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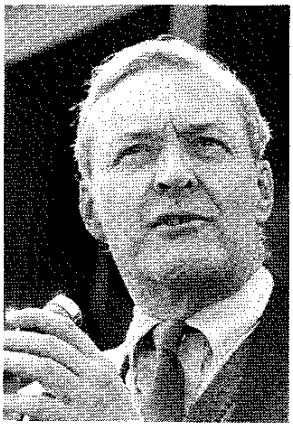
Fight for Benn and Heffer



THE DECISION by the Campaign group of MPs to stand Tony Benn and Eric Heffer for leader and deputy leader was the right decision — even if it was taken so late that many opportunities, especially for winning trade union votes, have been lost. The main thing is that they are standing and that their campaign gives the left an opportunity to stand up and fight its corner — for socialism and class struggle policies against the drift to the right by the party leadership.

Together with the expanding 'Chesterfield' network, the election campaign gives the left its best opportunity for several years to resume the offensive.

The drift towards new realism in the labour movement has been gaining pace at an extraordinary speed, hastening a political polarisation to the right. Key features of this process have been:

- The *de facto* capitulation of the TUC leaders to the AUEW and EETPU 'new realists' on a number of key disputes, from single union no-strike deals to the EETPU's organised scabbing, which they have now effectively got away with.
- Greater and greater acceptance by the Labour Party leadership that the changes brought about by Thatcher are 'irreversible'. Thus Kinnock is backing away from a future Labour government re-nationalising anything, and has drafted a 'statement of aims and values' which shifts party policy way over to the right. On crucial areas of policy like the economy and disarmament, the Labour leadership is now extolling the market and down-playing unilateralism.
- The TUC and Labour leaders are continuing their dismal performance of failing to give clear support to workers in struggle, the P&O dispute being the most recent glaring example.
- More and more Labour local authorities are making savage cuts and giving up any semblance of a fight against the Tories in local government over key issues like privatisation.

The list of examples of the move to the right is almost endless. A right wing consensus is seeping deeper and deeper into every pore of the labour movement, and it would be an illusion to imagine that it is confined to the leadership.

Benn and Heffer's campaign, and the Chesterfield network, give us an opportunity to start to break with all that. Whatever the formal programme they are standing on, the decision by Benn and Heffer to stand is an extraordinarily bold one. They are, in effect, pitching themselves into a battle against the vast majority of the labour bureaucracy. They can expect no quarter — the savagery and fury of the Kinnockite attacks on them shows what they can expect.

Those who want a policy of class struggle and socialism are a minority inside the labour movement. There should be no illusions on that score. The problem has been however that they have been an *unorganised* and dispersed minority, whose efforts have not maximised what is achievable in what is a very difficult situation for the left.

Socialists, both in the Labour Party and the trade unions — and in the 1001 other campaigns and issue-groups which the left builds and supports — should now be organising to build the Chesterfield network.

Chesterfield is both a long term campaign for socialism and a mechanism for debating the political issues, as well as being a forum for organising and linking up those who want to fight back. The Benn-Heffer campaign gives us the best possible opportunity to build it. We should seize the time ●

Angry seafarers on the picket line at Dover: the P&O strike is now an issue for the whole labour movement

Seafarers' struggle escalates

THE LEADERSHIP of the National Union of Seamen (NUS) has responded to P&O's frontal attack on the union — the sacking of all the strikers at Dover, the withdrawal of recognition from the union and the employment of scab crews on two of their ships — by calling an all-out strike of all 20,000 NUS members around the world.

Seafarers on deep sea ships have been told to strike the next time the ship enters port. The union's decision was in direct defiance of the high court injunction, obtained by Sealink, instructing them to end all 'secondary action' and return to work.

The high court has responded with a huge £150,000 fine and the sequestration of the union's assets. The dispute has assumed centre-stage in the battle against Tory anti-union laws.

It represents a major change for the trade union movement in Britain. At last a national leadership has been prepared to break the law and spread the action throughout the industry.

It was precisely the refusal of the leadership of the print unions to spread the action to the rest of Fleet Street and to defy the law which was the biggest single obstacle to success at Wapping.

In sharp contrast to this, McCluskie, who has taken the leadership of the strike after his earlier attempts to end it, has said that the court can take away the union's money and its buildings but it cannot take away the hearts and minds of the membership and that the strike will go on irrespective.

Since P&O announced their ultimatum in late April, action in the ferry ports around Britain has continued to escalate. On 2 May the NUS announced that 5,000 of its 5,200 members working on ferries, for the various companies around Britain, were on strike.

Ferries were halted in 17 ports including Weymouth, Falmouth and Portsmouth. All ferries to Ireland were halted through strikes at Holly Head, Stranraer, Cairnryan and Liverpool. Isle of Man Ferries were at a standstill. In Hull, North Sea Ferries were at a standstill. There were also strikes in Dover, Folkstone, Fishguard, Fleetwood, Heysham, Middlesborough, Harwich, Ipswich, Aberdeen and Peterhead.

All this makes the claims by P&O that it is getting its ships back into service look a bit silly. In fact they are not operating a service of any kind. They are simply attempting a strike-breaking operation which they hope they can spread.

The decision of the NUS to stand and fight is by far the most important decision by a trade union since the end of the miners' strike. Since the defeat of the miners, the trade union movement has been increasingly hamstrung by the systematic introduction and extension of the use of the Tory anti-union laws.

The strike is an absolutely central issue for the trade union and labour movement in Britain. McCluskie has already called on other unions for support: he has publicly called on the TGWU, for example, to stop handling the scab ferries at Dover.

The trade union movement is again at the crossroads. There is a chance now for a victory. There is a responsibility at all levels to rally to the support of the seafarers.

Support committees must be set up. After sequestration the only financial support seafarers will have will be that raised by the movement. The issue must be taken into every trade union and into the TUC. All scab sailings must be boycotted and the action spread beyond the shipping industry itself ●

ALAN THORNETT

UPFRONT

Abortion victory for women

DAVID ALTON'S bill has failed to get through its third reading. In a major victory for women, the biggest challenge to a woman's right to choose since the passing of the 1967 act has failed.

But now is no time for complacency: further attacks on abortion rights can be predicted. The momentum that has been built up over the past months of mass campaigning must be sustained. Those active in the Fight Alton's Bill (FAB) campaign should now be building the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) with the aim of defending and extending a woman's right to choose.

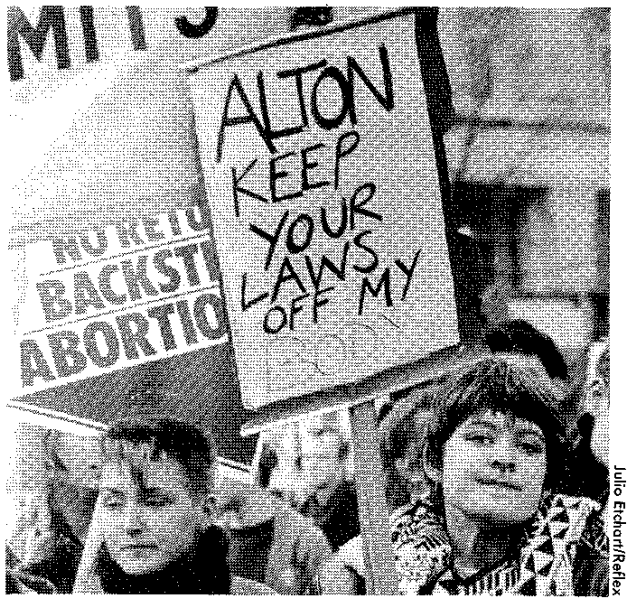
In drawing a balance sheet of the FAB campaign, the main lesson to be learned is that a mass campaign with an orientation to the labour movement is the best strategy for success. The parliamentary tactics of the pro-choice MPs played an important role in talking out the bill; but it was the mass movement outside parliament which was the key to defending the '67 act.

Activists in the FAB campaign have already begun making their own assessment of the campaign. Three problems stand out.

First, formal support from the labour movement was very easy to obtain, but effective support was weak. The new realists find it difficult to mobilise on social questions — particularly difficult social issues like abortion time limits — when they refuse to back their members on economic issues.

In Leigh constituency Labour party, Lesley Farrington has found herself witch hunted for asking her MP to abide by Labour Party policy.

The Labour Party nationally refused to place a three line whip on MPs, despite the fact that the Alton bill was clearly against party policy. Labour MPs were able to use their 'conscience' as an excuse for supporting Alton.



Julio Etchart/Reflex

Fighting Alton's bill: the mass movement was the key to defeating the '67 act

The second problem is illustrated by the 18 April FAB planning meeting: references were made to 'comrades' rather than 'sisters', reflecting the hegemony of the far left and the absence of independent feminist layers from the campaign.

Thirdly, Thatcher is pursuing a whole range of attacks on vulnerable sections of the population. A number of campaigns have developed in opposition, with the result that activists are spread quite thinly; making the building of mass campaigns more difficult than before.

Those active in FAB are well aware that mass mobilisation was the key to winning the fight against this bill and any future attacks. Alton and his supporters will be back again.

Building the National Abortion Campaign is vital to prepare for any future attacks ●

VALERIE COULTAS

Bad start for campaign against the poll tax in Scotland

THE SCOTTISH Labour Party conference in March decided to support a campaign to disrupt the government's poll tax registration plans. The campaign was to use every means necessary within the law.

The votes of the trade union delegations had ensured rejection of any plans for a campaign for non-payment of the poll tax. Such a campaign would, of necessity, have to advocate breaking the law.

Labour's Scottish spokesperson Donald Dewar and party leader Neil Kinnock have spoken out strongly against any suggestion of using illegal means to defeat the poll tax.

In April, householders throughout Scotland received their poll tax registration forms. A community charge registration officer has been appointed for each regional authority in Scotland. Labour-controlled regional councils have cooperated in recruiting staff and setting up the administration team required for each registration officer.

Regional councillors had the first opportunity to oppose the poll tax. As with cuts in services, they have chosen to implement the Tory laws. Even some Labour-controlled district councils, who are under no legal obligation, have chosen to act as agents to help collect the tax for their regional authority in return for a collection payment.

Non-compliance with the requests of the community charge registration officer can result in a £50 fine, increasing to £200 for continued offences. Nevertheless, the offical Labour Party campaign, 'stop it', has produced a leaflet, *Send it Back*, which explains how the process can be hindered. One million leaflets are supposed to have been printed.

However, they only went out after the registration forms had been delivered to householders. The Scottish trade unions have not taken the opportunity to distribute the leaflets to each of their members. Distribution has depended on local 'stop it' campaign groups and on the constituency Labour parties.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) are advocating a non-payment campaign. They have withdrawn from talks organised by the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) which had attempted to get a united front campaign against the poll tax.

The STUC talks had got agreement on a six point plan to oppose the tax. The Labour Party, the SNP, the Democrats and the Communist Party had all taken part in the talks.

However, the SNP then moved an amendment calling for a mass campaign based on a non-payment strategy. The talks collapsed and the SNP withdrew.

Since the general election, Labour Party leaders have failed to press home the demand for a Scottish assembly. Labour's 50 Scottish MPs are now known as the 'feeble fifty'. Failure to stop the poll tax will bring about a major crisis within the Scottish labour movement ●

ROLAND SHERET

Industrial struggles facing difficult conditions

PROFOUND DEVELOPMENTS within the trade union movement have taken place in the last few weeks, in the context of a stepping up of the Tory offensive. The Tories' aim has been to contain the emerging wave of industrial militancy. They have had some success.

- The TUC has accepted, in effect, the principle of single union deals following events in Dundee.
- Militant workers have been victimised for supporting strike action in defence of the NHS on 14 March.
- The high court has ruled that it illegal for the National Union of Seamen (NUS) even to hold a ballot on a national strike of seafarers in defence of jobs throughout the industry.
- At GCHQ in Cheltenham, Mike Grindley, organiser of the remaining trade unionists there, has been effectively sacked and placed under serveillance by the authorities.
- In a new move against basic trade union organisation the government has ordered the monopolies commission to investigate and report on what it calls 'restrictive trade union practices in the media'.
- ITN have announced that they intend to impose sweeping changes in working practices on the unions, involving single person camera crews, remote control cameras and a huge cut back in production assistants.

The collapse of the TUC over the proposed single union deal at Dundee will have a serious long term effect on the trade union movement. TUC leaders have adopted the policies of Eric Hammond and Bill Jordan: sweetheart deals involving no-strike and compulsory arbitration clauses accepted in return for sole negotiating rights.

It was a remarkable achievement for the employers. The Ford motor company managed to change a longstanding policy of the TUC in one slick manoeuvre. As soon as they had accepted the principle of these deals, TUC leaders rushed off to Detroit to see Ford management and offer them a blank cheque to write in any terms they wanted.

Ford management were not the slightest bit interested. This must call into question what their real reason for cancelling the Dundee plant was. After all, they had already signed an agreement with the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) which gave them the terms they wanted.

The TUC mission to Detriot was to 'save 450 jobs'! Yet these people have never lifted a finger to save jobs anywhere else. They regularly see jobs lost by the thousand, or even by the tens of thousands, and never as much as make a statement about it!

450 is half the amount of jobs at stake in the Dover strike, which the TUC (like the unions leaders who make endless statements about Dundee) has not lifted a finger to help.

The TUC now wants to formalise its acceptance of these kinds of deal. TUC leaders are looking for a procedure which will allow them to 'control' their introduction.

The idea of TUC control is completely unworkable since most of these deals are negotiated in secret and the unions involved will not discuss them with the TUC. Hammond and Jordon have already said that they would not accept TUC control.

The theme of accepting single union deals was taken up in even stronger terms at the Scottish TUC in April. STUC general secretary Campbell Cristie put the full blame for the 'loss of the 450 jobs' on the trade union movement and prounounced that it was about time the movement changed its attitude.

He went on to advocate that the STUC formalise the acceptance of single union deals. He proposed the establishment of an STUC sub-committee which would vet new investment areas and decide which union is the right one to conclude a single union deal.

Ron Todd and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) led the opposition to the deal at Dundee. But all the major unions, including the TGWU, are prepared to back the STUC move.

The AEU leadership, of course, is completely unrepentant over the role they have played in promoting these deals. Bill Jordan has boasted that, as a result, AEU membership has stopped declining for the first time in a decade.

Even before the dust has settled at Dundee, the AEU has entered into another almost identical deal. This time it is with General Motors and involves the new components plant they are planning in Dunstable.

Not surprisingly other employers are quickly cashing in on all this. Jaguar and GKN are now seeking a single unon deal for the joint plant they are proposing in Telford. Before long such deals will become the norm.

The sackings of Steve Forey, the assistant secretary of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) branch at Kings Cross, and of the four GEC shop stewards in Manchester, was no less a strategic move by the employers. It was specifically designed to prevent futher solidarity action with NHS workers. And it was effective.

British Rail management took action against all six ASLEF branch officers at Kings Cross after a decision was taken to support the day of action. Five of these were given a final warning. They were told they would be immediately sacked if they again 'induced others to breach their contracts of employment'. Steve Forey was sacked there and then.

A ballot on strike action in his defence was lost by 150 votes to 124 — the main factor was intimidation by both management and the courts. Workers were told that anyone who took strike action would be sacked. They were warned that the injunction was not aimed at the union but at individual workers who could be held personally responsible for the full loss of trade by British Rail in the event of a strike.

The courts have also played a key role in the P&O strike at Dover. The NUS was rendered largely ineffective as a national union in February when the executive called off a national strike in support of the striking Isle of Man crews in response to a court injunction.

Seafarers leader Sam McCluskie at first said that he was prepared to defy the law and go to prison. Then he called off the strike and complied with the injunction.

Pressure from the Dover strikers forced a further decision to ballot for a national strike in support of Dover. This time McCluskie tried to get around the injunctions by arguing that the matter of staffing levels and working conditions was a matter facing the whole industry — which is obviously the case — and therefore it would not be secondary action. This argument was ridiculed in the high court when the judge described it as 'an ingenuous way to get round the law'.

The court granted an injunction to P&O and ordered the withdrawal of the national strike ballot which was by then in progress. It ruled that, since the proposed action would be secondary, it was now illegal even to ballot on it — even if the decision of the ballot was never carried out. A suspended sequestration order was issued against the NUS, to be invoked if the ballot went ahead.

By the time this order was issued, however, the voting was completed. The court then ruled that it was now illegal even to count the votes! To avoid sequestration the uncounted papers were then locked in the vaults of the NUS' bankers and may never be counted.

These increasingly outrageous interpretations of the law are part of a pattern which the Tory government has developed since the first legislation was introduced in 1982.

At first they only partially enforced the laws. Then they were fully used aginst the National Graphical Association

(NGA) at Warrington and subsequently against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) during the miners' strike.

With the collapse of any resistance to these laws by the TUC, especially since Wapping, they have become the order of the day, dominating the industrial situation. They are now being interpreted in even harsher ways and new interpretations are being invented to go beyond what we have seen so far.

The new moves the government has made at GCHQ are no less extreme. Union organiser Mike Grindley has worked there for 26 years as a Chinese language expert. He has now been accused of making public classified information and suspended on full pay. (In fact he has said nothing which was not in the public domain anyway.) His positive vetting clearance has been suspended and he has been ordered to keep management constantly informed of his movements — including any nights he may stay away from home!

Another major and audacious move by the government is the use of the monopolies commission to investigate 'restrictive practices' in the media. It is a somewhat fantastic move, since it is clear to all that the monopolies commission was never intended for such a purpose. But it is a very serious move just the same.

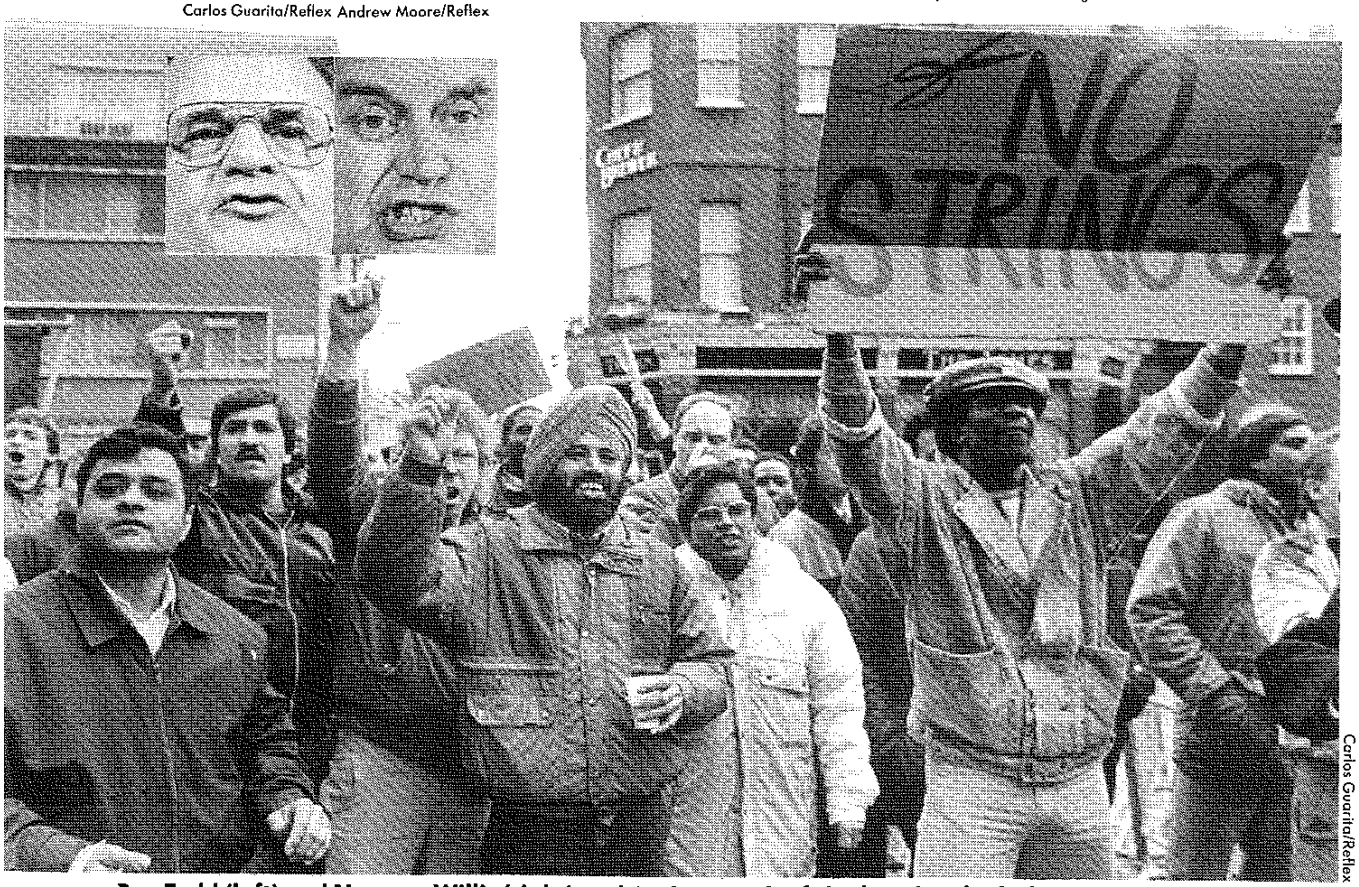
Collective agreements are now openly and officially disregarded. They are simply to be identified and abolished.

At the same time the government has made it very clear that this will only be the first of such investigations. Coal mining has been mentioned as the next one, since the government is concerned at the power of NACODS!

This crackdown in the media, which Thatcher has called the last bastion of trade union restrictive practices, is going to be very rapid indeed.

The annual conference of the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) has just voted down a proposal for an all-out strike in defence of jobs and conditions and

Carlos Guarita/Reflex Andrew Moore/Reflex



Carlos Guarita/Reflex

Ron Todd (left) and Norman Willis (right) seek TUC 'control' of single union deals: but sections of workers are beginning to break through the barriers of new realism

adopted a resolution calling for the union to 'change its priorites to deal with the changes facing it within ITV'.

The recent round of disputes has been held back at this stage by some of the latest measures of the government and the employers. But these disputes nevertheless demonstrate the capacity for struggle which is present in the working class as a whole.

They show that sections of workers are beginning to break through the employers' offensive and the barriers placed in their way by the new realists at the top of the movement.

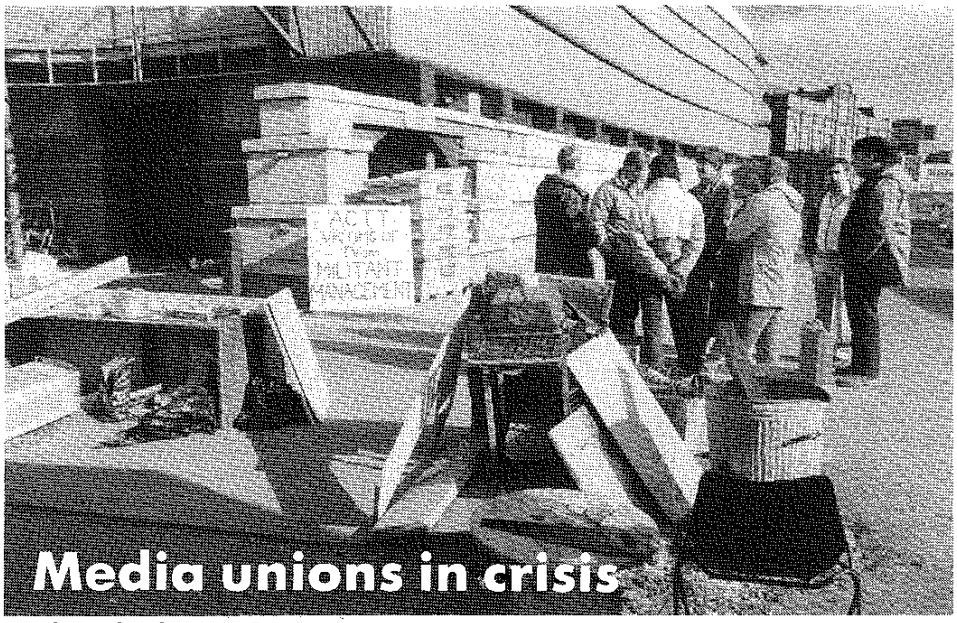
The struggles in the car industry, the NHS, and the cross-channel ferries represent the potential for struggles to develop in broad sectors of the working class

Such struggles encounter very difficult conditions. The TUC and the leaders of the main unions are still moving to the right and new realism is still extending its grip — as it did at the recent conference of the National Union of Teachers (NUT).

It is important that the possibilities represented by the current struggles are maximised. A movement which can achieve a breakthrough must be developed. In these conditions, solidarity is vitally important: we have to prevent these struggles from becoming isolated. The working class badly needs a victory ●

ALAN THORNETT

Media unions in crisis



Julio Etchart/Reflex

On the picket line at TV-am

TWO SHARP issues dominated the 54th annual conference of the Association of Cinematograph Television and allied Technicians (ACTT) on 16-17 April.

First, whether to amalgamate with the Broadcasting Entertainment Trades Alliance (BETA). Second, what to do about the sacking of 234 ACTT members at TV-am.

Amalgamation with BETA saw an unholy alliance between what have traditionally been 'left' and 'right' factions in the union.

Both Alan Sapper, general secretary of the union and prominent 'left', and the newly elected president of the union, arch right-winger Tudor Gates, argued for amalgamation with BETA on the basis of cost efficiency, avoiding damaging competition between unions for members and circumvention of secondary picketing laws.

They claimed amalgamation would send a signal to the employers that a newly formed, 60,000 strong super-union was 'serious'.

The debate opened up divisions based on the particular interests of different workers in the union, with some of those who still regard themselves as in a relatively strong position because of their craft skills, strongly opposing amalgamation. More importantly, this debate signalled that the left had collapsed into the 'new realism' of the right.

On Sunday morning, TV-am was discussed. A key role was played by activists from the TV-am dispute itself. They argued for the line of the national officials, against any form of industrial action being campaigned for to support the TV-am members. The dividing lines were clearly drawn, for or against a campaign to win industrial action to defend the union.

The emergency resolution from the London tv freelance shop, which itemised the attacks and called for general meetings of all media unions to 'campaign for joint industrial action with these unions to defend their very existence in this industry', was defeated with 100 votes for, 177 against and six abstentions.

In the weeks leading up to the conference, national agreements between the ACTT and ITV companies were already being undermined at Tyne-Tees and LWT. On Monday 18, ITN announced 142 redundancies and a host of other changes to make them 'competitive'. Thames followed suit just over a week later.

The post-war consensus view of the social function and operation of the film and tv industry is being demolished through the employers' offensive, backed by the Thatcherites. Neither the traditional right nor the left have any effective answers to this attack. A new leadership will have to be built in the new, more difficult but also more volatile conditions that will be standard for film and tv technicians in the 1990s.

Meanwhile the collapse of the long-running strike of journalists sacked by the North London Advertiser group, and the dismal sight of National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members crossing ACTT picket lines to connive at union-busting at TV-am set a grim background to the NUJ's annual delegate meeting in Sheffield — the first for ten years to take place without an on-going industrial dispute.

The gloom was compounded by the NUJ's financial crisis which last summer brought the suspension of all national-level committee meetings.

Attempts by the rightward-moving NEC to put the finances into order (relying heavily on the desperate gamble of centralised, computerised collection of subscriptions) were further complicated by embarrassing revelations that another £18,000 had been 'lost', presumed stolen, from head office.

This followed over £20,000 lost in mysterious circumstances last year, and helped persuade delegates to throw out calls for a modest 6 per cent increase in subs, while suspicious branches also rejected almost every other economy measure, fearing an erosion of the union's democracy and branch power.

The mood of industrial doom and financial gloom also coloured calls for swift moves towards a federation of media unions involving the NUJ, BETA, ACTT and print unions, which secured general support.

However, despite these problems, a politically quite radical delegate meeting called on the NEC to hold a ballot on establishing a political fund. Strong resolutions against Tory anti-union laws, health cuts, censorship in Ireland, racism and immigration controls were passed, while the NUJ's international profile was again strong.

The small but influential stalinist faction of *Morning Star*-reading full-time officials and London members suffered stinging rebuffs in their attempts to end NUJ support for Moses Mayekiso, restrict solidarity with anti-apartheid struggles, and hijack solidarity with Iraqi workers. The NUJ became the first union in the world to take a policy stand against the death penalty.

However the policy gains were not linked to any development of the left in the conference, which was smaller and less organised than ever. A meeting on the final night, however, agreed to attempt once more to launch an anti-sectarian 'open left' at a May meeting in London.

As delegates hurried for trains home, the incoming national executive, veering sharply towards the right, began planning an emergency special delegate meeting to reopen the issue of the subs increase. The danger is that under the banner of cost-cutting they may also try once again to impose the wider attacks on branches and rank and file structures of the union ●

OUR OWN CORRESPONDENTS

UPFRONT

Nationalities problem looms large for Gorbachev

THE INCREASED openings for discussion and protest created by the policy of *glasnost* in the Soviet Union have brought forth a series of major problems for Gorbachev's leadership.

The Crimean Tatars, banished from their homeland by Stalin, have staged a demonstration in Moscow in support of their right to return.

The Baltic states remain a constant thorn with agitation for national and cultural rights.

Even the comparatively 'quiet' republics of Belorussia and Moldavia have witnessed increased activity over national demands. Unofficial nationalist groups have also sprung up in several republics.

The most striking example of action around national demands has centred, however, on Armenia and the region of Nagorno-Karabakh in neighbouring Azerbaidzhan.

Demonstrations, amongst the biggest in Soviet history, have shaken Armenia, its capital Yerevan and Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The root cause of this dispute stretches back over centuries. Ngorno-Karabakh was originally settled by the predominantly christian Armenians in the first century AD and they have remained a majority of the population since then despite repeated incursions into the territory by Mongols, Persians and Turks.

It was the Turks who were responsible for the horrific massacre of Armenians in 1915-16, in which between one and a half to two million lost their lives and many others fled from their native lands.

It was only after the October revolution that a separate republic of Armenia was created.

However, in the course of establishing the national boundaries of the Caucasian republics, a clear error was committed, possibly as a direct result of Stalin's intervention.

The region of Ngorno-Karabakh, despite being 90 per cent Armenian, was given the status of an autonomous region within the neighbouring state of Azerbaidzhan.

An analogous problem with the region of Nakhichevan, populated predominantly by Azerbaidzhanis but within Armenia, was solved by granting it the status of an autonomous republic.

Since then, Nagorno-Karabakh has suffered further and further isolation from Armenia. It has not been able to receive broadcasts from ▶

No peace on the wards

THATCHER'S CYNICAL attempt to buy off the militancy of nursing staff was a significant retreat in the face of hostile public opinion and the strike wave of February and March.

It remains to be seen, however, if the enlarged pay settlement will achieve its objective of 'divide and rule', silencing the nurses while Tory cash limits put the boot into the NHS.

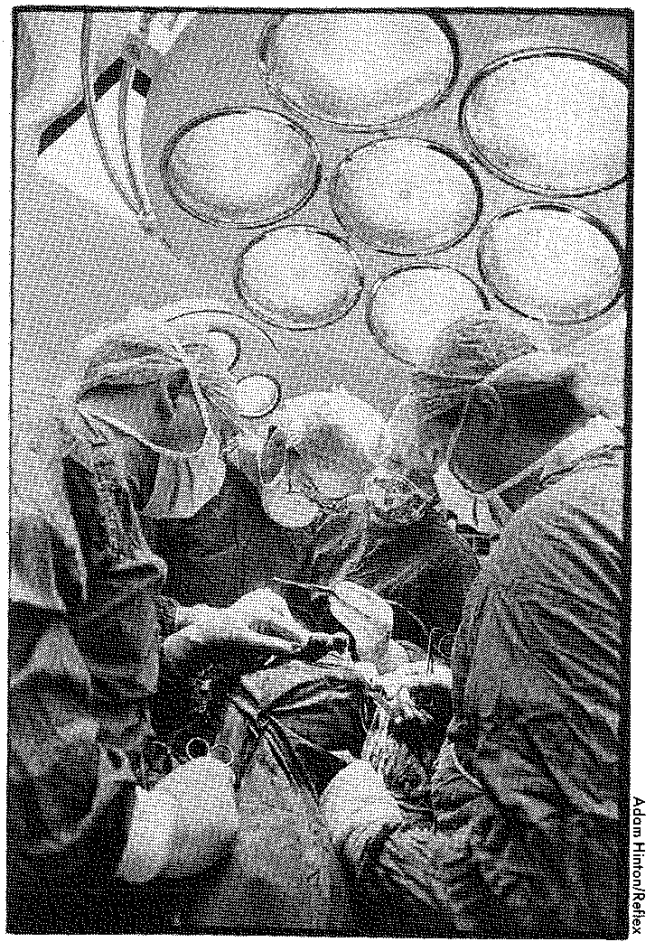
Few nurses yet know how much the review body award means to them in hard cash: it seems that many ward sisters and top-level staff nurses could yet suffer an overall loss through cuts in special duty payments for unsocial hours.

Many will get far less than they expected. Meanwhile other sections of health workers have been angered that they will receive far lower increases.

A new, brutal round of cuts and closures has begun for the new financial year, with West Lambeth district health authority heading the pack with the biggest-ever single package of cuts — £1 million of which is to be saved through redundancies among all sections of staff, including nurses and doctors.

West Lambeth has also found an ingenious way to avoid further increasing waiting lists at St Thomas' Hospital while keeping 180 beds closed: it has axed 25 per cent of outpatient appointments (60,000-plus this year) — thus preventing patients being put on to the waiting list in the first place!

Further hefty cuts programmes are being pushed through most London health districts and many others across the country, including Birmingham and Manchester.



Adam Hinton/Reflex

General surgery in the Queens Medical Centre, Nottingham

Little of the militant strike and protest action by nurses in February was over wages: most nurses were solely concerned with the state of the NHS.

Thatcher's attempt to buy off this movement could simply encourage other health workers to fight for decent pay, while events spur nurses into new local battles against cuts and closures, which will come back to the forefront of health campaigning.

In the run-up to the budget, unions were half-heartedly demanding an extra £2.5 billion for health: now Thatcher under pressure has coughed up £750m from the contingency fund, it is time to press home the fight for the rest ●

HARRY SLOAN

Yerevan, Armenian schools have been closed and the Armenian population has remained static in numbers while falling as a proportion of the total population of the region.

What has brought this situation to a head at this particular time is difficult to determine. It seems that the burning of an Armenian primary school in early February touched off mass protests including a spontaneous rally and strikes in Stepanakert. In response to this the local soviet in Nagorno-Karabakh called for the incorporation of the region into Armenia.

The Armenian Communist Party headed by Karen Demirchyan, taken to task in recent months for its very slow implementation of *perestroika*, its thoroughly corrupt practices and the victimisation of its own internal critics, might have used this opportunity to cover its misdeeds were it not for the fact that it was immediately by-passed by the mass movement and the spontaneous leadership which emerged from it.

This leadership took the form of an organising committee composed of intellectuals from which the communist party was absent. Indeed, the party seems to have set its face against incorporation.

The organising committee led the mass mobilisations in Armenia itself including a one-hour general strike on 11 March.

Representatives of the committee also met Gorbachev in Moscow on 25 February — an acknowledgement of its authority — and they brought back Gorbachev's appeal for calm.

During the course of the mobilisations the committee seems to have expanded to include representatives from local committees in communities and factories.

Unfortunately, the limitations of *glasnost* have been all too easy to discern in respect of the events in Armenia.

Little information has emerged through official channels, western journalists have been banned from the area and western radio stations blamed for instigating the troubles. References have been made in the Soviet press to Gorbachev's appeal for calm but as yet the text of this appeal has not been made known.

The scale of the 'pogrom' of Armenians in the Azerbaidzhanian town of Sumgait varies from 30 to 300 dead depending on sources but has been put officially at 32. The fact that leading politburo members have been in Stepanakert and Yerevan and have addressed rallies has only been briefly acknowledged.

The Kremlin has rejected incorporation into Armenia and only appears to be willing to grant 400 million roubles in socio-economic aid to Nagorno-Karabakh with a promise that Armenian language broadcasts will be received in the region. But a general strike has been in effect in Stepanakert and will continue until incorporation is reconsidered.

At the time of writing, the strike had caused losses of more than four million roubles and technically made four firms bankrupt.

This is a clear indication of the lengths the people of Nagorno-Karabakh are prepared to go to achieve their democratic demands and a warning to Gorbachev that the many remaining national questions in the Soviet Union can only be tackled by a completely open and democratic discussion ●

SEAN ROBERTS

Panama: no to US interference

THE US attempt to extradite on drug charges General Mañuel Noriega, Panama's defence force chief, is only the latest in a long list of cases of US interference in the affairs of Latin American countries.

Washington is simply trying to do by means of drug charges what the CIA itself has said it might otherwise have done by invasion or assassination squad.

In an attempt to kill two political birds with one stone, Washington has even tried to implicate Cuba in the drug trafficking charges.

Originally a province of Colombia, Panama's existence as an independent state owed much to the interests of the US which, unable to obtain from Colombia the conditions it sought for bisecting its territory with a canal, gained agreement with 'independent' Panama within several days of its existence.

Under the treaty, the panama canal zone became a foreign enclave, a military post for the US in Latin America, with over 10,000 US troops stationed there.

Recently Panama has been used by Washington as a staging post for operations in Nicaragua and Honduras. The original canal treaty was renegotiated by General Omar Torrijos, who ruled Panama for a decade before his death in a mysterious plane crash in 1981.

Torrijos was a populist who maintained friendly relations with Cuba and had a left face turned towards the US. In 1977 he signed a new treaty with Washington which planned for the relinquishing of US control over the canal zone in 1999.

Noriega was Torrijos' second in command and followed in the Torrijos tradition of combining internal repression with nationalist demagogy. Originally patronised by the US, long aware of his drugs connections, Noriega has recently shown a tendency to put nationalistic demagogy into practice.

He refused to cooperate with John Poindexter and Oliver North when they were sent to enlist his help in the war against Nicaragua.

In the run up to the treaty date of 1999, and in the context of the continuing 'problems' for the US in Nicaragua and in El Salvador, Washington needed a reliable ally in Panama. Noriega had to go.

The Panamanian defence force (PDF) of 15,000 soldiers was set up with Washington's support after student unrest in the 1960s. It has been a base for the army to rule the country: first with Torrijos as president, then with Noriega holding the real reigns of power while a civilian sat in the president's office.

Arturo Delvalle was installed by Noriega as president in 1985. With Noriega's agreement he introduced labour laws to weaken the power of the unions and further impoverish the Panamanian working class.

Originally opposed to the extradition of Noriega, Delvalle was deposed by him when he became persuaded by the US that Noriega had to go. Delvalle has now been recognised by the US as the president of Panama and has called for US military action against Noriega.

Unable to persuade Noriega to step down, the US launched all-out economic warfare against Panama in March.

Washington froze $800 million in Panamanian assets and withheld $6.5 million due to Panama for payments for use of the canal.

Panama uses US dollars as its national currency (making it ideal for the laundering of drug money) and the freezing of its US assets has resulted in a complete freezing of the Panamanian economy. The 'national civic crusade', a coalition of bourgeois forces, launched a general strike — more like a lock-out — to force out Noriega.

Washington is now caught in something of a cleft stick. It wants a Panamanian defence force sanitised of populism but dares not weaken the PDF too much in case it becomes unable to deal with any internal dissent.

The struggle over the last months has been almost entirely between Noriega and the US government. The working class of Panama — worst hit by the US economic

stranglehold — has played a marginal role.

Some small demonstrations took place over the non-payment of pensions but, despite widespread hostility to US interference in internal Panamanian politics, Noriega's record of repressing the working class has meant there has been no mass movement in his support either.

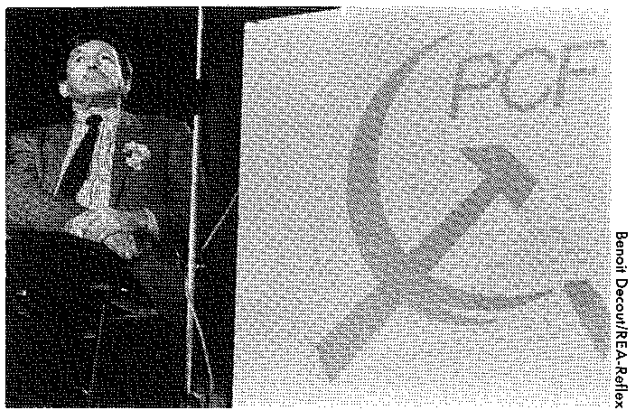
The left has been unable to galvanise support for an independent, anti-imperialist, anti-Noriega campaign which would show that the best defender of Panama against imperialism is the working class.

Noriega continues to allow the starving of the Panamanian economy while he bargains for a better deal in exchange for his resignation.

Socialists in Britain should oppose any interference by the US in the affairs of Panama while understanding that Noriega is no friend of the Panamanian working class ●

GILL LEE

Daniel Giry/REA-Reflex



Benoit Decout/REA-Reflex

Voters have leapfrogged the political spectrum: from Andre Lajoinie's PCF (right) to the fascist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen (left)

Le Pen's surge

THE MAIN event in the first round of the French presidential elections was the enormous vote for the neo-fascist Le Pen — 14.5 per cent, and more than 4 million votes.

Le Pen's vote is certainly racist, but not consciously fascist. Nor is his movement a clearly fascist one. Le Pen is the main beneficiary of the protest vote against the discredited politics of both the traditional left and right wing parties.

The map of Le Pen's vote is interesting. Apart from his bastions in the south (especially in the Cote D'Azur), Le Pen got big votes in the Paris 'red belt' and along the Belgian border north of Lille. The red belt vote shows that traditional Communist Party (PCF) voters have been leapfrogging the political spectrum straight over to the far right — a phenomenon not seen since the 1930s. The latter is the product of the unemployed from the closed-down mines and steel works in the north voting for Le Pen.

The National Front getting the protest vote is a big setback for the left even if it looks as if Mitterrand will win on the second round.

The main feature of the political recomposition on the left is the collapse of the vote of the PCF. Its candidate Lajoinie, with 6.8 per cent of the vote, got only half the vote achieved by Georges Marchais in the presidential elections of 1981. The PCF has suffered from its identification as a pro-Moscow loyalist party, and its role in the left government from 1981-6.

The responsibility for Le Pen's surge is indeed that of the official parties, both their austerity policies in government and their refusal to fight the racist right head-on. On the extreme left, the communist 'renovateur' (renewer) Pierre Juquin scored a disappointing 2.01 per cent, and Arlette Laguiller of the semi-Trotskyist Lutte Ouvriere achieved a better-than-expected 2.00 per cent. Pierre Boussel, better known as Pierre Lambert, got only 0.39 for his MPTT (Movement for a Workers Party).

Arlette Laguiller ran a much less 'political' campaign than Juquin, placing her emphasis on workers' economic demands. She was standing for the fourth time and as the only woman candidate has a certain 'personal' vote. Her two per cent does not represent the strength of Lutte Ouvriere, far from it. She achieved better scores than Juquin in a broad swathe of the north, especially the Nord and Pas-de-callais regions.

But in most areas the Juquin vote was higher — especially in Paris and many areas of central and southern France. Juquin tended to do well where the communist vote has been traditionally strong. His best vote was in the Haute Vienne region around Limoges, where he got around 4 per cent.

Ecologist candidate Antoine Waechter did well along the polluted Rhine; his Alsatian origins and German name probably did him no harm in that region either. In some towns in Alsace and Lorraine he got 9 per cent of the vote, which explains why his national total went up to a national score of 3.8 per cent.

Overall the elections are a disappointment for the left, and especially for the coalition around Juquin, which included dissident communists and the trotskyist Ligue Communiste.

Juquin suffered from a media boycott after the tv and press discovered that this former PCF spokesperson was not going to the right, but, after all, some kind of extreme leftist!

Nonetheless, secondary factors aside, it is a bad vote for someone who made the rights of immigrant workers, women and youth — as well as anti-nuclear and anti-imperialist themes — a central part of his campaign.

For the first time since world war two a fascist leader is gaining support in a major European country. It could not have happened without the dashing of the hopes which the workers had in the SP-CP government elected in 1981. The workers wanted progressive change, and got capitalist normalisation — from a government with four communists in it. Le Pen's victory is the price of betrayal ●

PHIL HEARSE

DANY COHN-BENDIT on channel four; four books so far; all the colour supplements — 1968 is becoming an industry. But what did it really mean? Was it just the youthful excess of a generation who grew up in a pampered unreal time, before the harsh economic realities of the late twentieth century caught up with them?

If you examine the momentous events of that year in detail, they went far beyond 'student rebellion' and youthful ultra-leftism. World-historic events shook several parts of the world, involving very 'grown-up' forces and vital battles in the international class struggle. 1968 and the period which led up to, and followed it, has decisively shaped the world in which we live.

The key events of the year are well known. The May-June general strike in France, the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August.

Less well known, but symbolic of an important process under way was the 25 February Vietnam demonstration in West Berlin, showcase of western capitalism. Young revolutionaries gathered from all over Europe to support the Vietnamese revolution, at the invitation of the German Socialist Students Federation (SDS). 20,000 people marched behind portraits of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The event marked the first time that the red flag had been carried in that part of Berlin since Hitler came to power in 1933.

'the aftermath of 1968 gave rise to widespread illusions about the possibility of fairly rapid development of revolutionary conditions'

Inspired by the Vietnamese revolution, militant socialist ideas were finding a new audience in the west.

The Berlin demonstration followed hard on the heels of the Tet offensive in Vietnam. Bourgeois papers, like the British *Guardian* claimed that the Tet offensive was a crushing defeat for the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF). But the US administration was not fooled. Never again did the US ruling class think of victory in Vietnam, only how to try to avoid crushing defeat.

1968 witnessed a new rise of the world revolution. A whole series of struggles in the colonial and semi-colonial world (the 'third world') accompanied the Vietnamese struggle. In particular, 1968 was the year of the spectacular emergence of the Palestinian fighters' organisations, the fedayeen.

In eastern Europe, the working people of Czechoslovakia attempted to exploit the opening provided by the emergence of a reforming wing of the bureaucracy around Dubcek, but were overthrown in August by the Soviet invasion.

But without doubt the most significant of the events of '68 was the May-June general strike in France. Sparked by the student rebellion, the French working class moved into action against the De Gaulle government, to the consternation of the trade union leaders, and the leaders of the biggest working class party — the French Communist Party (PCF).

The thunderbolt of May rocked bourgeois 'common sense' to its foundations. Here were millions of workers, occupying their factories and defying capitalist

'normality'. All those who said the workers were 'integrated' into capitalist society and only interested in more consumer goods were flabbergasted. Despite the fact that the May-June movement was sold out and led to defeat by the PCF, political life was totally shaken up. A new period had opened.

In Britain 1968 was important in two related ways. The Vietnam and student movement provided a new audience for the far left and led to its rapid growth. At the same time it was a 'break year' as far as the level of strike struggles was concerned, which doubled over 1967. It was the beginning of a working class upsurge which was to continue through the Heath government to 1974.

In a general sense, how can we sum up the meaning and outcome of 1968?

Let's start with France. Judged by objective possibilities the general strike signalled a *pre-revolutionary* situation. Both the major classes in society, the working class and the ruling class, mobilised against each other, posing the question of power — which class rules? The working class struggle went beyond the framework of normal strike struggles, and began, embryonically to challenge the structure and power of capitalism. In other words, the movement went as far as it could without a direct attempt to set up organisations of working class power (which only embryonically emerged) and stage an insurrection against the state.

But given the relationship of forces in the workers movement — the domination of the PCF deeply tied to the 'bourgeois order', to capitalism, — this was impossible. The missing factor was a mass revolutionary force which could take the movement forward, in a collective way, to establish workers power.

The defeat of the May-June general strike was the product of a whole preceding period of capitalist development, in which it had been impossible to even begin to seriously challenge the prestige and leadership of the PCF.

Revolutionary consciousness, in such a period of economic growth, tended to decline, compared with the 1920s and 1930s. To be sure, the reformist practice of the PCF, and the CGT union federation which it controlled; their betrayal of the struggle against the Algerian war — and their supine acceptance of De Gualle's virtual coup d'etat in 1959 — tended to reinforce this decline in revolutionary consciousness. But objective factors, as well as the betrayals of the leadership, played a role.

While tens of thousands of French workers were able to outflank their leaders in action, to occupy their factories, to build action committees in the localities, and even in some factories re-start production under workers control, this never became generalised into a nationally-led attempt to build organisations of workers self-rule and take power.

When marxists talk of the May-June strike being a casualty of the 'crisis of leadership' they refer not just to the lack of a large revolutionary organisation. They stress the need for a sizeable layer of thousands of workers who through their own experiences and struggles have developed an anti-capitalist consciousness. Such a layer of workers did not exist in France, nor could it be developed overnight.

The idea of the working class at one fell swoop, through a general strike, establishing its own power — without a preceding phase of profound anti-capitalist political development — is an anarcho-syndicalist myth.

On a more general level, 1968 marked a change in the political period, especially in western Europe, an end to the period of relative social peace which followed the post-war settlement between the bourgeoisie and the working class leaders. This change in political period was intimately linked with the onset of the long period of economic recession, following the post-war capitalist boom.

'the decisive battles between the classes lie ahead of us'

The new period ushered in by 1968, the period in which we still are, was one of a prolonged economic crisis and a prolonged struggle between the classes to assert their domination. This is a decades-long fight, marked by economic ups and downs and its political ebbs and flows.

But in the end, we are still in the unresolved, long term struggle against the attempt of the imperialist bourgeoisies to create a new regime of capitalist accumulation, and a new political order, on the ruins of the post-war welfare state — and the strivings of the advanced guard workers movement to develop a leadership capable of imposing its own, socialist solution.

From the struggles in 1968 flowed the downfall of the dictatorships in Greece, Spain and Portugal; a gigantic rise of workers struggle in Italy and Britain; the pre-revolutionary crisis in Portugal in 1974-75; and a widespread revolt of the peoples of the third world and in the stalinist states.

In capitalist Europe, the aftermath of 1968 gave rise to widespread illusions about the possibility of a fairly rapid development of revolutionary conditions. But after the onset of the 1974-75 recession, the class struggle ebbed markedly as the workers movement reeled from austerity attacks.

The change in the situation, while not resulting in a return to pre-'68 conditions of relative social peace, exposed the weakness of the far left cruelly. Typically the far left was notable for its ultra-leftism and underestimation of the mass organisations of the working class — unions and mass political parties.

Many revolutionary socialists imagined that these organisations could be more or less rapidly outflanked, and that debates and political differentiation would 'go round' the old and 'discredited' workers organisations. This turned out not to be the case. For example, in France after 1968 the communist party, and even its student organisation, grew, as new layers of workers brought into politics turned first to their existing mass organisations, and not small left wing alternatives.

In 1988, twenty years after the ice broke, the crisis of the capitalist world order — or for that matter the crisis of the stalinist states — is far from resolved. The decisive battles between the classes in the advanced capitalist countries, lie ahead of us.

In this sense, all those who, twenty years after 1968 are 'disillusioned' with the outcome, who have lost hope in socialism and the revolution, or think that all the hopes of 1968 were foolish, wasted dreams are wrong.

The generation of '68 almost everywhere underestimated the difficulty of the struggle, its duration and its scope.

The objective of refashioning the workers movement to meet revolutionary tasks cannot be done in a few months or even years; building a revolutionary movement implanted in the working class, and capable of giving real leadership is the most difficult thing in the world. It is also the most important.

The revolutionary generation of 1968 had a vision of a world ruled by priorities of human need and solidarity, not the priorities of profit. That vision is as valid and necessary as ever. As they said in 1968: 'This is only a beginning; the struggle continues !' ●

PHIL HEARSE

The meaning

Twenty years after the explosive events of May-June 1968 in France, how do marxists view their importance? Are they simply to be looked back upon as grand moments of past history, or seen as reminders of unfinished political business that still confronts us today? **JOHN LISTER** interviewed **DANIEL BENSAID**, a prominent leader of the student movement at Nanterre university and now a leading member of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, French section of the Fourth International.

JL: *Could you speak a little on the background to the events of 1968? Everybody saw at once that the students were fighting back against attacks on their rights; but what were the issues that mobilised the working class?*

DB: Much of the debate and reinterpretation of these events in France, especially among those who have broken with revolutionary politics, tends to insist on the cultural, ideological aspects of 1968. But what gave the 1968 events real weight, at least in France, was the combination of the student mobilisation — which also happened in countries like Japan and the United States — with the general strike. It seems to me too much forgotten now; but it was a real general strike of between eight and ten million workers which lasted three weeks.

What did it mean? Maybe we tended to overestimate the political content of the strike. Obviously it opened up the possibility of a political crisis. But at the same time we have to say what the limits of that general strike were. Some democratic demands were raised against the strong state of [French president] De Gaulle, a rigid archaic state with very concentrated power; and there were a series of economic, material demands to raise the standard of living; but the fact is that even given the big wave of the movement, the enormous general strike, the politicisation remained small.

There was no big crisis in the reformist parties. For example, the communist party (CP), in spite of its line, obtained good results in the 1969 elections, and it was relatively well able to channel most of the radicalisation. There was no big crisis in the unions either: they grew a lot, especially in the middle-sized and smaller factories. There were no big breaks like we had in France in 1945-47 after the war. There was a break, but of a very limited layer of youth and workers

g of May '68

which gave room for a new far left; this is significant because it still exists, but it was a very small break.

The possibilities for action changed, but not the relationship of forces. That, I think, is to do with the limits, the dynamics of the general strike itself. There was also a difference with Italy in terms of self-organisation. There were factory occupations, yes, but very few elected strike committees or mass meetings. The union officials maintained control and organisation throughout the strike.

Sometimes the commentaries tend to identify the birth of social movements such as the women's movement with 1968. In reality in France this came as a result, if you like, of the '68 events, but two or even three years later. The distinctive demands of the women's movement did not appear in 1968.

I think it was a transitional general strike, which remained under the control of the reformist leaderships, and which, in the framework of the functioning welfare state of the time, served to win more space and social gains, winning back some things that had been lost under the De Gaulle government.

There had been some social security measures designed to increase the weight of the state and the employers against the trade unions, but this was one point which was not won in the so-called agreement. In fact there was no real agreement. There were negotiations but, since the results were rejected in some Renault plants, they remained only as a basis for decentralised agreements. There was no global agreement as there had been in 1936. The main points conceded were on wages, and on trade union rights, but there was no agreement on social security.

The 1968 stoppage was never actually called as a general strike, was it?

No, that's the other point. It was a general strike, but a *de facto* general strike. Nobody had raised the slogan of a general strike. This is very important, and not a small point. The argument from the union bureaucracies, especially the (communist party-led) CGT, was that 'we don't need to call for a general strike because it already exists': so to call for it would be 'artificial', 'useless' and so on.

But it could have changed the meaning of the strike, because if they had called for a general strike, they would have been obliged to decide on what general platform they would call it, and the decision to call it off would have had to be a general decision too, with consultations. Secondly, if it had been declared a general strike it would have raised another question on the political preconditions to negotiate: whether they would negotiate with that government, or ask

for De Gaulle to be removed before talks began.

Despite the limitations of the strike and dynamics of the movement, there were possibilities to open up a political crisis. We don't say now, twenty years later, it would have been an immediate revolution; but it was possible to open up a political crisis in the context of the 1960s. Obviously many things have changed, and nobody knows exactly what might have been possible, but 1968 changed the situation in France and in Europe in the early 1970s. We are not discussing whether there could have been a revolution, but the fact that the strength of the movement, in spite of its limitations, promised much more than was achieved.

Obviously the communist party line was central to this outcome?

Absolutely. If we re-read today the literature of the big parties of 1968, mainly the communist party, we see how they were obsessed with the idea of provocation and plots. They were trying to find an answer to the changes in French society, in which, for the first time, the working class was in the majority. So they had developed the idea of a new coalition of social forces, expressed at the electoral level by the 'union of the left' (yet the gaullists kept winning more and more elections). At the same time they thought the socialist party (SP) had been pushed to the side by its capitulations on the Algerian War. In a real sense the SP was very reduced in influence in 1968, so the CP thought there could be an opening for them, like the Italian CP, to become the major party of the left and to grow step by step through elections. All this was being disturbed by the 1968 events.

They were also concerned to control the mass movement. They tried to negotiate a broadening of union rights which would strengthen the CP by achieving certain gains and by strengthening its control at the level of union bureaucracy because it legalised a lot of rights in the factories: delegates, hours, pay, a lot of things which the unions had wanted. In the end this was the main result of the strike.

Though it did not want to challenge the government, the CP did change its line during the strike, didn't it, raising the demand of a 'popular government'?

Yes, but that was a very short period at the end of the last week of May. It was between 22 May and 29 May — one week of open political crisis because the agreements were rejected and there was no possibility of stopping the strike just through that kind of agreement.

The specificities of the gaullist regime left no channels to reach a consensus or negotiate: it was very centralised, and the strength of the regime was its weakness when it was challenged. So there was an opening of a political crisis, because De Gaulle announced on 24 May that they could not find a way out, and called for a referendum. Everybody, even reformists like Mendes-France and Mitterrand, rejected the referendum. That could mean an open political crisis. There were two answers. The SP was ready to have a 'left government with personalities'; even Mitterrand was ready to propose a new government based not on parties but on personalities, without exclusions and with negotiations — which we termed inclusive bonapartism. The CP was afraid of being marginalised and out-manoeuvred, so it raised the question very abstractly of a popular government, not giving this any clear content. But this was only used to occupy the space for four days. Mitterrand said afterwards in his balance sheet of 1968 that this was all a manoeuvre, to say 'we are ready to take our responsibilities' so De Gaulle would withdraw the referendum, then dissolve the assembly and hold elections.

At that time, our position was quite tricky. To raise a governmental slogan in the radical movement was very unpopular because of widespread hostility to the SP and even the CP. However, we had a general answer which was 'yes to a popular government: but no to Mitterrand and Mendes-France!' At that time, Mitterrand was a bourgeois personality, he was not personally a member of the SP. He was in a small bourgeois radical group: only later did he join the SP.

All this lasted just a few days when De Gaulle disappeared to see the army in Germany and then came back. There was a kind of panic at that time, but it was a very short time.

Do you think now, looking back, that a more concrete governmental slogan would have been better — something like 'CP take the power'?

The CP alone could not have taken power. The kind of answer we raised was not very concrete but was not so bad, and was proven in the struggle. There was a big CP-CGT demonstration on 13 May or thereabouts. They felt threatened from the right, and threatened on the left because the day before we had organised a rally which was a mixture between the new social democratic left and the new far left and the CP was frightened by this mixture.

They organised their own demonstration — a very big one — and we were the only current from the left to participate, and we were very small. We came with our slogan 'popular government, yes: but no Mitterrand and Mendes-France!', and it was taken up by people from the CP because it expressed the political issue and a solution and at the same time showed a mistrust of the manoeuvres of Mitterrand and Mendes-France.

The other difficulty with the general strike not having been called was that to call for it would also have raised the question of who should negotiate: who should be the leadership of the general strike — the normal union bodies, or the left? In this context we have to be conscious of the fact that we as a current had only maybe 400 members, and in the factories we had very little — a few individuals.

Could you say something about the origins of the JCR?

We were expelled from the CP youth organisation in 1965 for two reasons. One was the kind of support we gave to Vietnam; we fought for support and active solidarity with the National Liberation Front (NLF), against the slogan of 'peace' which was the official CP line. The other was that we opposed the CP decision to back Mitterrand as the sole candidate in the first round of the 1965 presidential election.

We were expelled in 1965 and formed the Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires (JCR) in April 1966 with 3-400 members, 90 per cent of whom were students. Our main activity was Vietnam solidarity and opposition to university reforms, which started at that time. We participated in the student movement. When the general strike started, it was obvious we had no real weight to compete: the only thing we could do was to try to organise and centralise in some way the more radical, dynamic part of the movement, through the action committees which appeared. This was not real self-organisation, since the action committees were more like gatherings of radical people. We tried to centralise these gatherings to gain a little strength to push proposals into the movement.

You referred to the student agitation on Vietnam, and it is obvious that international events had a big impact on the French events of 1968. Weren't there also important developments in Germany with the student movement?

It is interesting to compare the situation today. In France there is a tendency to exaggerate the extent of the radicalisation and politicisation of the youth and

student movement before 1968. The real growth came only in 1968, and afterwards. Before, the communist students were the milieu of the maturing of the radicalisation, and they never reached five thousand members; nor were there such massive demonstrations before 1968. The radicalisation started with the US bombing of Hanoi in 1966-67, but the demos were not so big.

I was at Nanterre university, and we called what we considered a big gathering of people one Sunday — it was 500 people out of 10,000 students at the university. It was a significant minority of very active people — no more than that. What is interesting is to compare that with the situation now: then there was a kind of happy, spontaneous internationalism, a strong identification not only with Vietnam. Vietnam obviously was centralised, summarised as an issue, imperialism versus black people, a clear-cut confrontation, everything clear, politics, morals, ethics, everything lining people on the same side, no problem. But at Nanterre the movement also took on anti-bureaucratic struggles; there were some involving students in Warsaw, and other Polish issues.

The Nanterre movement was open to everybody. It had three main axes: it was against bourgeois education reforms; anti-imperialist, and anti-bureaucratic. The only limitation on becoming involved — there were no tests, no programme like a party or anything — was opposition to US intervention in Vietnam, that was the only real criterion that was used. That's very different from today and was very clear and simple if you compare with now, when we find problems like Afghanistan on the one hand, Kampuchea on the other. Then it was all very clear, a unified view of the world was a real characteristic of those movements.

The German events had a big impact for various reasons. First, we had established some direct links with the SDS movement of Rudi Dutschke, at the beginning of 1967, with common conferences, meetings and so on. We co-organised with the SDS a big Berlin demonstration in February 1968 before the attempted killing of Rudi Dutschke. Quite a big German delegation had also been here, so there were fairly strong direct links. When Rudi Dutschke was shot we were in a national conference of the JCR, and we started at once mobilising street demonstrations which radicalised very quickly.

Could you say something about the other movements of that time, for instance the 22 March movement of students?

The 22 March movement began first at Nanterre university, and changed composition as it spread. It was a confused political movement. At the beginning there were mainly two currents: us and the anarchists. The CP youth always opposed it, and there were some Lambertists (members of the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste, OCI) who were very concerned with student unionism. They considered the 22 March movement was an 'anti-union' movement to destroy the student union. We didn't consider it was opposed to student unions. So the really dynamic forces in the 22 March movement were the anarchists and the JCR.

Among the youth, the CP was very marginalised at that time, so there was us and the Lambertists — very sectarian — and the main current was the maoists who were growing as a result of the cultural revolution in China in 1966-67. At the beginning of the 1968 events they were stronger than we were, but we won out in comparison to them through 1968.

Did the JCR grow fast in 1968?

Yes, we had enormous prestige because we were identified from the beginning with the radical wing of the movement, with the 22 March. For example on the night of 10 May, the 'night of the barricades', sticks in everyone's imagination because of the pictures of it, we were the only national political current fully participating. The growth of the JCR and later of the Ligue came from the combination of two things: our participation in the movement when the maoists were a bit discredited, and the campaign of our comrade Alain Krivine in the 1969 presidential elections, when most of the groups, showing their left infantilism, had no idea of utilising those elections. It was not obvious, and it was particularly difficult to do it, but it was a good idea, and it was this which within a year gave us a big space to expand.

The Lambert organisation — then the OCI, but today's Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI) — opposed involvement in the 'night of the barricades' didn't they?

They were against it, and so were the maoists. It is a tricky question, because now, being more mature politically, I don't know if seen from the point of view of the global relationship of forces, building barricades in the centre of Paris to defeat the government without the workers, the unions, without the movement, offered any chance of winning. So was it irresponsible?

At that time the leadership of the JCR was young, Krivine was only 25, many were 20-21, and maybe for that reason we didn't hesitate so much; it was more a question of feeling the sense of a big mass movement — because it was a mass movement — thousands and thousands of people. So we thought let's go ahead, and we shall see. Political decisions in such situations depend on feelings.

That decision clearly strengthened your links with the student movement. The Lambertists argued that their orientation was rather towards the factories and the working class.

No, I don't believe that was the real difference. I think the difference was on their characterisation of the political situation. They had more workers at that time than we did, that is true, but not so many, and only in certain specific areas, such as the public services, which in such a situation are not so explosively combative. They had some good workers — for example in Nantes, where they started the strike — that is true, but that was an exception.

But they had a strange view of the situation: their main worry was the danger of the gaullist regime evolving towards fascism, a kind of corporatist state, tending to incorporate trade unions through wages policies and so on. They reacted in accordance with that, fearing that to provoke a confrontation could lead to a populist-fascist state, risk the smashing of the workers' movement and big repression; that was their main reason for opposing the 'night of the barricades', for example.

Our attitude was very different. It was partly an attitude of improvisation rather than a planned approach, but we felt that there had been a rise in workers' struggles and strikes. There had been a real, but not a big increase in strikes, each time bringing confrontations with the police. There was a feeling that not all that much divided the student radicalisation from the general mood of the country. We analysed the attacks by the gaullists on social security and so on; and in the earlier strikes we had fought for student solidarity, collecting money. Ours was not a lunatic line, given the general mood in the country — though obviously we did not foresee we could provoke a general strike!

And after the strike was over, the JCR was made illegal.

We were made illegal, yes, and again in 1973, but it was advantageous in some ways because if you don't have the crazy line of the maoists and if you have some real links with the workers' movement, illegality is a formality and gives a certain prestige. We had to reorganise for

four months, and 20 people were jailed until September or October, but it was not a big problem for us.

How do you explain the rise in votes for the CP after their role in the 1968 events?
The CP came out of 1968 as the main workers' party, before the SP started to win back some ground. They were the main reformist party and won some support after 1968 — but not so much. I think it would be good to study the statistics some more. After they signed the 'common programme' in 1972, there was a growth of real reformist currents, of which the CP was one. But as a reformist party it was less efficient than social democracy, and suffered from its links to the Soviet Union, which are strong in France. Many of the people who are breaking with the CP now are from this generation of 1968.

You mentioned the question of women's liberation in the context of 1968: what was the level of women's involvement in the events?
Obviously they played a role: there were women students and women workers — but their role was as workers or students, without raising specific feminist or women's demands. If you read the platforms and statements, they hardly appear anywhere. The same was true of participation in leading bodies of strikes. It is interesting to compare for example the weight women had in the 1986 student movement with the photographs and documents of 1968, with only marginal involvement. That is a big change.

It's now 20 years on: do you think things could have been done better? Do you think that the potential of 1968 led some people to artificially high expectations?
Obviously it was a high point, with potentialities which were not used, but we should remember with what strengths we entered 1968. We were formed in 1966, defending the very idea that the working class still existed, when all kinds of people were arguing that everyone was bourgeois now. Suddenly within two years we had a real, live general strike. It is very good for you!

There were obviously other potentialities even for a small organisation if we had only had more experience and more maturity.

The real question you are raising is firstly one of an estimation of 1968. This is not an academic question. Should we say was it a mountain or just a small hill? The truth may be between the two. But what it represents depends on what we do now: if nothing more happens, then it was just a big peak followed by a general decline. Now is the moment we must start from.

Some say it was the last big strike of the nineteenth century working class. But perhaps it was the first big strike of the twenty-first century. We don't know, and it depends on what we do now.

A more balanced view of 1968 is not that it was a revolutionary strike — though sometimes we insist on stressing the political potentialities. A colder assessment shows that the consciousness of the working class had been formed by the years of prosperity and expansion, the welfare state, democratic rights. 1968 was not a revolutionary crisis like those of the 1920s or 1930s: that is true, and sometimes in polemics with the CP we insist too much on the revolutionary character of the situation.

Perhaps we have been more objective in our polemics with the Lambertists, though at first we did not know how to express why we felt that the situation was not revolutionary but was *pre-revolutionary*. Yes, there was a deep movement of the working class that was shaking the bourgeoisie: but there was no subjective factor, no leadership rooted strongly in the working class. The strength of the bureaucracy has something to do with the level of consciousness of broader layers of the working class. We can now see that better.

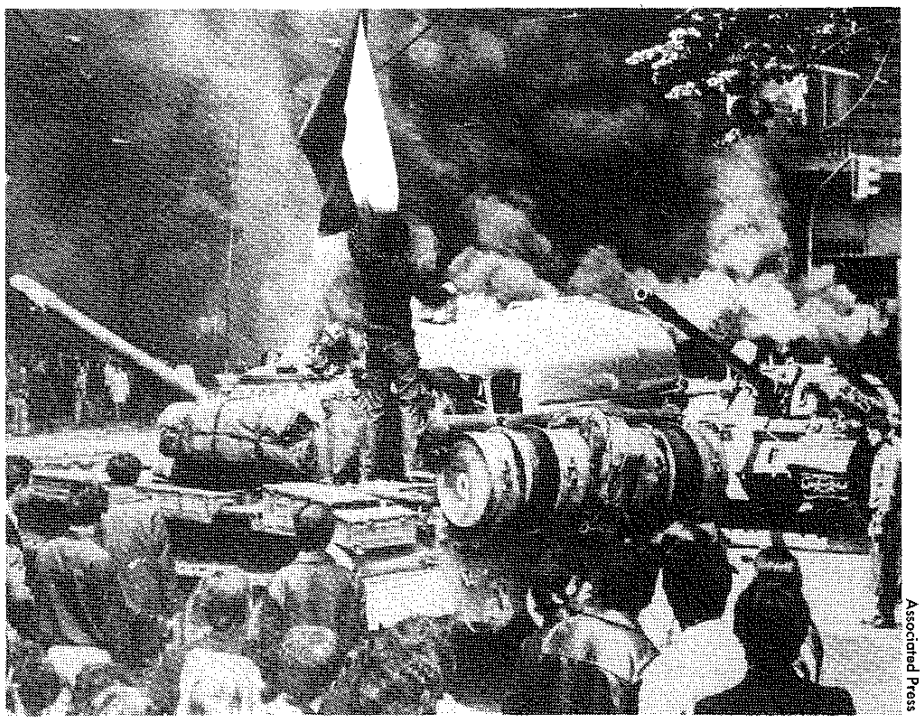
It is true that there were also many more illusions in maoist currents, partly because of the view that the working class was finished. They expected revoltuion now, immediately. They went rapidly into decline. Their very illusions coupled with the frustrations of what happened in Europe and then in China do not justify but explain why so many right wing intellectuals have come from maoist currents.

Social democrats tend to interpret 1968 in cultural and sociological terms: some say 1968 was a success because of what the SP was able to do in government — realising democratic aspirations, legalised abortion, and so on. Of course this is absurd: in many countries all this and more has been achieved without 1968. It doesn't explain anything about the peculiarities of such a movement, why a general strike involving millions of people took place, and so on.

There is a general move to depoliticise the interpretation of 1968. We have to defend the real political content and the dynamics of 1968, not just to celebrate but to give some present political meaning to it ●

The morning after the night of the barricades

When Prague was 'one big poster'



Associated Press

Czechoslovakia, spring 1968; alongside those struggling throughout the world, from Vietnam to Paris, workers and intellectuals from the Soviet bloc emerge onto the political stage. The idea that stalinist 'totalitarianism' had stifled for ever the possibility of political ferment and mass struggle in eastern Europe — already challenged by the Hungarian revolution of 1956 — was definitively shattered by events in Czechoslovakia. But, writes **RICHARD JAMES**, the Prague Spring and its aftermath also demonstrated the incapacity of a reforming political leadership within the ruling bureaucracy to lead a successful challenge to the stalinist system.

Twenty years on, as Gorbachev sets out on the path of liberalisation and reform in the Soviet Union itself — and Czechoslovak leader Milos Jakes proclaims *perestroika* in Czechoslovakia — the Prague Spring is full of lessons for today.

SOVIET TANKS rolled into Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968 as part of an invasion involving over 500,000 troops, including token units from other Warsaw Pact countries. It was a military walkover. But the process of 'normalisation' of political and social life was to take place over months and years. For what the Soviet tanks were there to crush was a mass movement for reform and democratisation, encompassing the broadest layers of society, which in the course of a few months had totally transformed the Czechoslovak political landscape. Spring in Prague had posed the possibility of an alternative to stalinist bureaucratic despotism.

Crucial aid was given to Soviet leader Brezhnev by the participation in the early stages of 'normalisation' of the majority of Czechoslovak communist leaders. These included the very same people who had led the process of reform and liberalisation that culminated in the Prague Spring. Not only had these leaders proved unable — and unwilling — to tackle the foundations of the bureaucratic edifice constructed after 1948, they were key to its consolidation, albeit at the end of Soviet guns, in the aftermath of the invasion.

They did not receive much thanks for their efforts. Over a period of eighteen months those most closely identified with the policies of the Prague Spring were driven from their positions of power in the ruling bureaucracy and expelled from the communist party.

Today, however, the 'Dubcekites' of 1968 see in the ascendency of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union — and the effects that this is having (or is hoped to have) in eastern Europe — a vindication of their line of twenty years ago. Before Gorbachev visited Czechoslovakia last year, eighteen former top party officials of 1968 wrote him a letter unreservedly endorsing his policies.

According to Czechoslovak human rights campaigner and revolutionary marxist Petr Uhl, many of the Dubcekites of 1968 believe (mistakenly) that the present changes in the USSR might lead to their rehabilitation and even — in some cases — to their restoration to positions of power.[1] Even today's party leadership, under Milos Jakes, has felt constrained to note similarities between *glasnost* and *perestroika* and the policies of 1968.

The issues of 1968 are issues for today in at least three senses. First, the political and social framework of contemporary Czechoslovakia, the core elements of which were established in 1948, was set in the course of the Prague Spring and the subsequent invasion and 'normalisation'. Second, the policies pursued by the Czechoslovak communist party in 1968 bear a striking resemblance to developments in the USSR under Gorbachev. Finally, it is true in the broader sense that the issues of strategy and tactics for political transformation in the countries of the Soviet bloc that were posed in 1968 are posed again today, albeit in different forms and in different contexts.

The overturn in Februray 1948 carried out by the Czechoslovak communist party, under the leadership of Klement Gottwald, was the result of a change in Stalin's post-war policy: the decison to fully integrate the east European countries into the Soviet sphere of influence through their social transformation into states modelled on the USSR. That is, states in which the means of industrial production are nationalised and control of them, along with a complete monopoly of political power, is vested in a bureaucratic caste mirroring, and beholden to, the bureaucratic rulers of the Soviet Union.

The overturn was not a socialist revolution in the classical sense but it did see a bureaucratically controlled mobilisation of the working class on a large scale.

Two hundred thousand workers were mobilised on the streets of Prague during the 'February crisis': there was a surge of revolutionary enthusiasm for the anti-capitalist course taken by the Czechoslovak stalinists. But the new social formation was bureaucratically deformed from its inception. Politically, it was a dictatorship *against* the working class: the power of the new bureaucratic rulers of society rested on the powerlessness of the great majority of productive workers.

The Czechoslovak communist party became the only vehicle of political power, a mechanism by which the ruling bureaucracy organised its domination of society, its control of a multiplicity of aspects of economic and political life. The bureaucracy rapidly grew into an immense layer of planners, functionaries and officials based in and around the state apparatus.

The February overturn and its immediate aftermath were accompanied by a wave of purges, trials and expulsions which affected even those at the very top of the party and state apparatus. This culminated in a series of trials in 1951-52 — notable for their anti-semitism — ending in the trial of the former purger-in-chief, ex-general secretary of the party Rudolf Slansky.

The motor force of this terroristic cycle of purge, slander and violence was located in the Kremlin: it was the desire of Stalin to subordinate totally the national bureaucracies of eastern Europe to that of the Soviet Union.

In a sense Stalin's efforts in this regard, however frighteningly effective in the short term, were doomed to failure. The ruling bureaucracies of the Soviet bloc held political power in a national context. A relative autonomy from the Soviet bureaucracy was bound to develop especially over time as each bureaucracy, rooted in a particular national reality, responded to differing political, social and economic conditions. Or, to put it another way, the power of each bureaucracy came to rest on its social position in a given social formation rather than, in the first instance, on the Soviet bureaucracy.

But, while direct state power in the east European countries could not be exercised from the Kremlin, it was the Soviet bureaucracy which set the framework and general lines, attempting to act in conjunction with the national rulers.

1956 saw two events which demonstrated the character of this relationship. The Soviet invasion of Hungary, to crush the revolution of that year, left upwards of 20,000 dead and a leadership installed to reimpose a bureaucratic status quo acceptable to the Soviet rulers. But 1956 also saw the elevation of Gomulka (a purge victim of 1948) to leadership in Poland on a wave of popular mobilisation. This demonstrated the pragmatic approach of the Soviet leadership under Kruschev which was forced to accept Gomulka's assurances that his 'Polish road', far from jeopardising the main elements of the system, was the best way to keep them intact.

The pressures for economic reform which began to exert themselves in the 1950s and 1960s throughout the Soviet bloc were largely the result of tensions and contradictions inherent in the stalinist system of bureaucratically centralised economic planning.

Czechoslovakia, along with East Germany, was far and away the most industrially developed and economically advanced of the east European states.

If the kinds of problem were similar throughout the Soviet bloc (imbalance between production of consumer goods and machinery, difficulties in promoting economic growth, inefficiencies caused by bureaucratic-commandist planning mechanisms, huge difficulties in mobilising the productive efforts of the workers and so forth), differing national conditions dictated that attempted solutions could only be developed on a na-

tional level. The tendency towards differing national responses was helped by the fact that, by the late 1960s, each bureaucracy had enjoyed many years of monopolistic political power.

The 1968 economic reforms in Czechoslovakia were among the most extreme and far reaching in eastern Europe. But the debates and intra-bureaucratic struggles which preceded the ascendency of the reforming wing of the bureaucracy began in the early to mid 1960s — especially after the twenty-second Soviet communist party congress which boosted Kruschev's liberalisation.

A wing in the bureaucracy developed which advocated far-reaching economic changes: blame was attached to the centralised nature of the system and decentralisation was advanced as a remedy. A key problem was seen as the inefficiency of the cumbersome bureaucratic planning apparatus.

Combined with a programme of economic restructuring, a policy of political liberalisation was advocated, in order to provide a political climate in which it would be possible for the economic reforms to succeed. Alongside the development of this debate in the ruling bureaucracy, a certain radicalisation was taking place among groups of intellectuals.

By the autumn of 1967 a reforming bloc on the central committee and praesidium had formed around the ideas of Ota Sik, the theoretician of economic reforms. A wider distribution of power and greater intellectual and political freedom were advocated. In order for the economic reforms to work it was necessary to change the 'image' of the party, to try to overcome the massive unpopularity of the state authorities that had develped under party leader Novot-

'The Russians have come' an eyewitness account

TESSA VAN GELDEREN

AUGUST 1967: my first glimpse of the lovely city of Prague on my way to the Tatra mountains. Young people dominate the city centre with their mini skirts and denims. Discussions with students and young workers is about music and films.

Politics is out. Marx and Lenin is compulsory in school and nobody is interested in talking about socialism. But everyone, young and old, is very friendly — except to the Germans. Memories of the war die hard. I speak a little Russian but those in our party who only speak German are not very well received.

One of the main stories in the paper is about a tobacconist who was robbed in her shop. Such a thing occurs so little that it hits the headlines here.

AUGUST 1968: I'm to spend the summer in Prague staying with a Czech friend. Her mother works for the press agency and her stepfather is a top television reporter just back from the olympic games in Mexico.

I am hoping to get some work checking translations. In the meantime I explore the city, often by myself, while my friend works. In the evenings I meet her friends who are at Prague university with her.

There is much discussion about what is going on in Czechoslovakia and Dubcek's spring. Everyone I meet supports the reforms. They say they are opposed to marxism but on further discussion this seems to be opposition to the sterile teachings forced down their throats in school. No one seems in favour of a return to capitalism.

There is little or no interest in the 'May events' in France. In fact, they seem to know very little about it.

Every evening as we walk the streets groups of people are talking. There is a buzz in the city centre. People seem free, able to openly discuss ideas and opinions for the first time. It is in sharp contrast to last year where no one discussed 'politics'. Now young and old mix on the streets, in the squares and cafes. Prague is alive.

21 AUGUST: my friend and I go to see the mime group, 'the black theatre of Prague'. On our way home we see the familiar groups talking, talking, talking. Many will be up most of the night...

...I am woken up at two o'clock am by the sound of low flying aircraft. 'The Russians have come', says my friend's mother.

Her husband is off at the television studio and over the next few days will help transmit illegal broadcasts.

Why didn't we know the Russians were coming? Border movements were thought to be just that. What was happening in Czechoslovakia was not seen as a threat to the Soviets.

Early next morning we are all on the streets. Many are trying to speak to the young Russian soldiers who seem distressed to find themselves an army of occupation in a 'friendly' country. The next day we learn of a soldier who committed suicide when he learnt where he was. Fraternisation with the troops is stopped.

The days become one long demonstration; one long queue for food, as people panic; one long minute at noon as car horns and factory sirens are sounded and everything else stops.

The streets no longer have groups of animated people; everyone is afraid to speak. Some resistance is organised through the illegal broadcasts, and cars speed through the streets throwing out leaflets. But always there are troops and tanks.

On the day I left, I was waiting near Wenceslas Square when a stranger pointed out the Russian tank that stood there permanently. It was the first tank across the border after the war when the Russians were regarded as the liberators of Czechoslovakia. It was identical with one in the same square that had to come to suppress the Prague Spring.

Now the Czechs did not want to speak Russian, they preferred to speak the hated German. I left many friends behind, some of whom later left their homeland ●

ny's hardline stalinist approach.

Novotny was removed from his position in January 1968 to be replaced by the reformer Alexandr Dubcek. The balance of power in the ruling elite had shifted decisively in favour of the reformers.

The project of the reformers was conceived entirely within the bounds of the social and political system established after 1948. It was neither an attempt to restore capitalism nor a challenge to the fundamental elements of the stalinist system. In other words, it was a thoroughly bureaucratic project. But the reformers' attempts to resolve the problems of the bureaucratic system without challenging the political and social framework of that system was only part of the picture that emerged in 1968.

One effect of liberalisation was to unleash powerful social forces whose dynamic was towards independent political expression, outside of the direct control of the bureaucracy. Especially from March 1968 there was a mushrooming of open political debate, criticism and activity spreading far beyond the official structures. Those involved were primarily intellectuals, students, those involved in the press and media and not, in the beginning, the industrial working class. Nevertheless, public pressure became a major factor in conditioning the policies and actions of the bureaucracy.

Those leaders who were closely identified with the reform moves were supported and praised; those who were more cautious came under pressure. A situation began to develop in which the bureaucracy was only in control so long as it appeared to identify with the increasing aspirations of broad layers of society for democratisation and change.

The slowness of the industrial working class to become involved deserves some explanation. An important reason was that the proposed economic measures (whose aim, after all, was increased productivity to enable economic growth) were viewed with apprehension and suspicion. In April the new prime minister, Cernik, said, 'at the present time wages cannot increase until production is made substantially more economic'.[2]

Conservative elements in the bureaucracy made attempts to appeal to industrial workers for support against the reformers. However, workers soon began to use the opportunity of the political thaw to make demands on local managers for increased wages and better conditions, backed up in some cases by strike action and the beginnings of independent trade union activity. While they were not to receive the support of the party leaders in this, they nevertheless were to throw in their lot in favour of political reform and liberalisation thus ensuring its support among the great majority of society.

The 'Action Programme' adopted in April by the central committee set out the main elements of the new direction: 'The communist party does not wish to assert its leading role by bringing pressure to bear on society, but by serving it devotedly...The party cannot impose its authority; it must earn it continually by its action...The party's aim is not to become a universal administrator of society, to bind and shackle the organisations and the whole life of society by its directives...'[3]

'the new social formation was bureaucratically deformed from its inception. Politically it was a dictatorship *against* the working class'

The 'leading role' of the party — a centrepiece of the stalinist conception of 'socialism' — was not questioned: it was the method of exercising that 'leading role' which was up for discussion.

Political pluralism, a free many-sided contest between different political parties and tendencies pursuing differing political programmes with guaranteed and institutional rights of opposition and dissent, was not embraced by the Czechoslovak leadership.

But, indeed, how could it have been? To adopt a programme for full socialist democratisation of society, for working class power and self-management, implies the *destruction* of the bureaucracy as a social layer and the *dismantling* of the repressive apparatus through which it exercises its power. New political parties remained illegal throughout the Prague Spring.

Nevertheless, elements of the April 'Action Programme' were very radical indeed compared to previous practice in Czechoslovakia and what existed elsewhere in eastern Europe. It promised, among other things, to abolish state censorship of the media; to guarantee the right of citizens to foreign travel; to purge and re-organise the security forces; and to frame a constitutional law to federalise the structure of the state, giving complete equality to the Czech and Slovak nations and guaranteeing a degree of independence for national minorities. All this was in addition to the commitment to pursue the economic reform and decentralisation process.

Demands which went much further than the positions of the party leadership were raised in a variety of ways throughout the spring and early summer months (and, indeed, after the invasion). On the May Day parade banners appeared with slogans such as 'No democracy without opposition', 'Free elections' and so on.

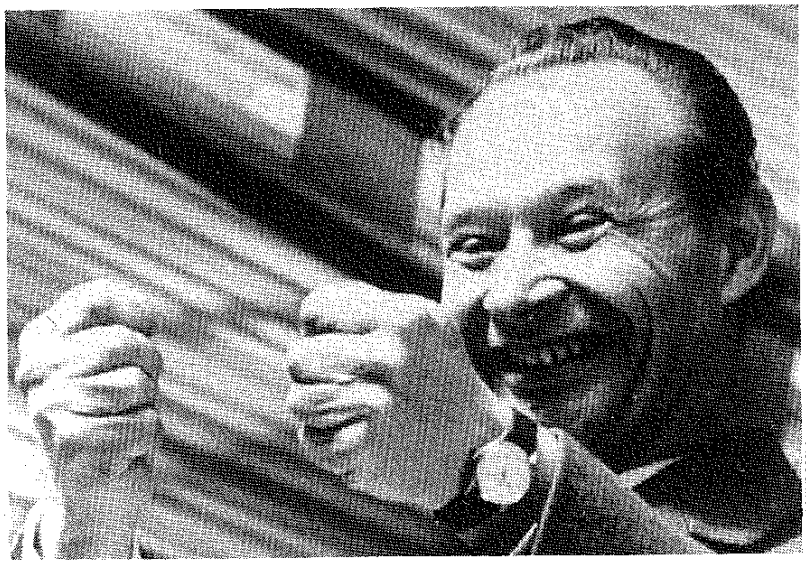
In late June a document appeared, the 'two thousand words manifesto', addressed to 'workers, farmers, scientists, artists and everyone' which called for the driving out of dishonest officials, by strikes and boycotts if necessary, and assured the government that it would be backed by arms against 'foreign forces'. It was attacked by party leaders but it reflected widely-held sentiments.

Throughout the period leading up to the invasion, the danger of Soviet intervention was played down by the party's leaders — despite the fact that it was clearly a real threat from May onwards. In refusing to mobilise society against the threat of Soviet intervention, or even to warn of the danger, the leadership helped, in effect, to prepare the ground for it.

For the Soviet bureaucracy the dangers in the Czechoslovakian situation were not so much in the intentions or character of the Dubcek leadership: the Czechoslovak bureaucracy maintained its hold on the structures of the state throughout and there was a substantial continuity of personnel in key positions of power from before the fall of Novotny to after the Soviet invasion and the removal of Dubcek.

The danger was perceived as being the broader social forces and political tendencies unleashed in the course of the reform project and the possibility that developments in Czechoslovakia would spill over into the other east European countries and even into the Soviet Union itself. That is to say, that the Prague Spring, if allowed to continue according to its internal logic, could develop into a challenge to bureaucratic rule and could spark movements for democratisation and change internationally.

This latter process had already begun by August. Demonstrations in Poland had raised the call for a 'Polish Dubcek' and in the Ukraine the Czechoslovak policy on national rights and federalism was gaining significant support. Evidence of far wider sympathy was provided after the invasion when there were



Happy days: Alexandr Dubcek at the May Day celebrations, 1968

demonstrations or other forms of protest in Moscow's Red Square, in Poland, Hungary, East Germany and even in Bulgaria.

After a massive propaganda campaign on the threat to 'socialism' in Czechoslovakia and meetings with top Czechoslovak leaders in Cierna and Bratislava, the Soviet invasion was launched and was immediately militarily successful. The praesidium of the communist party gave immediate orders against resistance by force.

The central committee building in Prague was one of the first to be taken over by the occupying forces. Dubcek and others were arrested, handcuffed and flown via the Ukraine to Moscow.

The Prague Spring was over: even as they were being arrested by foreign troops and their country was being occupied, Czechoslovakia's leaders were attempting to ensure that all possibilities for practical resistance were minimised and restrained.

In Moscow, Dubcek and the Soviet leadership drew up a joint communique. Dubcek returned to Prague and read the statement over the radio: it re-affirmed the party's line but called for 'normalisation' of the situation in a 'frank and friendly' atmosphere with the Soviets.

Also agreed in Moscow was a secret protocol — the details of which became known over the next weeks — whose provisions included stopping any discussion in the United Nations, repudiating the fourteenth party congress, consolidating the 'leading role' of the communist party, controlling the communications media, and adopting measures to minimise conflict between the troops and Czechoslovak citizens.

The signing of the protocol and the subsequent policy of compromise has been described as a 'criminal offence of high treason'.[4] It was an offence committed by virtually the entire top leadership of the party who individually appended their names.

But the criminal response of the ruling bureaucracy was not the only response to the invasion. On the streets there was an immediate and unanimous reaction of — non-violent — opposition.

Within hours of the invasion Prague had become 'one big poster', there were demonstrations everywhere. Clandestine newspapers, radio stations and television sprang up and, as quickly as they were closed down by the occupying forces, they sprang up again. Railworkers managed to prevent Soviet direction-finding equipment from getting through. Local committees appeared in many areas, ready to coordinate general strike action.

The period after the invasion witnessed large demonstrations in October and November, a three day student strike in November, the growth and development of workers' councils in many enterprises and further large demonstrations in March 1969 — eight months after the invasion. Political ferment continued: people's new found freedoms could not easily be taken away.

But the mass movement continued to look towards Dubcek and his cohorts for leadership. The underground radio, for example, was at the same time both the main organiser of mass resistance *and* the medium through which the party leaders appealed for 'calm'.

The fourteenth party congress, convened secretly on 22 August in a Prague factory, gathered together over 1,000 delegates. It was both a symbol of resistance and a mechanism through which appeals for 'normalisation' were made. A proposal for a general strike was dropped in favour of calling a one hour token stoppage for the next day.

In this way, and over a prolonged period, a solution acceptable to the Soviet bureaucracy was imposed. In April 1969 it was Dubcek himself who proposed that Gustav Husak replace him as first secretary of the party. The party was purged and reorganised, Dubcek expelled, and by the summer of 1970 relatively stable bureaucratic control had been restored.

There have been those on the anti-stalinist left — of whom Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher is probably the best known — who have propounded the view that the Soviet communist party, and other stalinist parties, could become transformed into parties which defend the interests of the working class. According to this view, stalinist ruling bureaucracies are capable of self-reform, initiating a transformative process leading to genuine socialist democracy. As we have seen, there is absolutely nothing in the Czechoslovakian experience of 1968-69 to back up such a contention.

It is certainly true that divisions within the bureaucracy and the adoption of a policy of liberalisation and reform can open the floodgates of mass struggle, providing the opportunity for the masses to enter the political arena. But there is no evidence to suggest that the bureaucracy — or even significant elements within it — can be forced by such mass pressure into a challenge to the foundations of the bureaucratic system.

In this sense the main lesson of the Czechoslovakian experience is the need for an independent working class perspective and leadership, politically outside of and opposed to all wings of the ruling bureaucracy. A leadership which understands that the struggle must be developed to the point where the entire bureaucratic apparatus can be overthrown and replaced with genuine socialist democracy ●

Footnotes

1. Petr Uhl, 'August Trauma', *East European Reporter*, Vol.3 No.1.
2. Quoted in A. Westoby, *Communism Since the War*, Harvester, 1981, p.248.
3. Quoted in F. Fejto, *A History of the People's Democracies*, Penguin, 1974, p.225.
4. Petr Uhl, *op. cit.*

1968: end of an era for Castro

'Castro adopted a rogue elephant role in relation to the stalinist movement'

JOHN LISTER

A GRUDGING but significant endorsement of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 marked the end of the high point of Cuban independence from Moscow's foreign policy.

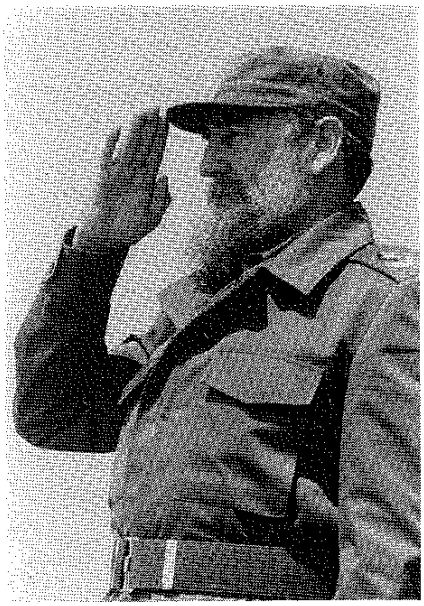
This high point had begun in 1965 — at the same time as the launch of the Cuban Communist Party had given the Castro leadership a formal tag of orthodoxy among other communist parties. Yet Castro coupled this with adopting a rogue elephant role in relation to the stalinist movement.

In Venezuela, he supported a 1966 split from the official CP of its guerrillaist wing led by Douglas Bravo. The new Cuban CP also lined up with the parties of North Korea and North Vietnam, voicing strident support for the Vietnamese struggle against US imperialism in terms which could only be seen as tacit criticism of the lukewarm line taken by Moscow.

In 1965 Castro declared that: 'We are in favour of giving Vietnam all the aid that may be necessary, we are in favour of this aid being arms and men, we are in favour of the socialist camp running the risks that may be necessary for Vietnam'.

Even at the point of his eventual capitulation to Kremlin policy in 1968, Fidel was to hedge his support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia with barbed references to inadequate Soviet backing for Vietnam. Quoting the Tass report of the unbreakable Warsaw Pact 'solidarity' with Czechoslovakia against any 'outside threat', Castro, unquestionably aware of the irony, observed:

'... We ask ourselves: "does this declaration include Vietnam? Does that statement include Korea? Does that statement include Cuba? Do they or do they not consider Vietnam, Korea and



Cuba links of the socialist camp to be safeguarded against the imperialists?

'In accordance with their declaration, Warsaw Pact divisions were sent into Czechoslovakia. And we ask ourselves: "Will Warsaw Pact divisions also be sent to Vietnam if the Yankee imperialists step up their aggression against that country and the people of Vietnam request that aid?" '

The road to this statement had begun from economic and political problems facing the Cuban leadership. In Latin America, Castro's perspective of guerrilla struggle had proved an unmitigated disaster in every country outside Cuba, leading to crushing setbacks in Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, and in Bolivia, where it brought the tragic death of Che Guevara.

The Cuban model of revolution stubbornly resisted attempts to export it. It depended for its survival on a flow of Soviet imports, especially oil, of which 99.3 per cent came from the USSR.

Castro was not in a strong position economically or politically to defy the revamped and impatient Kremlin leadership under Brezhnev and Kosygin.

By early 1968, with crucial trade talks about to begin, the relationship came to a crunch. Castro's ministry of the interior had late in 1967 arrested a 'microfaction' of pro-Moscow supporters of veteran Cuban stalinist Anibal Escalante, organised inside the new CP and on its central committee. They were accused of being closely linked to Soviet officials and opposing the Castro leadership (though in 1968 there was no formal ban on opposition factions inside the Cuban CP). In all, 35 defendants were sentenced by the CP central committee to prison terms ranging from 2 to 15 years.

This tweak to the nose of the Moscow bureaucracy was followed by an ostentatious Cuban boycott of an international meeting of communist parties in Bucharest in February 1968, and Cuban denunciation of the new US-Soviet nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Such a show of defiance was not to be tolerated indefinitely by the Kremlin leaders. They hit back early in 1968 with economic sanctions — slowing down deliveries of oil to Cuba. Within a month, Castro had capitulated. Later came the Cuban endorsement of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Since 1968, Cuban public pronouncements and political orientation have steered clear of even tacit criticism of the Soviet bureaucracy. Though still a distinct element, with its own unique history and its own specific problems dictating the precise shape of its foreign policy, the Castro leadership had become politically assimilated and subordinated in its global objectives and initiatives to the general line of Stalin's heirs in the Kremlin ●

Vietnam: twenty years since Tet

In February 1968 stunned Americans watched the tv spectacle of American marines battling with National Liberation Front (NLF) forces in the garden of the US embassy in Saigon. By May, Lyndon Johnson had ordered a partial cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam and sat down to the first serious peace talks. Although another seven long years of war were to follow, the basis had been laid for the triumphant entrance of the liberation forces into the renamed Ho Chi Minh City. **STEVE ROBERTS** writes.

THE TET OFFENSIVE was an authentic revolutionary insurrection with the urban population rising up to combine with the armed forces of the NLF and the North Vietnamese regular forces.

But its nature was widely misunderstood at the time. It was certainly not, as the US government claimed, the culmination of a long external offensive by North Vietnamese forces on the independent state of South Vietnam. No such state existed.

The Geneva conference had been held the month after the smashing defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. While the conference agreed to divide Vietnam into two parts along the 17° north latitude, it also provided for the holding of elections two years later for the purpose of reunifying the two Vietnams.

However South Vietnam, supported by the USA, refused to hold the elections, in its concern that the immense popularity of Ho would result in the reunification of the country under his leadership.

The political heritage of the aborted agreement was a vast network of Viet Minh cadres in the south of the country, which in December 1960 fused with radical buddhist groupings to form the NLF.

However, Tet was not simply a popular uprising against an unrepresentative and unpopular government in the south, as some liberal critics of the US government claimed.

In 1959 the Hanoi leadership decided to back armed struggle in the south. At the third national congress of the Vietnam Workers Party a number of southern cadres were elected to leading positions, including Le Duan who was elected to the key position of general secretary of the party. Le Duan had been associated with the fight for an armed struggle line in the south since the collapse of the Geneva accord. Under his influence the number of regular North Vietnamese troops in the south increased in the 1960s to over 50,000.

However, this must be set against the awesome build up of US military power. In 1961 South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem asked President Kennedy for assistance against the growing offensive against his regime. American aid was at first limited to military equipment, supplies and military advisers (although it should be noted that in two years the number of 'advisers' had grown to 17,000).

The first air raids began early in 1965 under the direction of Lyndon Johnson. By 1968 the tonnage of bombs dropped on Vietnam was *eighty* times in excess of that dropped on Britain during the second world war. The build-up of troops proceeded at a similar astronomical rate. By 1968 there were half a million US troops in Vietnam, supported by 50,000 South Korean, Australian and New Zealand troops, plus 600,000 South Vietnamese forces and hundreds of thousands of local levies and militias.

It was this vast military machine that gave General Westmoreland, its commander-in-chief, the confidence to say that 'the light was at the end of the tunnel'.

The phrase was particularly inappropriate. North Vietnamese sappers were putting the finishing touches to the vast network of subterranean passages that would take thousands of NLF and North Vietnamese troops to within 200 metres of the outskirts of Saigon and other major cities without detection.

The offensive began on 2 February.

Artillery barrages began against US military posts, and hand to hand fighting began in the streets, as NLF troops, aided by hundreds of thousands of their urban supporters, began the insurrection. The US embassy in Saigon was occupied. By the end of the month over 70 major towns and cities had fallen to the NLF, including Hué, the capital of the central region.

The effect on American public opinion was electric, spurring on, and adding weight to the rapidly growing public opposition to the war. Millions of Americans, including hundreds of thousands of students, participated in rallies and demonstrations against the continuation of the war. Burning of draft cards and the raiding of conscription records were becoming widespread.

In March, Johnson ordered an end to the bombing of approximately 90 per cent of North Vietnamese territory, rejecting Westmoreland's request for 200,000 further combat troops. In May negotiations began in Paris about the possibilities of a peaceful resolution to the war.

Since that time, right wing historians have argued that Johnson made a fatal mistake. The Tet offensive was admittedly spectacular, they argue, but in reality it had been a massive failure for the liberation forces.

While it is true that NLF losses were heavy (some 30,000 by conservative estimate) these opinions are contradicted by expert testimony. For example, Nguyen Van Loc, the South Vietnamese prime minister in 1967-68, judges that, 'We lost the battle for the south in 1968... By 1975 the communists only had to push in a few chosen areas to gain total victory'.

The prospect of overwhelming military power smashing the communists and leading to a quick victory had been shattered forever. Now the Americans began seriously to negotiate an end to the war, while trying to determine the terms of the settlement through the policy of 'Vietnamisation'. However, the new policy had already been compromised by the huge intervention that had preceded it.

In January 1973 a cease-fire in the whole of Vietnam came into effect. It provided for the withdrawal of all American troops within 60 days and the holding of new elections in the south. The Paris peace accords were characterised by Saigon as treason, by Washington as an honourable settlement, and by many on the left who should have known better as a sell-out. But within a year the fighting had resumed throughout the whole country. In March 1975, a partial retreat of South Vietnamese troops turned into a total rout.

On April 30, North Vietnamese troops and NLF fighters entered Saigon, promptly renaming it Ho Chi Minh City. Thus more than a century of imperialist domination, first by the French and then by the Americans, was over.

What of developments since? According to western writers, the newly unified Vietnam then began to set out on a course of expansionism aiming to dominate neighbouring Laos, Cambodia and perhaps the whole of south-east Asia.

Superficially there seems to be evidence for such a charge. In 1977 a treaty was signed with the Lao peoples republic which has been characterised by many, including some on the left, as a neo-colonial imposition on the part of Vietnam. And in January 1979 after two years of border skirmishes, the Vietnamese army overthrew Pol Pot's regime and captured Phnom Penh.

'the effect on American public opinion was electric'

However, the thinking of the Hanoi leadership points in an opposite direction to some 'neo-imperialist' grand plan.

After the victories of 1975, the Vietnamese leadership had assumed that there would be a peaceful international context for the development of the country. They also assumed, perhaps naively, that a combination of Watergate, war guilt and international pressure would force heavy reparations from a US government. Under these conditions Vietnam could enjoy a respite from the horrors of war and devote itself to the tasks of internal construction and modernisation.

The reality was very different. Not only was the US not prepared to pay damages, it brought pressure on its western allies to block all aid to the bomb-ravaged country. The only way forward for modernisation and industrialisation was a closer alliance with the Soviet Union.

Until that time Hanoi had walked a tightrope, balancing between Peking and Moscow. But China could offer little in terms of the technology and economic aid of its rival. Unable to compete with Moscow on this level, China resorted to military coercion: cutting off aid and increasing military pressure on Vietnam's borders. By 1978, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) had declared China 'the main enemy' of the Vietnamese revolution.

National security again became the main concern of the Vietnamese and relations with its near neighbours became entwined in big power diplomacy. The vision of a socialist federation of Indochina became tragically transformed into its parody: a war-exhausted country maintaining 200,000 occupying troops in its Kampuchean 'ally's' territory.

Retribution was swift. The month following the overthrow of Pol Pot, the Chinese leadership decided to 'teach Vietnam a lesson' and launched a powerful military thrust 60 miles across the Sino-Vietnamese border.

While the Chinese offensive was largely unsuccesful in its objective of inflicting heavy damage on Vietnam, the combination of military pressures on the country has exacerbated the pattern of economic disasters which have afflicted the country since 1975.

In part these disasters have been due to climactic factors, failure of harvests and so on. But more importantly, the bureaucratic deformations which already existed in the North Vietnamese state have become grossly amplified in the wake of the revolutionary victory.

The sixth congress of the VCP meeting at the end of 1986 discussed some of these problems. Politbureau member Vo Chi Chong declared, 'our management is neither centralist in character nor democratic, but a conservatism that consists of prolonging bureaucratic centralism'.

The cure proposed was of the Gorbachev variety. The congress shook up the leadership, retiring the three most central figures: Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong and Le Duc Tho. The press was given greater freedom, not only to go through officially sanctioned 'criticisms', but to initiate disucssion.

The Soviet Union has urged along the process with less than subtle warnings about the 'waste of aid' granted to Vietnam.

Despite this interlinking of the process of economic reform in the USSR and Vietnam, it would obviously be a mistake to adopt a facile comparison of the two. It is still not clear what economic course Vietnam will adopt to try and overcome its problems.

For our part while clearly recognising these gross bureaucratic deformations of the Vietnamese state, we should also understand the horrendous pressures that transformed the bright new future opened by the Tet offensive into a maelstrom of fratricidal warfare and economic devastation ●

Vietnam solidarity:

The determination to resist and the confidence to win

The mass movement in solidarity with the Vietnamese people against US imperialism was a major feature of 1968 in Britain. It was the focus for the radicalisation of an entire generation: a radicalisation which went beyond the single issue of Vietnam and led many thousands to embrace varying forms of revolutionary politics. **TESSA VAN GELDEREN** spoke to **PAT JORDAN** and **TARIQ ALI**, both founding members and leading figures in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC).

Pat Jordan was a full time worker for the campaign during the mass demonstrations of 1967 and 1968. He was a member of the International Marxist Group at the time and has been a lifelong fighter for socialism. Pat is currently recovering from the effects of a stroke.

In 1967-68 Tariq Ali's picture was never far from the front pages of the press. An editorial board member of *Black Dwarf*, he became a symbol of the mass demonstrations and occupations. His book about the period, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*, is reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

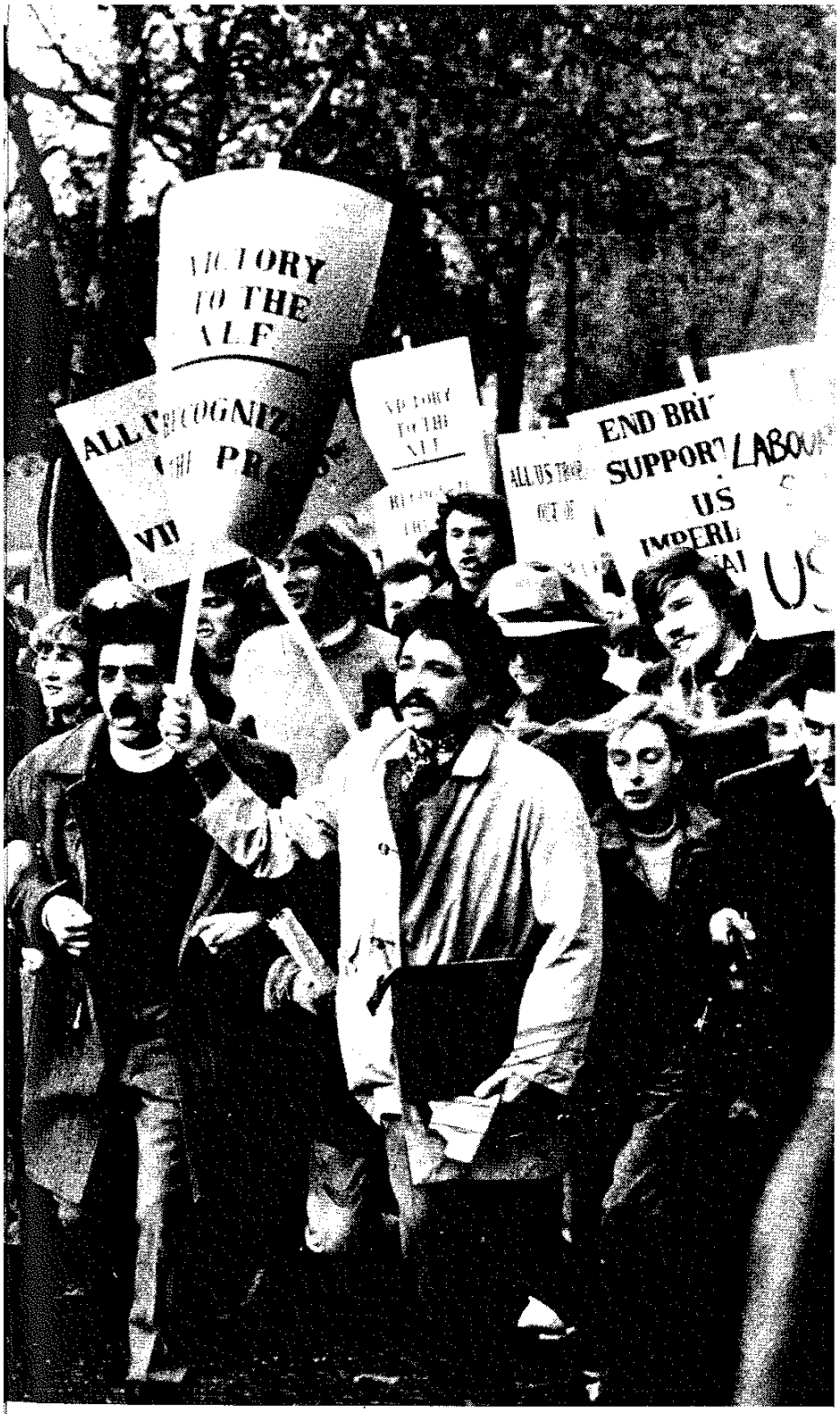
PAT JORDAN

CND WAS THE left campaign of the fifties, its main activity was a once-yearly march from Aldermaston. The march was like a revolutionary university — people arguing, tactics and strategy debated, thousands of papers bought and sold.

The main organisation to gain from this was, rather surprisingly, the Labour Party Young Socialists (this was before the Socialist Labour League's control in the sixties).

The orientation of CND was to get the Labour Party to adopt unilateralism. Then Aneurin Bevan, after initially supporting unilateralism, made his famous somersault. This rapidly disillusioned people. They realised that they needed something else other than this simple orientation which was entirely within the framework of supporting the Labour Party, at that time under the leadership of Gaitskell.

Many CND activists were people who had left the Communist Party at about the time of the Hungarian revolution in



1956. As a result of these developments the Committee of 100 emerged and argued for direct action.

One of the people involved with this was Ralph Schoenman who persuaded Bertrand Russell to support the committee. The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation was established. The name was to make bridges, Schoenman was the driving force.

When Schoenman went on a visit to Vietnam he was told by the Vietnamese communists that they were very dissatisfied with the anti-war movement in Britain. This was the British Council for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV) which was led by the Communist Party. The first line of its founding statement was 'we do not take sides, we want peace in Vietnam'. Quite rightly the Vietnamese did not like this as it took out the anti-imperialist essence of their fight.

In Nottingham *The Week* group was in the Labour Party. At the Labour Party conference in 1966 it produced a daily bulletin. There was a resolution from Nottingham South CLP which ended up with 'Vietnam for the Vietnamese'.

There was also a resolution on the agenda which had been inspired by the BCPV which called on the Wilson government to take an initiative 'to bring this dreadful war to an end'.

Nottingham South's delegate, Peter Price, came under immense pressure from the Tribunites to withdraw his resolution: they supported the BCPV. They did horrific things like waking him up at two o'clock in the morning, bullying him. They argued that if the Nottingham South resolution remained on the agenda it would jeopardise the passing of the BCPV resolution.

We were, of course, totally opposed to withdrawing the resolution. In the end it got a not insignificant number of votes as did the BCPV resolution.

This then was the background to the establishment of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Schoenmann was part of these discussions and observed the production of *The Week* bulletin. He came to us with a proposal that we start a different type of movement against the war in Vietnam. He'd discuss it with Ken Coates, who was a member of the Fourth International and worked for the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.

I moved to London from Nottingham to work for the Peace Foundation to set up such an organisation. I did that in January 1967 and we held the founding conference of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in June 1967.

We tried to intervene with all groups of people including CND, arguing that they should support the struggle in Vietnam where it was possible that nuclear weapons could be used. We had no joy from them, although individuals did support us. We also had support from various maoist groups. *New Left Review* gave us facilities. We produced a photographic exhibition of the war in Vietnam which was shown round the universities.

There were a few hundred delegates at the founding conference, a large proportion were students but there were a sprinkling of trade unionists and a number of people from Labour parties. Local groups were established to mobilise for national demonstrations and local activities. A favourite passtime was stalking Labour prime minister Harold

Wilson who said: 'Everywhere I go, I get followed by people picketing me about Vietnam'.

There was an attempt to prevent Labour foreign secretary Michael Stewart from speaking at the Oxford Union. This raised the whole question of 'free speech'. You have to remember that the Vietnam war was on the television nearly every evening and there was a revulsion against Wilson who was giving support, at least in a political sense, to the Americans. People were outraged.

We were well aware of our weaknesses in terms of social compositon. We took steps to try to remedy that. We organised a trade union conference and a youth conference.

'a favourite pastime was stalking Harold Wilson, who said "Everywhere I go I get followed by people picketing me about Vietnam" '

The steering committee of VSC met weekly over this period. There were many fights and packing of meetings. It was usually a fight between the International Marxist Group and the maoists. At the first conference of the VSC the maoists had wanted to write into the constitution support for the '13 points' and the '10 points'. These were negotiating points put forward by the Vietnamese. We were opposed to that because it would have tied us hook, line and sinker to the North Vietnamese government's position. It would have allowed us no political freedom whatsoever.

The first large demonstration was in October 1967. It was huge by our standards: 10,000 people.

The VSC became the focus for many organisations and individuals to express their opposition to the Wilson government. We would have placards on VSC demonstrations with 'victory to the NLF, we want higher pensions'; 'victory to the NLF, workers' control in the shipyards'. People spontaneously reacted. They knew they were anti-Wilson's government. They knew the demonstration was against something the Wilson government was doing, so they wanted to go on it.

The Communist Party campaigned, at first, vigorously against the VSC. There was a strange amalgam of forces opposed to us: the CP, the pacifists and the Socialist Labour League (SLL, later to become the Workers Revolutionary Party). The latter produced a leaflet for one of the mass demonstrations entitled 'why we're not marching'!

The great strength we had was that we were part of a world-wide movement. If we talk about the objective effects, what the VSC did in part was to reinforce the American anti-war movement which in turn was one of the factors demoralising the American army of occupation. The main factor demoralising them was the fight put up by the Vietnamese and the fact that they were completely socially isolated in Vietnam. Only the scum of Vietnamese society would have any dealings with them.

This was expressed in various ways. Many were drug takers, the level of discipline started to collapse. If American imperialism had not been forced to withdraw its army it would have had a mutiny on its hands. In its widest scenario that's the kind of job that will have to be done in relation to central America. There should be an internationally coordinated campaign.

Vietnam was the first military defeat suffered by the United States. Afterwards the Fourth International drew the conclusion that it was virtually impossible for American imperialism to intervene again because there was such revulsion to the Vietnam experience. I wish they'd been right.

TARIQ ALI

THE SOLIDARITY movement with Vietnam was not spontaneous — it had to be organised. It was in part the result of a decision taken by the Fourth International at its eighth world congress in 1965 when it decided to make solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution *the* main priority for its sections all over the world. It was that big central push which threw cadres of the organisation everywhere — even in countries where there were only a few — into building the movement.

This coincided with a political conjuncture which was extremely favourable so that it became a mass international movement. The whole uniqueness of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign is that it became an umbrella for a newly developed revolutionary consciousness amongst a fairly substantial and significant number of youth — primarily students but not exclusively so.

Vietnam lit the fuse and enabled people to go way, way beyond a single issue and embrace varying forms of revolutionary politics. I think that's what gave that whole period its political meaning and left its mark on an entire generation all over the world. The Vietnamese were a focal point in that.

It's foolish to imagine that the Vietnam exprerience can be mechanically repeated now. If the political situation changes in Europe, anything's possible. But even then I don't think that the particular conjuncture will be repeated because its a conjuncture that happens very rarely in a century.

There's been nothing like it. People say it was like the twenties and thirties. Yes and no. The Spanish civil war was a very big event in Europe. It did not bring about a world-wide radicalisation. The Russian revolution did, so the twenties are more comparable. But the whole business about 1968 is that it was not confined to Europe.

It is true that many important things happened in Europe: the general strike in France, the creeping general strike in Italy, the overthrow of a senile bonapartist regime in Portugal.

But you also had a general strike in Pakistan in 1969 which toppled a military dictatorship and led to the break up of the country. There was a massive peasant uprising in different parts of India, the beginnings of a struggle in Latin America, the fight against the Portuguese in Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique and successive strike waves in Argentina. There was the uprising in Sri Lanka. And there was the anti-war movement in the United States which was without precedent in the history of that country. So it was really global and that's what made it so unique.

The struggle of the Vietnamese somehow symbolised all that: the determination to resist and the confidence to win. The fact that the Americans could not defeat the Vietnamese played a very big part in the radicalisation in Europe.

But the victory in Vietnam was not repeated elsewhere; in fact the setbacks in Europe were pretty decisive. The general strike in France — the largest general strike in the history of capitalism — shook the regime, but did not topple it. In the subsequent general election the gaullists were re-elected and that had a very demoralising effect — not immediatley but a few years later.

The other important event in Europe was the Portuguese revolution in 1974-75. There too, we had a very big setback. In my view, the far left collectively and the Portuguese Communist Party bear part of the responsibility for that defeat. They failed to understand the central question which agitated large numbers of people in that country — the

links between socialism and democracy. The revolutionary upsurge was not defeated by a bloody counter-revolution; it was defeated by the victory of Mario Soares and the Portuguese Socialist Party.

November 1975 marked the end, by and large, of the period of radicalisation which had opened up in Europe in 1967-68. From that time on there was a continual drift to the right.

This depresses some people. It does not particularly depress me. There are many examples in history where after every revolutionary wave and upsurge you have a period of regression. You have reaction which is triumphant and as the tide goes back it leaves all sorts of flotsam and jetsam in its wake. That is how the historical process operates. It is not permanent.

'Vietnam lit the fuse and enabled people to go way beyond a single issue and embrace varying forms of revolutionary politics'

There were people so hypnotised by the fifties that they could not see what was going on in the sixties. It would be a tragedy if people were so mesmerised by the victory of reaction in the late seventies and eighties that they totally fail to see what is possible in the next decades.

The success of the solidarity movement in the United States and in western Europe marginalised during that period all those political parties that were essentialy putting forward either a pacifist or a popular front approach. Our movement showed that you could mobilise far more people on a clear solidarity position. The fact that this could be done first split the Young Communist League, then divided the Communist Party and finally the *Morning Star* started reporting VSC actvities in a sympathetic way. Likewise in other west European countries.

In the United States it was more complex in that the CP was not the only organisation opposed to solidarity slogans. The US Socialist Workers Party slogan was 'bring the boys back home' which was not sufficient.

The group in the US that made the biggest gains was the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) which mobilised around 'victory to the NLF'. Because the SWP(US) cut itself off from this layer it won over very few people which was a tragedy; many of them went to different organisations and some of them ended up defending individual terrorism. This could have been avoided.

The stalinist parties refused to accept that what was taking place was a revolution. We did. The Vietnamese themselves were very open and invited us to Vietnam to collaborate with them. They were present at the founding conference of the VSC. The Vietnamese CP belonged to the stalinist family. Cadres were educated and formed in a period when the Communist International was dominated by stalinism. Yet this party also made a revolution and led a successful struggle against three different imperialist powers: the French, the Japanese, the French again and finally the USA. So you could not call it a party which was aiding counter-revolution.

It also did many reprehensible things. Sections of the CP in the south played a very bad role in drowning out dissent, including killing trotskyists. At the same time it was in a united front with the trotskyists in Saigon and there was a joint slate. So it was not a simple issue.

For us in the Fourth International, it was not a problem which prevented us from throwing everything into defending that revolution. Its success would have enormous repercussions throughout the world and on that we were absolutely right. The reason why the Americans have not occupied Nicaragua today is because there is still revulsion in the United States because of Vietnam.

You have to be on the side of those in struggle. You can do this without capitulating to their political conceptions. In the VSC and in our press we did it. It's not that we were uncritical.

I remember writing in *Socialist Challenge* that the issue of democracy was not unimportant and should not be ignored by the Vietnamese. Many of the things Gorbachev is saying now we were saying years ago and I think some of the lessons of *glasnost* can and should be applied to countries like Vietnam and Cuba. They need them for their own health. These are tactical questions but the tactics are not unimportant. I am very proud that our current in the labour movement was among the first to recognise this.

In 1968 people came out of the Labour Party because the Wilson government was so reactionary it was very difficult to do anything inside the Labour Party. The Labour left, at the time led by people like Michael Foot, was simply incapable of exerting any pressure whatsoever. By and large they defended Wilson's policies. So there was no possibility of a fightback in the Labour Party and thousands of people left. I think in retrospect that this was absolutely correct. It was the only way we could build a movement outside the Labour Party.

I would say that the far left was wrong, throughout western Europe, in assuming that this radicalised layer from the sixties onwards would be sufficient for providing the base for building mass revolutionary parties. We are now 20 years away and in not a single country in Europe has this happened. It can't just be an accident. The far left has got smaller.

The only exception, I think, is Germany, ironically enough, where you have the Greens, which are not a classic revolutionary party but represent a left, radical populist force with a strong socialist component to the left of traditional social democracy and are making an impact.

'the reason why the Americans have not occupied Nicaragua today is because there is still revulsion because of Vietnam'

Some things could have been different. I think in Portugal it is an open question if the far left and the CP had had a different strategy and a different set of tactics. If you had a revolution that was socialist and democratic it would have been a model for the whole of Europe.

Many people have written, including Marx and Engels, that students are a very good barometer of changes about to happen and in 1968 they were the first on the streets. But the sixties were not just one big street demonstration. It was university occupations that led to factory occupations.

You had a working class upsurge in Britain unprecedented since the twenties. There were the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes, very different from the miners' strike in 1984-85. There was big support for them from other sections of the working class which is why they won. One of these strikes directly brought about the end of the Heath government.

Britain is a bit peculiar because of its antiquated electoral system. It forces Labour to represent all segments of opinion. There's no way out of it. If you had a system of proportional representation, I think it would be worth having an electoral front. At the moment its utterly useless.

Nothing will happen unless there is a breach in the ranks of labourism. I don't say you can't do anything. But there will be nothing big politically which will affect national politics unless something happens in that formation.

The birth of the modern women's movement

The first national women's movement conference took place in 1970. But it was 1968 which saw the birth of the modern women's liberation movement. The upheavals of that year provided a catalyst for a movement which, for all its weaknesses, survives today and is testimony to the thoroughgoing changes which were set in motion at that time, writes **JUDITH ARKWRIGHT.**

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT which emerged in '68 took a number of different forms. The popular image of the bra burners and the miss world protesters was only a part of a number of developments that came together all at once.

The decade preceding 1968 had seen many changes in women's employment patterns and, between 1959 and 1964, a massive increase in the unionisation of women — twice as fast, in fact, as the increase in women employed.

In 1954 the very active campaign for equal pay for teachers and civil servants had come to a climax and the Tory government was forced to concede in principle, though it was not implemented until 1961. This concession was also partly a result of the rising birthrate and the fact that, consequently, more women teachers were needed.

Nevertheless interest in equal pay was now aroused and the issue never really went away from that time.[1] In fact the expansion of the welfare state in general led to a growth of female employment in areas like nursing and social work, which in turn increased pressure for concessions on equal pay.

Around this time the ideas of the US women's movement were beginning to percolate through to this country. Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, had been published in 1963. Friedan represented mainly middle class professional women (the book is partly based on a survey of her classmates). The National Organisation of Women which she helped set up partly reflected that.

Other works by radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* were not published in this country until 1970 and 1971. To a certain extent they represented a reaction to the left's response to women's liberation.

Sheila Rowbotham remembers that 'in the autumn of 1968 vague rumours of the women's movement in America and Germany reached Britain...All we knew was that women had met together and encountered opposition within the left'.[2]

Women on the left involved in the events of 1968 were beginning to question the role ascribed to them by men.

But Sheila Rowbotham points out that the actual initiative for organisation at that time came from elsewhere. It was working class women who took up the struggle around various issues including the unfinished struggle for equal pay.

In the spring of 1968 a women's rights group was formed in Hull around a campaign led by Lil Bolocca and the fishermen's wives to improve the safety of trawlers after two ships had been lost in January of that year.

In the same year 300 sewing machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant went on strike, demanding that their job should be regraded. The strike lasted three weeks and the women extended their demands to the general principle of equal pay. They were only partially successful — winning their demand in full only after a further strike and appeal to an industrial tribunal in April 1985!

This example alone points up the inadequacies of the legislation on equal pay that was passed in the intervening 17 years! During 1969 there were further strikes for equal pay in Skelmersdale, Manchester, Coventry and Dundee.[3]

In October 1970 the two developing strands of the broader women's movement were to come together around the campaign by night cleaners for the right to join the Transport and General Workers Union. In this campaign they were supported by the Dalston women's liberation workshop and firm links were now being made with the emerging women's liberation movement.

Although the Ford women had not won everything they wanted they had succeeded in putting the issue on the agenda once more and the Labour government was forced to put the promises of its 1964 election manifesto into practice.

1969 saw the establishment of the national joint action committee for women's equal rights. This committee, made up of sections of the trade union bureaucracy and women's organisations, called a demonstration in May 1969 and, in the autumn of that year, Barbara Castle introduced her equal pay bill. The bill finally became law in 1970 and, for all its loopholes, it was an important milestone — the first major piece of legislation on women's rights since the 1920s.

In a separate but parallel development at the end of 1968 and beginning of 1969, women's liberation groups were taking the first faltering steps to establish themselves. There were two groups in London and one in Essex. The Tufnell Park group in particular was very influential and produced the first newsletter, called *Harpies Bazaar* later to become *Shrew*. For the most part such groups were made up of the far left, including trotskyists and maoists, women involved in Vietnam solidarity and American women students. These groups also included young mothers unhappy with the role ascribed to them within the wider struggle.

Sheila Rowbotham recalls the res-

ponse to an article she wrote for *Black Dwarf* in January 1969 on marxism and the sexual humiliation of women: 'I remember one left man coming up to me and with a pitying air saying he supposed it had helped me to express my personal problems but it was nothing to do with socialism'![4]

What the history of the women's movement shows us time and again is the continual reluctance of the labour movement in general, and the left within it, to take the issues seriously.

At that time one important way to take on the male left was the establishment of socialst women's groups, based largely on the International Marxist Group, but attracting wider forces. The February 1969 issue of *Socialist Woman* stressed rather anxiously that 'We are not anti-male, a charge often thrown at those concerned with the women question. We are opposed to private property, the alienation of labour under capitalism...to men who do the gaffer's job and assist him to do the dirty on women workers, whether in the home or in industry'.[5]

Most accounts seem to agree that, compared to its role in the US women's movement, consciousness raising as such was not so important in the early period of the movement in Britain. All the groups mentioned above were mainly involved in campaigning activities.

One campaign which reached the headlines in 1969 and again in 1970 was the miss world protest.

The miss world competitions were an appropriate target for the beginnings of the women's movement at this time since they epitomised everything that the new generation of women rejected about the fifties. The contest was established in 1951 by Mecca managing director Eric Morley. He explained that married women were banned from the contest because 'it might make woman dissatisfied with her life as housewife and mother...'[6]

Of course it was this protest and a similar one in the US at the 1968 miss America contest — when bras, girdles, false eyelashes and cosmetics were thrown into the dustbin — that helped give the women's movement its image. However, the women involved in the protest saw it in a correct context ignored by the hostile media.

One of them wrote at the time that 'I see the miss world contest was but a drop in the ocean of capitalism's mess...Exposing it because we related to it was the beginning of a rejection of our culturally privileged positions...But freaking out at the phoney glamour of this sort of spectacle is only a start, because it's still a limited and middle class response'.[7]

This was in a way typical of the constant awareness within the British movment of the need to broaden out and link up with other women. Nevertheless, propaganda actions like this are an important part of our heritage and can perform an important role at times.

The begininngs of a centralised women's movement can be dated from the February 1970 conference. This had been called as a result of women getting together at a meeting on working class history held at Ruskin college. When the time came for the conference, it had to be moved to the Oxford Union building because so many more than expected turned up — about 500 women.

This conference established the four demands of the movement for equal pay, equal educational opportunities, twenty-four hour nurseries and free abortion on demand. The four demands later became seven when they were added to at subsequent conferences. Groups then started to get more active and the real growth began to occur after the demonstration of 8 March 1971.[8]

For the women involved there was a sense of historic achievement which was not always appreciated by the left and others, though a greater understanding of the significance of this movement began to develop in the seventies.

The women's liberation movement was very much born in the late 1960s and in a way provided one of the more lasting gains of that period, though we cannot underestimate the extent to which the gains that women made are being challenged today, despite superficial adaptations to feminism.

The long lasting effect of the movement points up some of the differences between it and previous struggles of women.

The women's movement of the sixties and seventies was all-embracing in its vision of women's position in society and, although women were active on specific campaigns, there existed a collective consciousness which challenged women's role in the family and as sex objects in a way which had not really been done before.

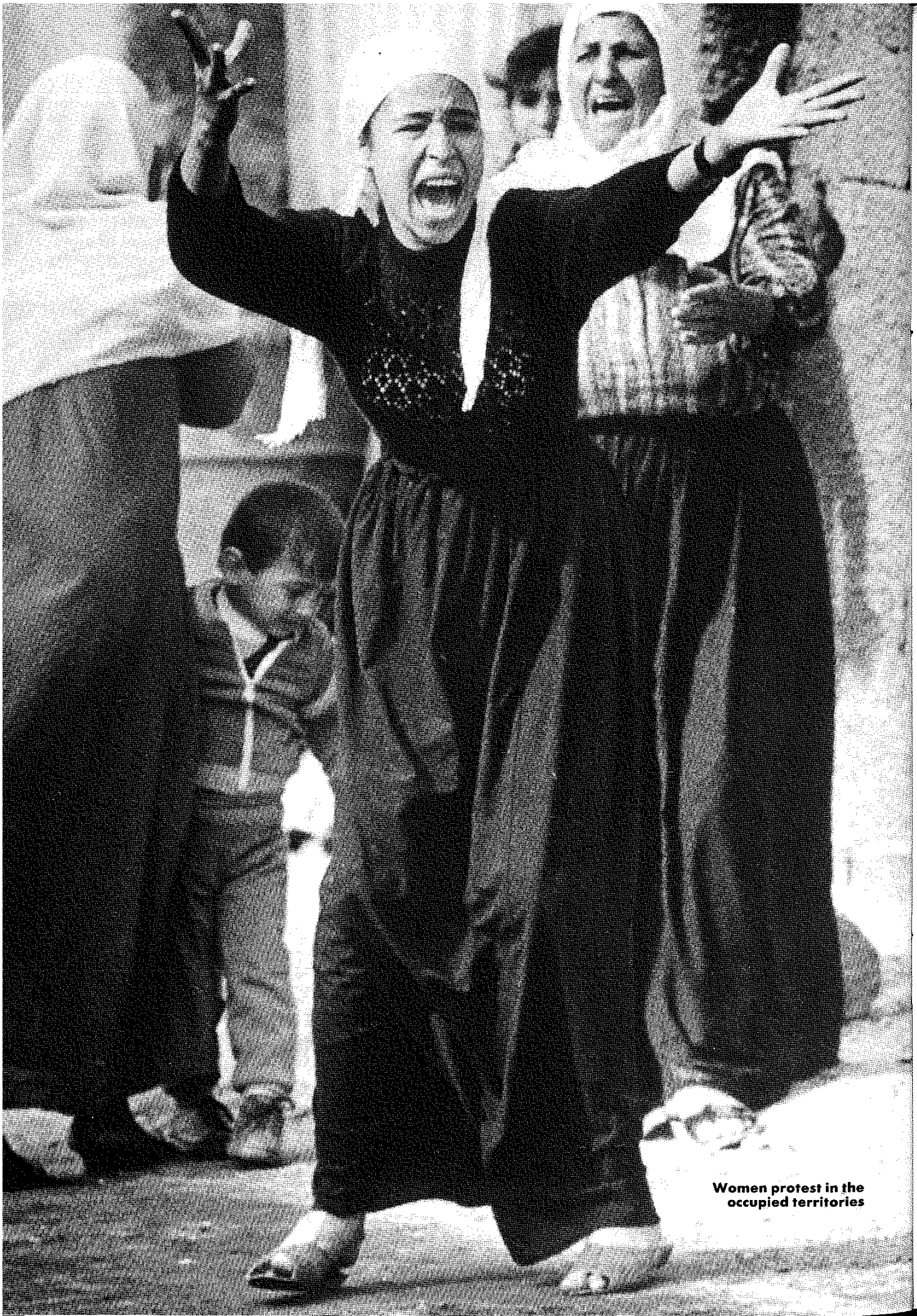
It is because of this vision and because of the way it grew up that this movement was a much more natural ally of the left and of the labour movement than its US counterpart proved to be. It is to be regretted that this was not always recognised by the left.

Lee Comer, who was involved in the socialist feminist current that was to develop later, best summed up this aspect of the movement in a passage from her book *Wedlocked Women:*

'The women's liberation movment is not and never has been about the amelioration of the position of women vis-a-vis men in capitalist society...Because the women's movement analyses and questions the very fundamentals of human experience — the division of labour between the sexes, the tenets of masculinity and femininity, the sexual objectification of women...and the oppressive nature of a society divided by class, sex and race — the movement, unlike any before it, confronts both the minutiae and the totality of human experience...women bring the acutality of their experience, pinioned at the base of the family unit and in the lowest sector of the workforce, into a political awareness of the totality of oppression'[9] ●

Footnotes

1. Cited in E. Wilson, *Only half way to paradise*, Tavistock.
2. Sheila Rowbotham, 'The beginnings of women's liberation' in *The body politic*, Stage 1.
3. April Carter, *The politics of women's rights*, Longman.
4. Sheila Rowbotham, *op. cit.*
5. *Socialist Woman*, February 1969.
6. Cited in 'Miss World' in *The body politic*, Stage 1.
7. *ibid.*
8. April Carter, *op. cit.*
9. Lee Comer, *Wedlocked women*, Feminist Books.



Women protest in the occupied territories

Palestine: the uprising continues

The Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule has entered its sixth month. **JACK GOLDBERG** and **LUCY MATTHEWS** spoke to Israeli marxist **MICHEL WARSCHAWSKY** about the current stage of the struggle and prospects for the future.

JG and **LM**: *What historical stage in the Palestinian revolution do you see represented in the current uprising?*

MW: I think that the emergence of the new Palestinian national movement has had three dates. The first one in 1969 was the Karameh battle which was in fact the embodiment of the existence of the national movement abroad, outside Palestine. The second important date was the 'day of the land' in 1976 which was the emergence of the Palestinians of '48 in the arena as part of the national struggle. And the *intifadah* (uprising) is the third one which is the emergence of the Palestinians in the territories occupied in '67 as an active component of the national liberation struggle.

In that sense they have achieved in a sense the unification of the Palestinian movement in the struggle itself not only as part of the same people, the same national movement, but as an active component having its own autonomous struggle in the framework of the overall struggle of the Palestinian people.

How do you see the current uprising affecting the general political spectrum within Israel, particularly with reference to the Peace Now movement?

After the invasion of Lebanon, Israeli society went through a deep polarisation and a deep crisis affected what was the basic strength of the Israeli society, of the Israeli state, which was the national consensus upon which the huge majority of the people, the political forces, including the left-zionist forces, were united.

For the first time in the history of the state, Israeli society was divided, and in my opinion the fractures which occured during the Lebanese war still exist and are very deep. Now the *intifadah* is opening a new stage in the crisis of Israeli society and deepening this polarisation.

In Lebanon, however, it was still, we say in inverted commas, a 'foreign policy question'. Therefore, a force like Peace Now, which is by far the main component of the peace movement, was able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people around very simple demands, and, at a certain point, after one year of war in the Lebanon, on the correct issue of withdrawing from Lebanon and stopping the war.

Today, the core of the immediate problem is the Palestinian question, and Peace Now doesn't have a true answer to this question. So we see today a variety of initiatives, by local groups, organisations, movements, petitions, by sections of the Peace Now movement trying to give their own answer, and not willing to wait.

On the other hand, there is the radical wing of the peace movement which developed during the period of the invasion of the Lebanon. The committee against the war in Lebanon, and the committee in solidarity with Bir Zeit university, which united the whole of the left, the zionist left, the non-zionist left, the communist party and anti-zionists around the demands of withdrawal from the occupied territories, recognition of the PLO, and defence of the idea of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Today, for many of the people who identify themselves with this radical wing, these demands are either too much or not enough.

They are too much because they cannot be used to build a broad movement against the occupation, which is the priority now in my opinion.

This should not restrict itself to specific solutions nor even to reasons for mobilising against the occupation. It should be able to include Israelis who are doing it for Israeli patriotism because they want a jewish state or because they are afraid of the Arabs, because they hate to live with Arabs, as well as people who want a democratic secular state for example — one broad movement pushing out the Israeli army and the Israeli state from the occupied territories. So in that sense, building a movement which adds to that single demand to end the occupation, a solution, a Palestinian state for example, is weakening, is too much.

On the other hand, the three demands mentioned above are not enough, or problematic, if we want to offer solutions. Because the solution — the final solution, not just an interim demand — offered by the organised majority of the Israeli left, mainly the communist party, the 'progressive list for peace' and some currents in the zionist left, namely, a Palestinian state by the side of Israel, for many people does not answer the real questions.

What will happen to the refugees? What guarantees do we have, ask many people, as to what will happen to the 700,000 Palestinians inside Israel who are today an important component of the movement.

Here too we have a process of political clarification and differentiation inside the movement, though we are still able to work together and to be the most determined element of the peace movement, trying to mobilise on a permanent basis and a clear basis to withdraw from the territories, to recognise the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people and for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.

Do you think that the uprising has affected the outside organisations of the Palestinians in terms of them changing their programme and gearing up to it?

I don't know. It's hard for me to imagine that it won't. I don't believe any of the Palestinian leaders today are claiming that they knew this would happen and that they initiated it. It's not true. And in that sense I agree with George Habbash (leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, PFLP) on the one hand, and Sabra Jiryis on the other who say: this needs a balance sheet on the leadership because we were not prepared for what happened.

I believe that one of two possibilities will happen, and must happen in *each* organisation. Either the Palestinian strategy will have to re-adapt itself with a much more important focus on the struggle inside — which is not just a change in geographical focus but on a new conception of struggle, mass struggle, at the expense of military struggle on the one hand and diplomatic struggle on the other. Or this or that organisation will not change its policy and will not pay enough attention to what is happening, in which case we enter a process — not for tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but a process, of a hard split.

You cannot imagine that the *intifadah* will have a tremendous effect on the Palestinian population and the Israeli population and on the Palestinians inside Israel, and will have no effect on the PLO.

A lot of people are very intrigued by the leadership of the intifadah *that has arisen and some people see it as a 'new' leadership. In what sense do you think this leadership is 'new' and to what extent do you see it suffering from many of the same limitations and shortcomings in perspective as the PLO leadership 'outside'?*

There is a new leadership in a broad sense in that a new generation has taken the leadership of the movement. This is in the broad sense not the narrow sense of 'leadership'. What is known as 'the generation of occupation' is today the leadership of the movement and this generation differs from the earlier one in several crucial ways. Many of the battles that had to be fought by the leadership of the previous generation have, for this generation, already been won. The existence of a Palestinian national entity, for instance, is fact today, it no longer has to be fought for. Also, the weaknesses of Israel are known to this generation. There is no longer this myth of the all-powerful, unbeatable power and so on. They know Israel from the defeat in Lebanon, they know Israel from the defeat in '73.

This general leadership, this generation, is also a main component of the organised local leadership, but it expresses itself through the existing organisations. It is not new organisations against the old ones.

There is still an overall strategy where the centre is still outside — outside meaning the leadership from abroad and its political and military initiatives. Despite controlling the running of the *intifadah*, they see their role and the role of the *intifadah* as limited to mobilising the Palestinians of the occupied territories to express their existence and complete rejection of zionist occupation, but leaving the actual solution of the conflict to come from initiatives — both diplomatic and military — external to the movement. In that sense there is still, in my opinion, no real breakthrough on the political level, there is no real political translation, or strategic translation, of the big achievement which is the *intifadah* itself.

What are the developments that are open for building solidarity work inside Israel, in terms of the broad axis of building a revolutionary entity, perhaps even spanning the green line? And in relation to these two questions you could say something about the 'democratic secular state' slogan in the current situation.

We are organising our work around three different levels, each one within the other one. One is to try to have the broadest movement against the occupation built around one single demand: 'down with the occupation; withdraw from the occupied territories'. This is a fight, mainly against the left, which doesn't understand, or doesn't want to understand that we have to act on a mass scale, just as we did during the invasion of the Lebanon, in order to really stop, either partially or wholly, the Israeli policy.

'the *intifadah* is opening a new stage in the crisis of Israeli society'

The second level is, in the framework of the mass movement against the occupation, to organise a more limited coalition of forces, which we see as very important firstly to reach the first objective, and also within itself. This smaller coalition, in addition to opposition to the occupation, presents the Israeli-Palestinian dimension: not only the demand to withdraw from the occupied territories, but to also to support the Palestinian right to self-determination, solidarity with the Palestinian people, to agitate for recognition of the PLO and so on.

The third level which is basically our own, is not only based on the question of occupation and the question of solidarity with the Palestinians, but the conception of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence and the very nature of zionism. The nature of zionism as a state which has occupation, and ultimately deportation, as an integral part of it. But the problem is not only the question of the occupied territories, but the overall conflict between the colonial movement and the national liberation movement, and in this framework — the third — we are not not only in solidarity with the Palestinian people, we are supporting politically and as far as we can also materially, the uprising.

As we said in last year's paper, 'the *intifadah* is liberating us from occupation' not only in the sense of the territories occupied since '67 but the very affirmation of the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people in Palestine. In that framework we raised the slogan of a democratic solution or a democratic state, which we don't counterpose to a withdrawal from the occupied territories but which we pose together. We say 'we want a democratic solution, which is by definition against zionism, against the very structure, the nature of the zionist state'.

A main component of the democratic solution is the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. Part of its self-determination is its right to have its own state where it wants. We explain that for us, the demand to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza is not basically different from another demand we use: the demand that the Israeli army withdraw from Palestinian inhabited areas. And we support any demand, and we raise any demand which we think can mobilise people, both Israelis and Palestinians, in order to add democracy and limit the power of zionism, be it to stop deportations, to get the Israeli army out of the towns, to withdraw from the occupied territories, to get zionism out of Palestine completely.

In the past the 'democratic state' slogan was conceived as a historical solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What is becoming more and more apparent now is its aspect as an immediate answer to real problems: that is, from a maximum slogan, it is becoming really a transitional slogan which emerged from the very needs of the population.

The question of secularism, the question of democracy and also the question of the Palestinians within the '48 borders, and the idea of the irreversibility of the occupation: all these things raise the question of Palestine. Not any more a question of territories, but a question of regime and of the future of two peoples under the rule of this regime: the Israelis on the one hand and the three sectors of the Palestinians on the other — the refugees, the Palestinians within Israel's '48 borders and the Palestinians of the occupied territories ●

A remarkable woman of the Russian revolution

COLIN SMITH

Cathy Porter,
Larissa Reisner: a biography,
Virago Pioneers, £5.50, 195pp.

David King collection

LARISSA REISNER was a remarkable woman even for the remarkable times through which she lived. In this country her reputation is obscure, if not nonexistent, but from Cathy Porter's new biography she emerges not only as one of the first and finest of the literary talents born of the Russian revolution but also as a revolutionary, a fighter in the civil war, of exceptional energy, courage and resourcefulness.

She was, in a short life, a bolshevik, the red army's first woman political commissar, a diplomat, an officer for the comintern and itinerent correspondent for various Soviet journals, especially *Izvestiya*. She died of typhus in 1926, three months short of her 31st birthday.

Her background and upbringing seems in hindsight to have peculiarly prepared her for her all too brief but brilliant life. Larissa was born with an apt sense of timing on 1 May 1895, the first child of Ekaterina and Mikhail Reisner, well known members of the Russian socialist intelligentsia. The early years of her childhood had the cosmopolitanism of exile as her parents joined the temporary diaspora of socialists escaping the threat of tsarist repression.

Like other daughters of similar background Larissa was brought up to be independent, critical and outspoken. She was encouraged to read voraciously — history, politics, literature and science and trips to the theatre and opera were regular features of her adolescent years. Elegant in her taste, restrained but confident in her manner and with a sharp-witted intelligence she was a product of the pre-revolutionary cultural elite of St Petersburg, albeit of a socialist sort.

February 1917 pitched Larissa from her first love, poetry, into the midst of revolution and in 1918, at the age of twenty-two she joined the Bolshevik Party. For the next two years she was in the thick of the fighting against the counter-revolution from Kazan to the Caspian Sea aboard ships of the new red navy, carrying out dangerous reconnaissance missions and giving talks to the soldiers and sailors on literature and revolution in the respites from battle.

She was among the first to write of the civil war, its successes, horrors and heroism. From 1921 to 1923 she lived in Kabul with her husband, Fyodor Raskolnikov, then the Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan, from where she wrote articles on the conditions of Afghan women, the independence struggle of the mountain tribes and the conditions of workers in the factories of Kabul.

In 1923 she was sent as a secret comintern liaison officer to Germany to report and participate in the aborted uprising of that year. In the last years of her life she travelled extensively as a special correspondent for Izvestiya reporting on the lives of workers in the industrial areas of the Soviet Union. Weakened by recurrent bouts of malaria which she had contracted during the civil war Larissa died of typhus, probably caught from drinking unpasteurised milk, in February 1926.

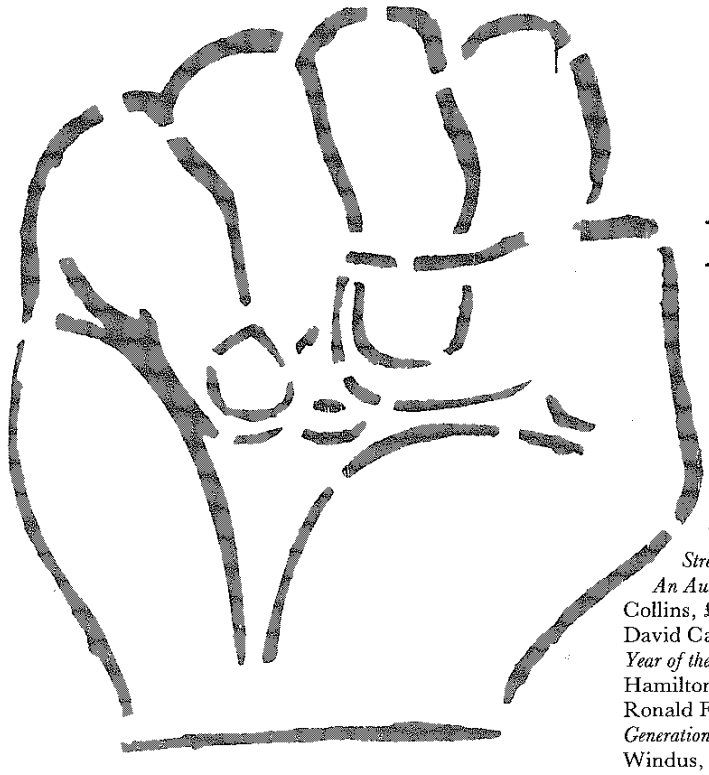
The literary legacy of Larissa Reisner is small, five slim books and numerous articles of which, unfortunately, only two books have been published in English translations, and these are long out of print. Hopefully Cathy Porter's biography will renew interest in the work of a fine socialist writer. Since her early experiences of the revolution, teaching literacy and literature in the workers' clubs which sprang up throughout the Russian capital after the Ferbruary overthrow of the tsar, one of Larissa's main preoccupations and sympathies was with the lives and ordeals of ordinary men and women in their struggles for a better world.

Her sketches and articles written in a form of heightened, sometimes florid, prose alternatively lyrical or mordant but always vivid and clear give 'the smell of revolution' and are an inspiring adjunct to the drier analyses and histories of the events that made the Soviet Union.

Her writing was very popular during and immediately after her lifetime although she met with some suspicion and hostility mainly from her male more 'political' comrades for her bourgeois cultural background and a prose style considered by some to be too poetic or ornate to be compatible with a marxist view.

But by others she was seen as an embodiment of the 'new Soviet woman' no logner bound by family and marriage but courageous, independent, an equal partner with men in the struggles of the revolution. This now seems somewhat idealistic and, unlike Alexandra Kollontai, the character and privilege of her upbringing does appear to have made her less aware of many of the particular problems of women's liberation, both inside and outside the Bolshevik Party.

But it is primarily as an activist of considerable determination that Larissa Reisner should be remembered and as an inspiring chronicler of what the revolution 'was really like' that she should be read. Cathy Porter's previous biography was of Alexandra Kollontai and she is to be congratulated for again recovering for a new generation of socialists the life of a remarkable woman of the October revolution ●



Nineteen sixty-eight: the books

JEAN REILLY

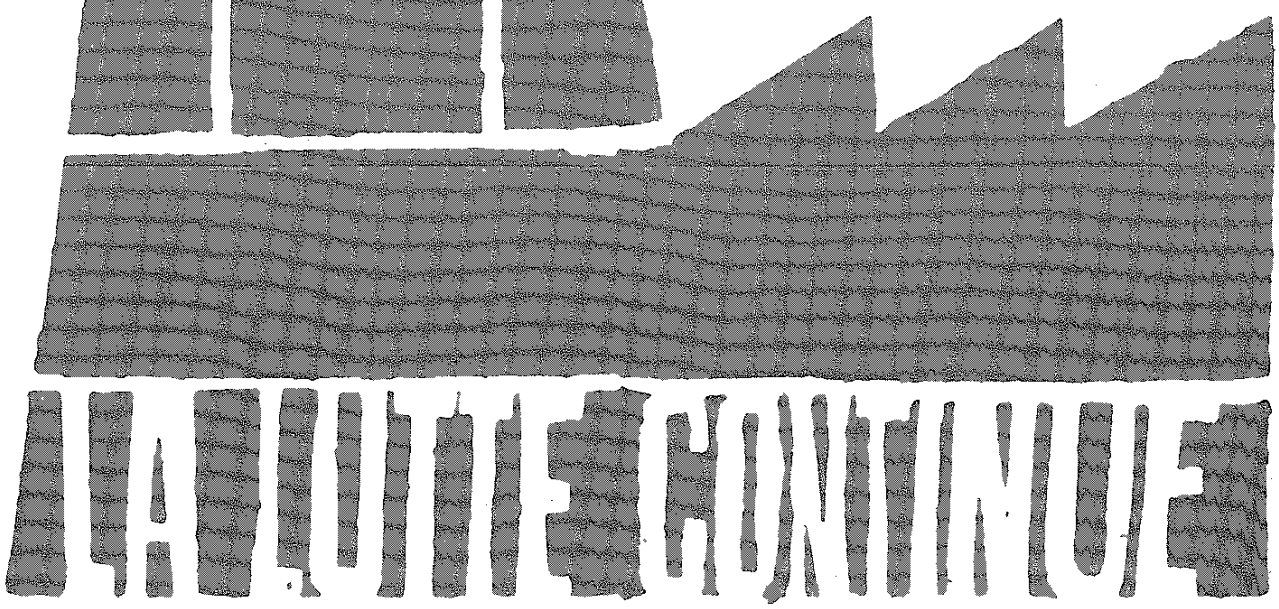
Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties,* Collins, £12.95.
David Caute, *Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricades,* Hamish Hamilton, £14.95.
Ronald Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt,* Chatto & Windus, £14.94.
Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After,* Bookmarks, £6.95.

BY THE TIME you have reached the reviews section of this issue you may feel sick to your back teeth of 1968. However, just in case you still have room for more, here is a guide to what's on offer in the way of further reading.

Anyone born after the early 1950s will find it difficult to picture in their minds a year like 1968 — student uprisings round the globe, civil rights marchers taking to the streets in Derry and Belfast, the Tet offensive (the beginning of the end for the Vietnam war), workers, students and intellectuals rising up against the stalinist bureaucracies in Poland and Czechoslovakia, a general strike in France, blacks and students rioting all across the USA.

They will certainly find no parallel of it in their own political life. To the extent that these books give younger militants the feeling of working class power and solidarity in that period, and the optimism and renewed commitment that comes from victory — even victory followed by retreat — then they are well worth reading.

Street Fighting Years by Tariq Ali, which has already been reviewed in a previous issue (*Socialist Outlook* No. 5) is certainly the most readable of the four. The book is a 'political memoir' and as such concentrates on the personal experiences of the author in that period. Ali makes no apology for this, having given a more general political analysis of the same period in an earlier work (*1968 and After:*



REVIEWS

Inside the Revolution, London, 1978).

Personalised though it is, it is still an informative and gripping account of some of the major struggles and political debates of the time — a sort of revolutionary edited highlights.

In contrast — both politically and stylistically — David Caute's book, written as it is by an academic historian, is very informative though also very dry. Its style is, however, the least of its faults. Caute hangs the whole book on the framework of two political/ sociological processes: the rise of the 'new left' and the 'counter-culture'. He appears to have very little sympathy with either.

His own sympathies are made clear in one of the few personal reminiscences of his book. Caute describes how he was in a restaurant in Prague in June 1968 when someone came in with the news of US presidential candidate Robert Kennedy's assassination:

'A numbed silence fell across the restaurant; it was as if the air had been sucked out by all the reactionary forces, from racist bigots to stalinist apparatchiks, ranged against the men of reason and liberality across the world' (sic).

Four pages later Caute informs us that George Wallace, the reactionary, racist ex-governor of Alabama, mopped up a lot of Kennedy's support in the presidential elections:

'After his death a lot of Kennedy's blue-collar support turned to Wallace as the only other candidate who was speaking for *them*' (his emphasis).

Throughout the book, Caute shows contempt or hostility to both the cultural movements and the revolutionaries of the capitalist world while heaping praise on the workers and students of Poland and Czechoslovakia and the non-violent civil rights movement in America.

Ronald Fraser's book, as its title suggests, concentrates on the political and cultural developments in the colleges and universities. The book is made up of direct quotations from 175 individuals who were 'chosen for their roles in the movement' held together by a narrative from Fraser himself.

This format makes Fraser's work very accessible. It covers the period from the 1950s to the 1970s with a postscript and 'summing up' which takes us up to today, and includes a very interesting breakdown of the kinds of jobs and politics which the contributors are engaged in today.

Chris Harman's book is a more conventional political analysis of the events of the 1960s. Why they happened, how they happened and what does it mean for revolutionaries today.

Harman, the editor of *Socialist Worker*, goes into far more detail than the others about the various revolutionary groups, particularly in Britain. He analyses their political lines, their tactics, their errors and, in his view, their eventual decline into reformism.

Not surprisingly, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), or the International Socialists (IS) as it then was, comes out looking pretty good! Unlike everybody else, the SWP rejected the so-called 'new movementism' of the various sections of the working class — women, black people, gays and lesbians — the result of which, Harman informs us, was the 'internal fragmentation of the revolutionary organisations' and the abandonment by many people of a 'revolutionary perspective'.

Harman displays an inability, or unwillingness, to understand the political developments of the women's liberation movement and the movements for black and gay liberation of that period and since — or, indeed, the gain for the working class struggle that these movements represented.

However, despite this, and despite his somewhat snidey, sectarian tone at times, the book has its strengths, for example, the coverage of the strikes in Italy and France.

Perhaps one of the best ways of describing the political and literary differences between the four books is to look at the treatment they give to the same event — the Prague Spring.

Tariq Ali begins his account with a description of a trip to Prague in January 1967 on an assignment for *Town* magazine. He describes how he was given suggestions of who to interview by an official from the department in charge of culture. He rejected them all and only later realised that he had refused to meet Milan Kundera, author of *The Joke*.

Ali describes how he first learned of developments in Czechoslovakia from a Czech student friend. The process of liberalisation, the new mood in the party, the elections in the universities and factories, the programmes on television on which the Czechoslovak people watched former political prisoners confront their jailers and tell of their experiences. In the newsreel pictures of the May Day rally in Prague, people were seen carrying posters of Che Guevara.

Although he admits that at that time he and his comrades were too busy concentrating on events in France to take sufficient notice of developments in Czechoslovakia, he was impressed by the enthusiasm of his student friend — especially since the latter had initially been very suspicious of the Dubcek regime. He also argues that the invasion could have been avoided if Dubcek had mobilised the people and the army and warned the Soviets publicly of their intention to defend their right to self-determination.

Caute's more lengthy account breaks the Prague Spring into three phases: the resignation of Novotny, first secretary of the communist party on 5 January; the period between Novotny's resignation as president on 21 March to the end of June which was 'the most rapid period of liberalisation' and the period from July to 20/21 August, the Soviet invasion.

He describes the situation inside the central committee, inside the students' committees and conferences, the attitudes of the workers and the reaction of the other east European regimes at length.

He characterises the revolution as being 'middle-class' in character, by which he means that the liberalisation was mainly in the interests of the intelligentsia. Only when the Russian tanks moved in did the workers, in Caute's opinion, begin to identify 'liberalisation as synonymous with national independence'.

Caute is very critical of Dubcek from the standpoint of someone who appears to believe that real liberalisation in eastern Europe must mean a move to social democracy and a rejection of communism.

Ronald Fraser's book gives no more than a passing mention to the Prague Spring. This is perhaps one of the weaknesses of his otherwise interesting format. Since none of his 175 contributors are Czechoslovakian or took part in the events there, he misses out an essential component of 1968.

These protests are, however, described in Chris Harman's book. Harman concentrates on the period after the Soviet invasion.

The student occupations in November of that year and the growing unity of the students and the workers are detailed here.

Surprisingly though, there is very little in the way of a political analysis of the events. Harman again is very dismissive of Dubcek — though, of course, from a different perspective from Caute. His only comment on the actions of the students and the riots in the year following the invasion was that they 'did not stop the re-establishment of monolithic, bureaucratic control. Only revolutionary action could have done that'. We are given no indication, however, of what such revolutionary action might have been.

Each book approaches the events of 1968 from a very different angle. Despite the political differences of the writers, reading any of them cannot fail to make those of us who missed it all just a bit envious, for once, of our elders ●

Spring reading

CAROLINE RAULT & DAVE PALMER

WELL SPRING IS HERE and time to get 'drunk with love' if not actually, vicariously with a selection of newly published books.

Drunk with love (Faber and Faber, £3.95) is a collection of stories about the rich and feckless by prize winning American author Ellen Gilchrist. The subjects of these stories are intriguing and underpinned with racial and sexual tensions making for at times disquieting reading.

Do not be put of by the blurb on the back of *The love of a good woman* by Isabel Miller (Black Swan, £3.95) which talks about 'Milly ... boxed in by the truth of her biology'. The second world war years have proved fruitful for feminists, and here the two central characters find that their lives are transformed by the new possibilities these years offer.

Gertrude, working outside her home for the first time, is uplifted by the companionship and insight of her fellow workers. Milly, who is a lesbian, applies for a live-in companion when her husband goes to war, and they fall in love. It's a sort of *Rosie the riveter* with romance.

For those of you hooked on feminist thrillers enter Dr Loretta Lawson, English lecturer and reluctant sleuth. *A masculine ending* by Joan Smith (Faber and Faber, £3.95) is an unusual and uneasy thriller of which the 'heroine' is not a smart aleck who outwits the rest of the world but rather makes mistakes and goes through a process of self-knowledge as the mystery unravels.

Snow Storms by Sarah Dunant (Michael Joseph, £10.45) features another woman lecturer, of Anglo-Saxon history this time. *Snow storms* is impossible to put down in any sense — compelling, dry and clever. The plot is about the cocaine trade, but much more it is a study of friendship versus relationships and the addiction to wealth and drugs.

Lyn — a story of prostitution by June Levine and Lyn Madden (Women's Press, £4.95) is a nonfictional account of terror. It begins as Lyn watches her lover and pimp throw a fire bomb into the house of her friend Dolores Lynch. Three women die as a result — Dolores, her mother and aunt. Lyn's life story is a testament to survival and banishes forever the myth of the happy hooker. **(CR)**

DO YOU WANT to catch up on the latest trends in marxist revisionism? Then try *The end of organised capitalism* by Scott Lash and John Urry (Polity Press, £9.95). Lash and Urry argue that we live in an era of 'disorganised capitalism'.

The world market has broken down nationally organised cartels; the expansion in the number of white collar workers and the decline in the core manual working class has released 'new social movements'.

As a consequence they call for 'the development of a transformed oppositional politics, whose complexion need not be reformist'.

Heard this all before? The interesting thing here is the authors are trying to give 'post-marxism' some sort of material basis which it lacked in the past. That reminds me ... whatever happened to ...

Yes, it's that man again. Gregory Elliot's political and intellectual biography of Louis Althusser, *Althusser: the detour of theory* (Verso, £10.95), attempts to put the ideas of the bane of seventies social science students in some sort of historical context.

Althusser's metaphysical gobbledygook is now old hat. His epigones and acolytes have long since superseded the limits on the 'autonomy of ideology' set by his deeply anti-humanist and constipated structuralist marxism.

More in vogue these days among trendy theorists are notions of 'de-centred discourses of power' propounded by Michel Foucault, a member of the same PCF cell as Althusser in the sixties ('de-centred power', 'disorganised capitalism' — perhaps these characters are on to something).

Those, like me, who would consider that Althusser took academia not so much on a detour but on a complete diversion with his particular brand of marxism will probably find Elliot's account of his thought a mite too sympathetic.

Fittingly for a book on Althusser, Elliot's writing style is inaccessible and it's pretty expensive for a paperback too. Nevertheless, worth a look if you've got the time.

Someone who would have no truck with the likes of Althusser or any of those other airy-fairy 'armchair socialists' is Degsy (*Inside left*, Derek Hatton, Bloomsbury, £3.95).

No doubt Hatton leaves that sort of thing to the effete/feminist, middle class university educated 'loony left' types in London he so despises.

These unrepentant confessions reveal Hatton as the ignorant, opinionated, publicity-seeking bigmouth that he so obviously is, but they provide an untaxing read.

Makeba: my story (Miriam Makeba with James Hall, Bloomsbury, £4.95) describes an altogether more substantial life. 'The empress of African song', Miriam Makeba has been banned from her homeland since the banning of the ANC in the early sixties when she was on tour abroad.

A bit of a name dropper, Makeba has spent her life in exile living in the west African state of Guinea. A friend of the dictatorial President Seqou Torué but seemingly little interested in the ins and outs of politics she is, however, quite clear about her own role in the ending of racial oppression in the continent of Africa.

'I am not running away from anything but towards something; toward a day when the world realises, through voices like mine, that there is a terrible evil among all people that is dragging us down and must be stopped. I am not a vengeful person, but I know there is a political system that must answer for the murders of my relatives and ancestors. My message is my concert.'

What makes Makeba such an interesting figure is her position in the political and cultural cross-fertilisation between black Africa and its American diaspora during the sixties.

The most famous of her five husbands (the first being a black South African policeman who beat her) is the SNCC and Black Panther leader, the egomaniacal Kawme Touré (Stokely Carmichael). He once described his ex-wife as of a petty bourgeois mentality.

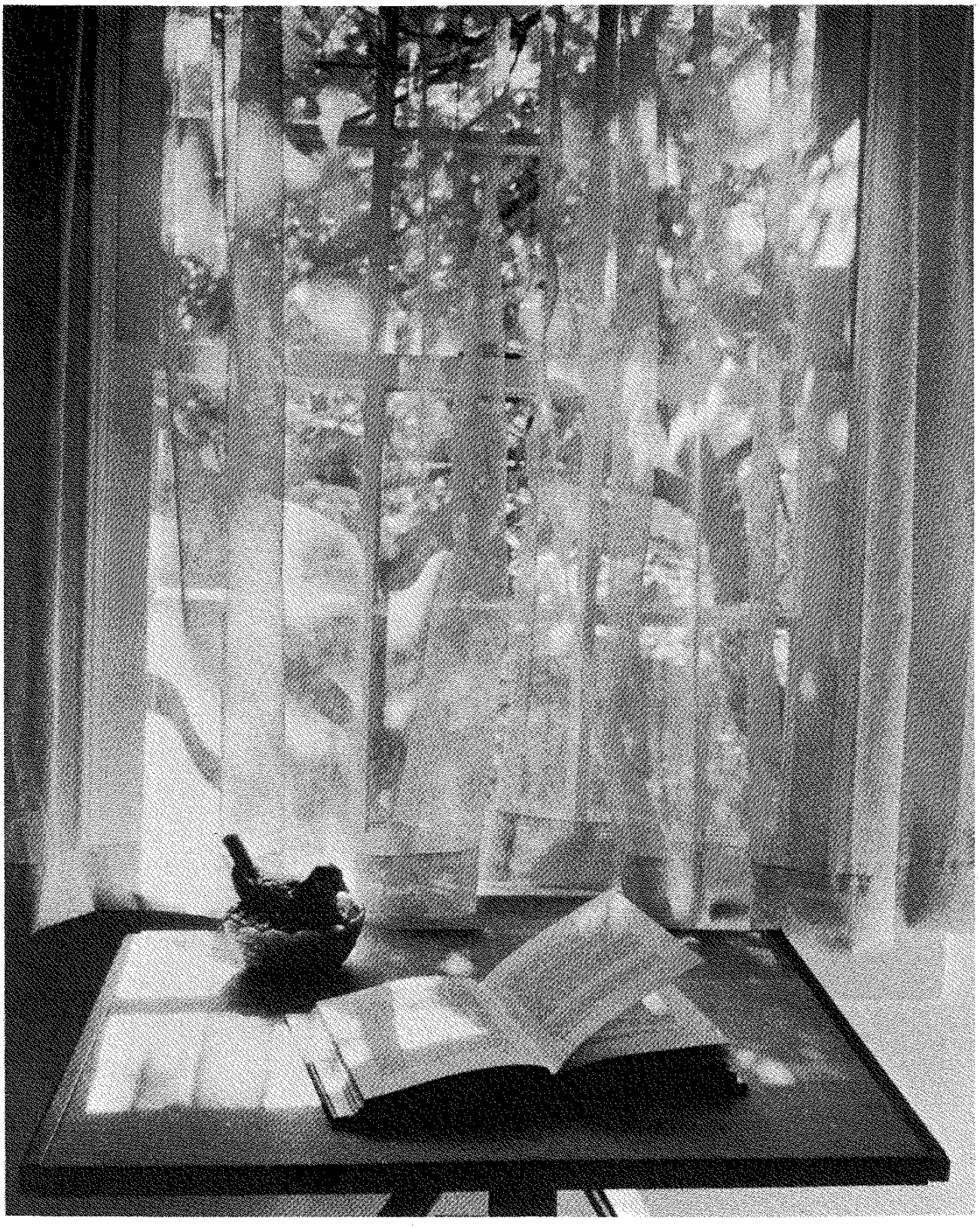
Why not make your own judgement by reading this undemanding account of Makeba's often difficult and transitory life.

Neal Ascherson's weekly column is virtually the only thing worth reading in *The Observer* which seems now to have more sections than news.

I confess to being a complete sucker for Ascherson's thesis that now is the time to complete Britain's bourgeois revolution and that what is needed (before moving into socialism of course) is a revival of the republican spirit. Off with their heads I say!

Ascherson hates Thatcherism and astutely points out its strong state, free market contradictions. This excellent collection (*Games with shadows*, Radius, £7.95) brings together Ascherson's essays from *The Observer* and elsewhere and covers plenty of ground in Europe, both east and west. He is Britain's only rival to Alexander Cockburn in the field of principled left journalism **(DP)** ●

REVIEWS



Eyes on the prize

Martin Luther King: emerged out of the mass movement in 1955 as a leader of the civil rights movement

KEITH WHITE

Eyes on the prize — America's civil rights years 1954 – 65, six part documentary, BBC tv, and the companion book of the same title, Juan Williams and the production team, Harrap, £14.95.

THE VICTORY of the north in the American civil war brought with it many new rights for southern blacks, including the vote. But this short-lived 'emancipation' ended just 12 years after the end of the war in 1877.

By 1900 segregation and discrimination were codified in the notorious 'Jim Crow' laws depriving blacks of equal rights in voting, jobs, education, social and commercial facilities.

Using a skilful combination of narrative and personal testimony, *Eyes on the prize* tells the story of the subsequent battle of US blacks for civil rights.

There was no significant progress in this battle until painstaking efforts over many years by black lawyers working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led in 1954 to an historic supreme court judgement declaring school segregation unconstitutional.

This was the catalyst needed for blacks to organise themselves against the whole 'Jim Crow' system — the law and the constitution was on their side. At the same time the white citizens' council, pledged to resist integration, was formed and grew rapidly throughout the south.

The mass movement was born in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passanger. Her arrest led to a boycott by 50,000 blacks which lasted a year before the busses were integrated. This victory saw the emergence of Martin Luther King Jnr as a leader. It is also noteworthy in that it illustrates the central role of women in the movement.

In Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 the central high school was the first in the city to accept black students. It was an initial step in desegregation by the local school board and was greatly resisted.

Nine black students eventually needed federal guards to protect them as they went about their lessons. At the end of the school year all the high schools were closed for over 12 months before they were finally integrated.

In Nashville in 1960 hundreds of students, mobilised by the newly formed student non-violent co-ordinating committee, refused to leave whites-only lunch counters until they were served. A mass movement was built around the ensuing arrests.

The 'freedom riders' were groups of blacks and whites who rode the interstate busses sitting in each others' seats, using each others' facilities at the bus depots en route. The outcry against the mob violence they met led to federal intervention and new laws.

In Mississippi the focus was voter registration. Thousands of disenfranchised blacks were organised into the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party which took the battle against segregation to the Democratic Party convention of 1964 — only to find they were prevented from replacing the southern racists as the genuine Democratic Party delegation.

The culmination of these years was a massive civil rights march in Alabama — protected by federal forces, but not before a previous much smaller march was brutally attacked by Alabama state police at the famous Edmund Pettus bridge.

Eyes on the prize powerfully recreates the atmosphere of the time, the uncertainty of the outcome, the bravery of ordinary people engaged in struggle and their growing pride in standing up for their rights. The reality of imminent violence is vividly described. Melba Beals, one of the Little Rock nine:

'On the first day we managed two hours before it became apparent that the mob was over-running the school. Policemen were throwing down their badges...would no longer...protect us. [In the] principal's office...someone suggested that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid then they could get the rest out while they were doing it'.

In the event they all got out. But, even when Eisenhower assigned them federal guards for their protection, they were still regularly assaulted. 'Who is going to hit me with what? Is it going to be hot soup today?'

However, it was the white deaths (Goodman and Schwerher in Mississippi and the Reverend James Reeb in Alabama) that generated the most outrage in the north.

The 'liberal' Kennedys are shown torn between their public commitment to civil rights and their fear of alienating the white southern electorate. They equivocated endlessly until nationwide outcries against the violence forced federal initiatives.

The victories in the south marked the end of a stage in the struggle. Attention now began to switch to the north where formal civil rights were not the issue. The coalition between the various organisations started to break down in the face of the need to develop a strategy.

The story of the later years is at present being tackled by the same production team. It is to be hoped that they will deal with it as effectively as *Eyes on the prize* deals with the early rise and initial successes of the movement ●

A film with very little to say

DAVID GRANT

The *Last Emperor*, a film by Bernardo Bertolucci.
OK, SO IT IS a great film. I mean, nine oscars can't be wrong, can they? Mind you, when you consider the opposition consisted of films like *Moonstruck*, one clip of which was enough to convince me to save my four quid, it's not surprising that Bernardo Bertolucci's latest, but by no means greatest, film swept all before it in Hollywood.

Apart from 'best supporting actor', of course, which inexplicably went to Sean Connery for his role in *The Untouchables* (a slick, sick, slice of gratuitous violence if ever there was one, replete with its pastiche of Eisenstein's pram-down-the-steps trauma in *Battleship Potemkin*, only this time with exploding heads-gore-and-blood...) but I digress.

Vitorio Storaro's photography is the real mainstay of the film, as the action sweeps us back and forth across sixty years, and at least three different modes of production (depending on where you stand on the 'asiatic mode' debate and 'post-capitalist transitional society' issue).

His command of colour, the warm greens and yellows, splashing reds and cold, cynical blues, combine to produce a feast of visual signifers that the 'decoders' will, no doubt, have hours of amusement interpreting.

The rest of us will simply lap it all up, courtesy of producer Jeremy Thomas' insistence that the *Last Emperor* be booked into the best 'big screens' around the country.

But it's not just all spectacular interiors of the forbidden city, beautiful costumes and sets. Excellent performances by all the main characters set this film apart from and above ninety-nine per cent of the films you are likely to see on general release.

Then there is also the psycho-drama of Pu Yi. The plenipotentiary without power, the lord of ten thousand years who is never allowed to control his own destiny. A victim of his circumstances whilst ostensibly a man who should make history, Pu Yi is secluded from the world, successively by the imperial court, the Japanese imperialists and the Chinese communist party.

The film includes superbly observed vignettes: the surreal ancien regime in the imperial court; the decadence of life-as-Japanese stooge, surrounded by jazz music, opium riddled relatives and androgenous kitsch; and finally, life as the humble, re-educated gardener, who witnesses his former warder humiliated by the fanatical red guards of the cultural revolution.

So what's the problem? Why the ironic tone of this review, you might ask? Well, two things really. First, this is not Bertolucci at his best. The sheer scale of the film, and no doubt its budget (reputedly loadsamoney) seem to have overwhelmed any incisive marxist or freudian insight, the most challenging and inspiring aspects of Bertolucci's previous work.

The film has very little to say. We have, it seems, come a long way since Jean Luc Goddard's protege denounced the corrupting influence of tinseltown, making films that were banned by Italian censors (*Last Tango*) and forcibly re-edited by irate producers (*1900*).

The second issue is the new image being projected from Beijing. Who better to create, in the cultural and artistic sphere, a film to parallel the new 'open' approach, wooing western interest and attention, than the marxist film maker with a human face, Bernardo Bertolucci?

After all, a regime that allows access to a western film maker to make a film which is honest and objective about many aspects of both pre- and post-revolutionary China must mark some sort of progress, mustn't it? And if we're ever going to really 'open up' (for this read Chinese markets to western capital, weapons and consumer goods), then we surely have to break down the barriers at a cultural and artistic level first, don't we?

Perhaps the latter point is unfair. But then life is, as Pu Yi would have no doubt concurred, sometimes like that ●

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