in South Korea, there have been some left-wing splits from the Stalinist forces in the Philippines (the Revolutionary Workers Party and the Socialist Labour Party). The Indonesian PRD, with around 10,000 members and which is the centre of the political radicalisation in Indonesia, clearly contains many subjective revolutionary socialists. A key task for the LRCI over the next 12 months is to strengthen our contacts with these left movements in East Asia

Europe

In Europe, the rapid fall of the Euro against the dollar and the resignation of the entire European Commission put the EU on the back foot against its US rival. Trade disputes over bananas, hormone-treated beef and GM products indicate the continuing friction, which will carry over into the next round of world trade negotiations.

The relative quiescence of workplace struggles in Western Europe in this period is due to the economic upturn and the presence of "Left" coalitions or Social Democratic governments.

Our perspectives predicted few major clashes in Europe "until the effects of the world recession were felt". As we have seen, the main powerhouse economies of the EU have swung upwards not down – though rationalisation, redundancies and merger mania have meant that the working class has not benefited from it. Nevertheless there have been important struggles over the past year.

In January Greece was swept by a huge wave of very militant school occupations by 16-18 year olds against tests designed to exclude poorer students. In Spain – the only major EU country with a conservative government – there have been a number of national and regional strikes. In France during the Autumn 140,000 French school students took part in two national days of action, followed by a mass workers' demonstration against unemployment.

The Euro-elections proved to be setback for the ruling Social Democratic parties with the important exception of France. In Germany the ruling socialist party suffered badly and has done so since in provincial elections. This shows that the forced resignation of Lafontaine has in fact proved a pyrrhic victory for the "German Blair".

Schröder is clearly committed to shift the balance of forces within the SPD and the government to the right. But he and his supporters face important obstacles from two sides within the workers' movement: a substantial part of the traditional labour aristocracy has refused to support Schröder in the recent elections because of his attacks on the welfare state. Secondly, a growing part of the West German trade union movement is toying with support for the ex-Stalinist PDS.

The Schröder government is continuing the attacks started by Kohl, sometimes in a more severe form than Kohl ever dared to attempt. But it is forced to carry out the attacks via integration of the trade union bureaucracy into class collaborationist schemes like the "Alliance for Jobs". This reflects the inherent weakness and instability of the German government which will continue for next period and which may even collapse before the end of the term to change into a cross-class "great coalition".

In Britain, Blair has strengthened his grip on the Labour Party and, through a renewed alliance with the right wing of the bureaucracy, on the trade unions too. In. England and Wales, despite Blair's poor showing in the Euro-elections, the space for a protest vote against Labour is limited by the continued loyalty of reformist workers and their leaders to the Labour project. Not so in Scotland where 100,000 voted for left of Labour socialists (23,000 in Glasgow) and Tommy Sheridan, leader of the Scottish Socialist Party (a coalition of right centrists and left reformists), was elected to the Scottish Parliament.

The results for the English SWP and Socialist Party were humiliating and no doubt added to the SWP's observable fall in morale and numbers since its disastrous adaptation to pro-Serb Stalinists in the Kosova war.

In France the bloc of the LCR and Lutte Ouvrière got 5.2 per cent of the vote and around a million votes. That gained them five seats in the European Parliament. The LO-LCR vote approached 10 per cent in parts of the industrial suburbs of Paris and bore comparison with that of the declining PCF.

On the other hand the earlier hope of the centrist left, the renewed Stalinist parties such as Rifondazione Comunista in Italy and the Izquierda Unida in Spain, suffered heavy defeats. This strongly contrasts to the victories of the Swedish Left Party and the German PDS, who have capitalised from the discontent of the more class conscious workers and youth in the EU elections and are likely to do so in the future

Conclusion

Our political perspectives – an intensified period of inter-state and class struggles mainly located in Asia and Latin America – have been more or less borne out. But our short term economic perspectives were proved wrong.

The New World Order remains in remarkable disorder. However the prolongation of the US cyclical upswing has enabled the US dominated financial institutions to counteract the turning of the Asian and Latin American recessions into catastrophic slumps. Unless the US Stock exchange crashes and the US enters into a serious recessions it appears that the cycles of Europe and North America will not be synchronised. Europe may continue a Euro fuelled recovery,

But these are still "ifs" and "maybes" and not yet certainties. A stock exchange crash is still likely, although profit recovery over the last 12 months means that it need not be as spectacular. And it may not lead to the synchronised world recession that we thought probable one year ago.

Despite our short term errors of economic prediction, on a world scale the objective foundations of an openly revolutionary period (economic misery and uncertainty combined political/ military explosions) are increasing.

The emergence of new pre-revolutionary situations over the next six months is not excluded – in Russia or Indonesia, for example. But the restraining factor of the crisis of leadership needs to be given more emphasis than ever before.

In Western Europe and North America, as long as the present economic buoyancy continues, the class struggle there is likely to express itself mainly in sectional trade union struggles, in pressure for reforms from the social democratic governments where they exist and in continued movements by young people around issues like education, third world poverty, the environment and sexual and cultural freedom.

The need for working class unity in action, against the global companies and the global effects of the profit system, is greater than ever. Yet the national programmes and national organisations of the workers and oppressed are imprisoned by reformism and trade union routinism. Only the revolutionary socialists offer a truly global answer: only revolutionary socialism offers a truly global organisation.

The gap between our aspirations and reality is huge: in most countries the left is tiny. But it is not because of the stability of capitalism's economy, politics or ideology. Solving the crisis of leadership within the working class remains the key task, a key that will unlock the cycle of struggle and defeat that has imprisoned the workers' movement over the whole past decade.

The shame of Labo

In mid-November the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 became law. Its provisions mean hardship, social isolation and effective criminalisation for asylum seekers. *Linda Miller* explains that support for racist legislation is nothing new, either from the Labour Party or Britain's trade union movement.

For centuries immigrants have arrived in London and other British cities, though in most decades since 1700 to the present substantially more people have left Britain than have come to live in it. In the 1880s, for example, the nation "exported" some 820,000 more people than it received.

Even so, immigration fuelled violent passions among large sections of English and Scottish workers in the second half of the nineteenth century. The main target of their anger at that time were the Irish.

Spurred by the famines of the 1840s, tens of thousands of Irish peasants swelled the ranks of the proletariat in Britain over the course of the next two decades. Virtually all sections of the press fed religious and social prejudices against the Irish, who were crudely caricatured as lazy, disease-ridden and criminal.

Karl Marx, noted the debilitating impact of this virulent anti-Irish sentiment on the development of class consciousness among English workers in an 1870 letter:

"The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself."

But for all the ill-feeling and recurrent violence against Irish immigrants, no government acted to stem Irish immigration. There were two key reasons for the "liberal" attitude of the British ruling class: the height of Irish immigration coincided with a capitalist boom that generated a strong demand for cheap labour, and Britain's rulers found it essential to maintain the myth that Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, sections of the political elite would adopt a very different attitude to immigration, on a much smaller scale, from Eastern Europe. An unholy alliance between sections of the labour movement and demagogic Tory MPs would pave the way to the Aliens Act 1905, the first modern-day legislation to restrict immigration into Britain.

Across Britain in 1892 more than 40 labour movement bodies adopted resolutions calling for restrictions on immigration, especially by East European Jews. Trades councils in London, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester were among those advocating immigration controls. The resolution passed by Manchester Trades Council that year was shamelessly reactionary:

"It is time that workers of this country . . . rose up and protested with firmness against the continuation of this curse [of Jewish immigration]".

Later in 1892 the TUC would declare its support for legal barriers to immigration. Four years later the trade union leadership sent a delegation to the Home Secretary supporting anti-immigrant legislation, sponsored by the Tory Lord Salisbury.

The East End of London was the primary focus for Jewish immigrants, fleeing Tsarist pogroms in imperial Russia and similar anti-Semitic massacres and discriminatory legislation in sections of the Austro-Hungarian empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A notoriously anti-Semitic Tory MP, Major Evans-Gordon, held his seat in Stepney (East London), with significant working class support, even during the Liberal landslide of 1906.

Evans-Gordon had founded the British Brothers League, the forerunner to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, in the East End in 1901 and was one of the driving forces behind the 1905 legislation.

The Aliens Act 1905 marked a crucial turning point in the politics of immigration. Sections of the capitalist class and the labour movement had collaborated to establish xenophobic and racist legislation on the statute book. Partly as a result of this, nearly a century later the majority of the population see immigration controls as necessary, reasonable and historically inevitable.

The populist agitation culminating in the 1905 legislation did, however, provoke stiff opposition, mainly from Jewish workers' organisations. An outstanding example of such resistance was a September 1894 conference in Whitechapel, East London, organised by the Federated Jewish Tailors' Union in response to the TUC's support for restrictive legislation. The meeting hall, with a capacity of 3,000, was packed to the rafters. Thousands more who could not gain entry filled adjacent streets.

The conference adopted a resolution stating that "the vast amount of poverty and misery which exists is in no way due to the influx of foreign workmen but is the result of private ownership of the means of production".

The following year ten predominantly Jewish unions signed the first popular leaflet against immigration controls. Its authors asserted that immigrant and "native" English workers had a common enemy in the capitalist class and reminded the English of their "duty to combine against a common enemy, [rather] than fight against us, whose interests are identical with yours".

An important minority of politically advanced trade unionists joined with their Jewish comrades in calling for class unity, regardless of ethnicity or religion, as the only effective response to low wages, and appalling working and living conditions. Rallies, with some labour movement backing, took place in London and Leeds, while 1902 saw the formation of the Aliens Defence League. Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter) was among its founding members. The early twentieth century also witnessed the development of locally-based organisations such as the Manchester Protest Committee to champion the rights of immigrant workers and oppose restrictive legislation.

This agitation didn't stop the 1905 measures, but it helped check the growth of racist ideology in British unions. The TUC leadership, for instance, halted its campaign for immigration controls until the late 1950s.

The Aliens Act declared that an "undesirable immigrant" who "cannot show that he has in his possession or is in a position to obtain the means of decently supporting himself" should be denied entry to Britain. The statistics for successful asylum applications over the next few years illustrate the cruel implementation of this legislation. In 1906 more than 500 people were granted asylum, whereas by 1908 the figure had fallen to 20 and by 1910 stood at just five.

Parliament followed the 1905 Act up with further Acts in 1914 and 1919. These attacked not only those seeking to enter Britain, but also people from other national origins who had already settled in this country. The 1914 measures empowered the state to deport aliens, who had previously been lawfully resident in the UK, irrespective of whether or not they had a criminal conviction. Not surprisingly, in light of the leading role Jewish workers had played in building some of the most radical labour movement organisations in London's East End, Manchester and Glasgow, the act made it a criminal offence for an alien to "promote industrial unrest".

A large number of East European Jews who had gained asylum in an earlier period found themselves legally branded between 1914 and 1918 as "enemy aliens". Many of them joined the ranks of 29,000 foreign nationals interned in special camps. In what would prove an especially bitter irony these facilities were actually labelled "concentration camps".

The 1919 legislation removed the right to asylum. Throughout the 1920s anti-immigrant legislation blocked Jewish workers who continued to flee anti-Semitic persecution in Eastern Europe. The acts also provided the legal pretext for the forcible deportation of dozens of Jewish leftists. During Ramsey MacDonald's 1929-31 Labour government, one prominent Russian Jewish revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, was denied asylum in Britain as he sought refuge from Stalin's brutal dictatorship.

Immigration controls provided a cloak of legitimacy to successive British governments in the 1930s as politicians turned a blind eye to the plight of Jews in central Europe. While the Nazis consolidated their grip over Germany and Austria, between 1933 and 1939 the UK authorities admitted only 50,000 Jews.

That figure would have been even lower but for an April 1933 meeting where Jewish community leaders agreed with the Home Secretary that no refugee who gained admission would become "a charge to public funds". Subsequently, the Jewish Refugee Committee raised funds to support those fleeing the gathering Holocaust.

Even then, the UK imposed new visa requirements on German and Austrian nationals in 1938. The vast majority of those affected were Jews fleeing the certainty of death under Nazi rule. The Foreign Office issued secret instructions to British consulates in central Europe indicating that the main purpose of the visa requirement was to: "regulate the flow into the United Kingdom of persons who may wish to take refuge there in considerable numbers". Before granting a visa, passport control officers were obliged to ascertain whether the "applicant is likely to be an asset in the United Kingdom."

Also in 1938 the government revived the category of "enemy aliens". This label again applied not only to Jews seeking refuge but to long-settled Jewish workers. From 1939 until 1945 the "enemy aliens" category extended to all German, Austrian and eventually Italian nationals. While those interned under this legislation included numerous fascist sympathisers a significant minority comprised German and Austrian Jews, European leftists and even members of the International Brigade who had fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War.

The numbers interned grew in May 1940 as more of continental Europe fell under Nazi control. The exact ethnic and religious composition of internees is not known, but a survey of one camp revealed that more than 80 per cent of its inmates were Jewish and that nearly a third of these had escaped from Nazi prisons.

Squalor and the virtual absence of medical facilities characterised these hell-holes. In Bury, for example, a facility holding 2,000 people lacked running water and its "toilets" consisted of six buckets. Inmates slept on grease-covered factory floors amid abandoned machinery.

Such conditions provoked resistance, with internees staging a hunger strike which gained some support among trade unionists in Greater Manchester. The main voice of opposition to internment and the deportation to Canada and Australia of central European refugees continued, however, to come from the Jewish community, with only occasional backing from trade union branches which passed resolutions that rarely translated into any action.

By this stage the official leadership of the labour movement was thoroughly incorporated into Britain's "war effort", stomping on strikes against ever harsher workplace conditions, and suspending all criticism of Churchill's coalition government in which Labour and union leaders played a key role.

On the one hand, then, trade union bureaucrats accepted internment, at the same time as encouraging a begrudging acceptance of so-called New Commonwealth immigrants, primarily from the Caribbean, who had come to bolster both Britain's armed forces and civilian production.

There was government-sponsored recruitment of 1,200 workers from British Honduras (now Belize) to be lumberjacks in Scotland, while another 1,000 West Indians came to work in munitions factories in the North West of England. In addition, an estimated 10,000 West Indian men came to Britain to join RAF ground crews, while thousands more signed up for the army and navy where they were joined by many West Africans and South Asians.

The welcome was rarely warm, but organised racist hostility during the war years was also minimal. This relatively tolerant atmosphere would change dramatically by the end of the 1940s as it

ur's racist record

became evident that some of the war-time black workers wanted to remain in Britain and others sought escape from mass unemployment and poverty in what remained Britain's Caribbean colonies. In contrast to the economic desperation in the West Indies, there was a post-war boom in Britain, sparking a high demand for semi and unskilled labour in many parts of the country.

In the 1950s however, pressure was mounting for tighter curbs on immigration, targeted primarily at people from the New Commonwealth.

In the late summer of 1958 large-scale racist violence intensified with anti-black rioting in west London's Notting Hill and the west central area of Nottingham. The local Labour MP for North Kensington, George Rogers, excused the racist violence as he called on the then Tory government to "introduce legislation quickly to end the tremendous influx of coloured people from the Commonwealth. . . . overcrowding has fostered vice, drugs, prostitution and the use of knives. For years the white people have been tolerant. Now their tempers are up." Rogers' views found an echo from James Harrison, a Labour MP in Nottingham, who had consistently advocated further restrictions on immigration immediately after the Second World War.



The Muhammad Idrish campaign united anti-deportation activists and trade unionists against racist immigration laws

The views of Rogers and Harrison remained very much on the margins of Labour in opposition. Labour's national executive adopted a liberal "anti-racist" statement in the wake of the Notting Hill and Nottingham riots, which the popular press wrongly depicted as opposition to immigration controls generally. Meanwhile, the top table at the TUC had issued a call for further curbs:

"Countries of origin should impose gates to prevent people leaving for the UK."

Later that autumn the TUC General Council actually approached the Conservative government to encourage it to adopt a scheme to "bar anyone entering the UK from the black Commonwealth without work vouchers". The Tory conference did agree to a remarkably similar position that year. In the twilight of their 13 years in power the Tories granted the TUC bureaucrats' wish with the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962.

Initially, Labour opposed the 1962 legislation, but over the course of the next three years Labour under Harold Wilson carried out a policy shift on immigration controls that was as dramatic as any about-face by Jack Straw and New Labour. After its narrow win at the 1964 general election, the party not only retained the 1962 act but reached an informal accommodation with the Tories on immigration issues in return for their support for the mild anti-discrimination measures embodied in the first Race Relations Act (1965).

Figures such as Home Secretary Roy Jenkins and junior minister Roy Hattersley promoted the argument that the tight control of the flow of immigrants, especially those from New Commonwealth countries, was essential to "promote integration and good race relations." The problem ceased to be either white racism or the inability of capitalism to provide decent living standards for all but the willingness of immigrants to conform.

This all-party consensus on immigration fractured as a result of Enoch Powell's increasingly vocal campaign against immigration and for the repatriation of workers who had come from the New Commonwealth. The Labour government had already moved amendments to tighten up the 1962 Tory legislation. In early 1968, to appease popular racism, Labour pushed through its own Commonwealth Immigrants Act, aimed particularly at barring Asians, then living in Kenya and holding British passports, from coming to Britain. But Labour's introduction of tighter immigration controls only encouraged Powell to plumb new depths of racist demagogy, with his infamous "rivers of blood" speech in April 1968.

Though Tory opposition leader Ted Heath sacked Powell from his shadow cabinet shortly afterwards, he never disowned him as a parliamentary candidate. Heath was aware that there was majority support for Powell's views in Conservative associations. Partly as a sop to Powell's supporters, the 1970 Tory manifesto included a pledge to introduce yet another major piece of legislation to restrict black immigration: the third such act in less than nine years.

The Immigration Act 1971 went through parliament with only ritual opposition from Labour. The TUC, despite the significant growth of African-Caribbean and Asian memberships in several unions, explicitly refused to condemn the latest legislation. But a discernible shift had begun both within the ranks of the Labour Party and the unions.

Mounting self-organisation within both the African-Caribbean and Asian communities, partly influenced by the US civil rights movement and the later wave of militancy associated with the Black Panthers, had laid the basis for a growing opposition to the legislation of the 1962-71 period. Such developments, combined with the growing radicalism of large numbers of white working class and middle class youth, inspired by the international struggles of the 1960s, had an impact on the labour movement.

The most concrete expression of that progressive change in the unions came in 1974 when the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) took up the case of an immigrant worker and union member, Franco Caprino, who faced the threat of deportation. Caprino, worked for the Grand Metropolitan hotel chain, where the TGWU successfully recruited immigrant workers in a unionisation drive, focused on the company's appalling working practices.

The Caprino case was a milestone. Since then more and more unions have recognised the duty to support members and their families threatened with deportation. But this new commitment to backing individual black members went alongside the TUC's Hotel and Catering Committee 1978 call on the industry's bosses to enforce sanctions against immigrant workers. The committee's statement argued that:

"There was a problem of unauthorised employment of visitors from overseas which undermined the development of collective bargaining, and the terms and conditions of employment within the industry."

In a real sense union bureaucrats were using the same arguments deployed by their precursors for more than a century: cheap immigrant labour undermined wages and bargaining power, so excusing the union leaders from the fight for class solidarity to struggle for better conditions and equal status for all workers, whether "native" or immigrant.

Meanwhile, Labour had returned to office in 1974. Roy Jenkins was again Home Secretary, pursuing a programme of piecemeal reform that included a much more extensive Race Relations Act (1976). In a speech to the Commons in support of the legislation, Jenkins returned to a familiar theme:

"There is a clear limit to the amount of immigration which this country can absorb and . . . it is in the interests of the racial minorities themselves to maintain a strict control over immigration."

By April 1976 Labour had sacked Home Office minister Alex Lyon for being "soft" in his enforcement of immigration controls. Less than two years later a parliamentary select committee on race and immigration issued a unanimous report that foreshadowed key aspects of the Thatcher government's Nationality Act 1981. Its recommendations included still tighter controls, an abolition of amnesty provisions for "illegal" immigrants, the introduction of internal controls for many black people residing in the UK and a register of their dependants.

Labour and the TUC felt obliged to address the significant increase in electoral support for the fascist National Front, which gained 100,000 votes in the spring 1977 Greater London Council elections. This result came against the background of rising unemployment where the NF's scapegoating of black people was all the more likely to strike a resonant chord.

But Labour tailored its agenda in office to placate tabloid-induced racist panics and popular racism among voters. At the same time its post-1976 austerity policies – authored by the International Monetary Fund – alienated a growing section of its working class base, helping prepare the ground for Thatcherism.

In stark contrast to Thatcher's barely coded messages to National Front voters and strident promise of still tighter immigration controls, the 1979 Labour manifesto sought to skirt around race and immigration altogether. Thatcher, of course, would fulfil her vicious promises.

In addition to the Nationality Act 1981 and Immigration Act 1988 the Thatcher decade witnessed a long series of measures to deter immigrants entering the UK, restrict the citizenship rights of black workers already resident here and make the reunification of families ever more difficult.

There have, of course, been a number of brave and committed struggles on behalf of individual union members, school students and their families. The former local government union Nalgo (now a component of Unison) adopted a paper position calling for the abolition of all immigration controls at its 1990 conference, with that September's TUC rejecting it in favour of a call for "heavy penalties on illegal labour trafficking" and the implementation of "non-racist" controls.

The 1990s have witnessed further legislative attacks by the Tories in 1993 and 1996, and now Labour in 1999, targeted primarily against refugees from Third World countries and most recently Roma people fleeing racist attacks and systematic discrimination in the ex-Stalinist states of Eastern Europe. Of course, the measures pursued by UK governments are hardly unique.

The European Union's member states are committed to the creation of a "Fortress Europe", effectively sealed off from refugees and "economic migrants" from the non-white world. Similarly, the United States has drastically tightened its border controls and criminalised an ever larger layer of would-be immigrants.

At root all immigration controls rest on ideologies that are inherently racist and promote national chauvinism. As important as campaigns to support individuals and families are, socialists must go further to raise the call for the scrapping of all immigration controls and decisively confront the legal restrictions on workers' free movement and the ideology that underpins these restrictions.

Racism serves to obscure capitalism's failure to provide a decent life for all even in its imperialist heartlands. Its poisonous vapours conceal from view the crimes of our rulers, not only against the workers of their own country, but against workers globally. They arm and prop up brutal regimes in the semi-colonial world to ensure the profitable operation of the multinational corporations based in Europe, North America and Japan and then target the victims of these regimes through anti-refugee and anti-immigrant propaganda and laws.

Today's laws against asylum seekers descend directly from the Aliens Act 1905. While drawing inspiration from the struggles of Jewish immigrant workers and generations of African-Caribbean and Asian workers who have mounted resistance during the 20th century, socialists must renew the tough ideological fight within the labour movement for the abolition of all immigration controls at the start of the 21st.

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!

Asylum bigotry – Labour's disgrace

"Land of hope and glory, mother of the free"? Is this the state of Britain at the start the new millennium?

Many of those who voted Labour at the May 1997 general election expected that the new government would extend liberties or at least halt the systematic erosion of them associated with the Tory years. The hope of many anti-racist activists was that the end of Tory rule would mean that government ministers would no longer play the "race card. Those hopes have been destroyed.

On 11 November the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 gained Royal Assent. As a result hundreds more people will face confinement in holding centres such as Campsfield and Harmondsworth. Their sole "crime" will have been to seek refuge, whether from political persecution or abject poverty, in a supposedly democratic country. Already, plans are at an advanced stage for turning a disused military barracks into an interment camp for Roma people fleeing racist discrimination and violence in Eastern Europe.

Home Secretary Jack Straw and his parliamentary henchmen, Mike O'Brien and Lord Bassam, have sung from the tabloids' racist song sheet when it comes to "defending" Britain from a Roma "invasion".

The voices of Straw and his Tory shadow, Ann Widdecombe, have become increasingly indistinguishable from each other.

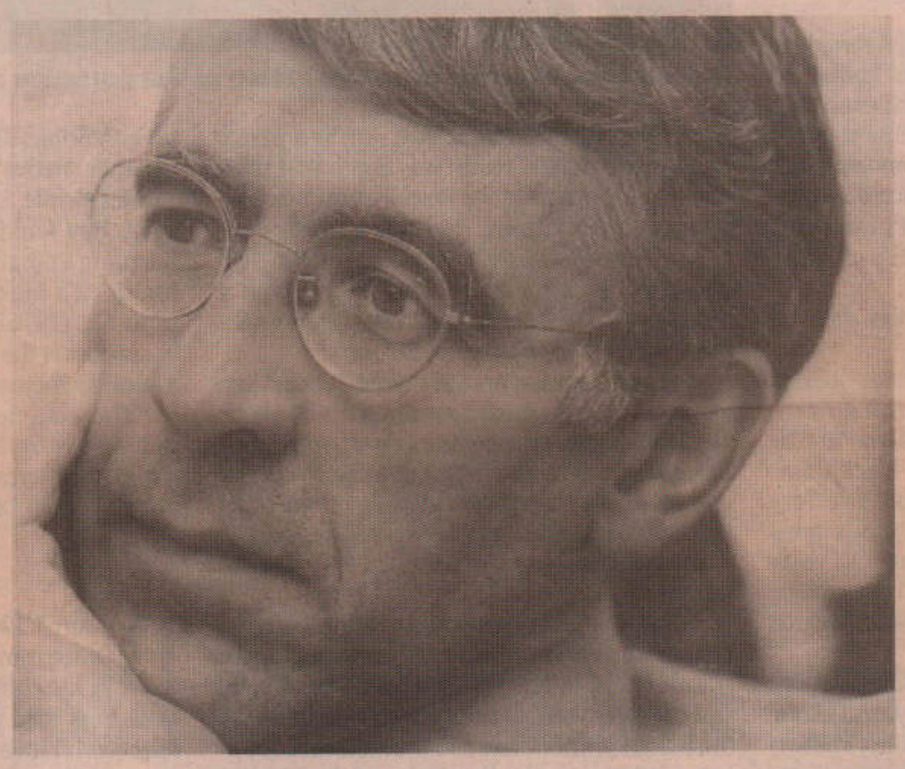
Jack's boot stamps on our civil rights

THE QUEEN'S SPEECH, unveiled a week after the asylum legislation became law, made it plain that Jack Straw is the new face of a vicious social authoritarianism.

Jack Straw now advocates further restrictions on a defendant's right to trial by jury through the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill. The Home Secretary has wilfully courted confrontation with civil rights campaigners, while posing as a populist opponent of an arrogant legal profession. Black people facing criminal charges will suffer disproportionately from the drastic restriction of the basic right to trial by jury. Thousands more cases could soon be heard by unelected, unaccountable and almost exclusively white middle class magistrates.

A similar impact, hitting black people and the poor generally, will result from the Crime and Probation Bill with its provisions for mandatory drug-testing of anyone taken into police custody as well as for convicted offenders on probation. This is a licence for the police to harass individuals on the margins of society and to clamp down still more heavily on inner city ethnic minority communities. It comes at a time when there is abundant evidence from recent court cases of the police planting illegal drugs on suspects.

Combined with Straw's refusal to go beyond a minimal extension of the Race Relations Act – far less than recommended by the Macpherson panel in February 1999 – his rapturous support for the findings of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry stands as rank hypocrisy of the worst order.



The long-awaited Freedom of Information Bill reinforces many aspects of the status quo. In particular, it maintains the thick veil of secrecy around the processes of governmental policy-making, so offering protection to all sorts of influence peddlers and corporate lobbyists. Clause 34 of the new bill has been correctly been termed the "catch all" clause. This clause grants the right to certain people to prevent information becoming public. These include cabinet ministers, the London mayor and the chairman of the Metropolitan Police Authority. The clause is included under the guise of ensuring ministers are able to fully debate policy without breaking collective responsibility. It will prevent the disclosure of anything that "would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank provision of advice or exchange of views." The reality is rather different. *The Guardian* newspaper has gained access to documents from the Home Office which show that Straw himself has been advised to use the clause to prevent homeowners finding out if their homes were going to be affected by new roads or railways being built! If it becomes law Clause 34 will be an instrument to allow those in power to cover up and use information for their own benefit.

We face attacks on basic civil liberties of the most sinister kind. Anyone who has read George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four will recognise the threat contained in Straw's Suppression of Terrorism Act:

"A person shall be guilty of an offence of supporting terrorism if he belongs to or supports financially, in deed, in action, in writing or in thought the actions of terrorism in any country."

But Straw is not even satisfied with that. The Queen's speech includes proposals to give even greater powers to the police against "domestic subversives". Such subversives will include anyone who uses "the threat to use violence to intimidate or coerce the government, the public or any section of the public for political, religious or ideological ends".

Under new Labour's laws, anyone opposing the rule of big business will be labelled a terrorist; anyone fleeing persecution aborad will be labelled a criminal; state censorship will be labelled "freedom of information" - and the right to trial by jury will be for the rich and powerful only.

■ Inside: Miscarriage of justice - the fight to free Satpal Ram, page 2 and Labour's racist record, pages 18-19

FEEDBACK ■ Contact us on 0181 981 0602

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