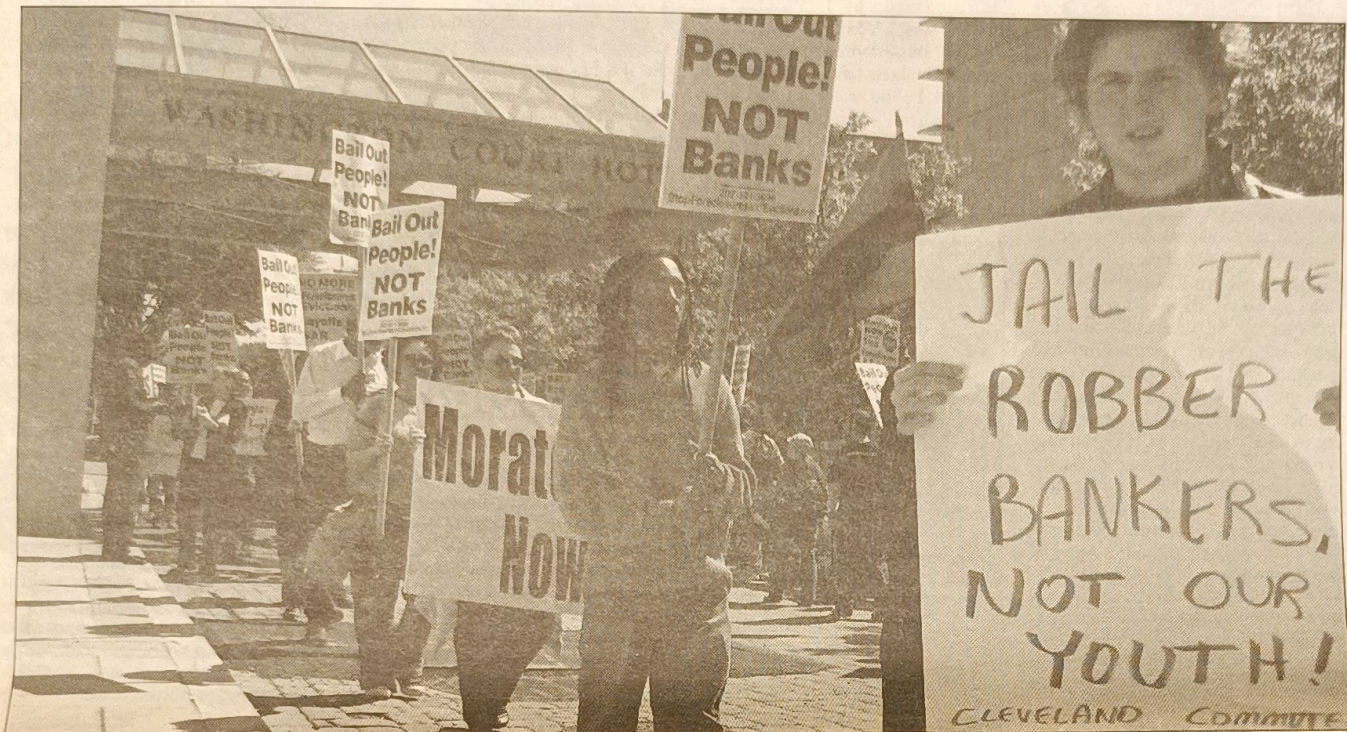


FIGHT RACISM! FIGHT IMPERIALISM!

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Demonstration outside the Mortgage Bankers Association in Washington DC

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CAPITALISM IN CRISIS

DESPERATE TIMES DESPERATE MEASURES

Despite trillions of dollars being thrown at the global financial system by the dominant capitalist states, the crisis of capitalism continues to deepen. By the end of October 2008, according to the Bank of England, the world's financial companies had lost \$2.8 trillion. The US is almost certainly in recession. It has the highest unemployment rate for 25 years. Japan and Germany, the world's second and third largest economies, are in recession, as is most of the European Union. This crisis threatens to be on an even bigger scale than in 1929. No part of the world capitalist system will escape its consequences.

Desperate measures on an unimagined scale have been taken by the world's leading capitalist powers and their central banks to limit the fall. In its recent Economic Outlook, the OECD, the intergovernmental organisation of mostly rich capitalist nations, puts Britain among countries such as Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Luxemburg, Spain and Turkey as most vulnerable to the global financial crisis and falling house prices. DAVID YAFFE reports on the growing economic and political crisis of British capitalism.

Desperate times

The British economy contracted by 0.5% between July and September 2008. A deep and long recession is certain. Unemployment increased by 140,000 to 1.82m in the three months to September, reaching 5.8% of the workforce. House prices have fallen between 14% and 15% over the last year. Mortgage approvals have fallen by more than half on a year ago. The fall in house prices, according to the Treasury, will continue until 2010 and will reach 25% relative to incomes from the previous peak. More than 30,000 homes have been repossessed this year so far and 168,000 borrowers are at least three months behind on repayments. The stockmarket - FTSE 100 - has fallen around 40% from the summer of 2007. It is highly volatile. It was below 4,000 points for some days in both October and November. Workers have seen their pension funds cut by nearly a third over the last year

as the stockmarket has plummeted.

The pound has reached a 12-year low against other currencies, briefly touching the lowest level against the euro ever and falling to a six-year low against the dollar - a fall of nearly 25%. Foreign investors are now withdrawing funds invested in British assets. Over the last two months more than £100bn, three quarters of the capital that foreign investors brought into Britain over the last four years, has been withdrawn. If this continues it will have devastating consequences for the British economy, accelerating the run on the pound, and turning recession into depression.

The Icelandic banks' collapse in early November has left local authorities and other public bodies with severe cash flow problems. More than a quarter of UK councils - 108 local authorities - had put around £800m in now defunct Icelandic accounts. For some councils this is equivalent to

around a tenth of their budgets. Other public bodies with frozen funds include 15 police authorities with £95m, charities, housing associations and universities. Transport for London had £40m on deposit. These deposits, unlike those of individual savers, are not underwritten by the government or any other scheme. The government used anti-terror laws to freeze Icelandic banks' assets in this country in its negotiations with the Icelandic government over British investors' funds. This abuse of anti-terror laws is a sign of things to come.

The outlook is bleak. As we go to press the banks have now pulled the plug on Woolworths, one of the most familiar sights on the British high street. 840 stores will disappear, leaving up to 30,000 workers redundant. MFI, the furniture store, has also gone into administration. DSG, the old Dixons group, which operates Currys

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DESPERATE TIMES DESPERATE MEASURES

continued from page 1

and PC World, lost £30m in the six months to the end of October 2008 compared with a £52m profit over the same period in 2007. Job losses are inevitable and its future could be in doubt. UK credit insurers are withdrawing insurance cover for suppliers, as more companies fail to pay their suppliers.

A surge of job losses is on the way. The CBI expects unemployment to reach 2.9m by mid-2010. More than a quarter of employers are preparing to make workers redundant, according to a recent survey (*Financial Times* 31 October 2008) – managers, white collar workers and skilled non-manual workers are most likely to lose their jobs as private sector services are expected to suffer the biggest jobs cut. 62,000 jobs in the City are expected to have been lost by the end of 2009; 10,000 jobs are to go at BT. The proletarianisation of the better-off sections of the working class is underway. They will join tens of thousands of low-paid workers who are losing their jobs.

Desperate measures Banks, the government and the state

A great deal of nonsense has been written about governments throughout the world, especially in the US and Britain, taking a stake and in some cases 'nationalising' banks and other financial institutions. It is important to recognise the process that is taking place. What we are seeing is a further consolidation of finance capital and the state – that is, the further development of state monopoly capitalism (imperialism). This crisis of capitalism has seen the underwriting of the debt of the banks and financial institutions by the state on a scale like never before. The process has entered a new phase. Wall Street has always been at the heart of the US state just as the City has been at the heart of the British state. The crisis has raised this to a new level of intensity. To see this as a development that is in the interests of the working class is patently absurd.¹

In early October the British government launched a £400bn rescue plan – equivalent to nearly 30% of GDP – to get banks and financial institutions lending again. It said it would invest up to £50bn in the banks, offered guarantees covering £250bn new bank debt and added £100bn to the existing Bank of England short-term loan scheme. There would be a fee for the guarantees. The government sponsored the takeover of HBOS by Lloyds TSB to create a new banking monopoly and injected some £37bn into these two banks and RBS, giving the government a stake of around 44% in the former after the merger takes place and 58% in the latter. All these banks are trading below the price at which the government has agreed to buy the shares. The government at present is carrying a loss of around £5bn.

Barclays refused to accept a government bail-out, preferring to raise capital from oil rich countries in the Middle East at a higher cost in order to keep the government's influence to a minimum. It had, in fact, nothing to fear. On 10 November City Minister Lord Myers stated that the bail-out banks would be free from Treasury scrutiny, ignoring previous promises made by government ministers. The government stake in the banks will be

controlled by UK Financial Investments (UKFI), chaired by the chairman of J Sainsbury and former Lloyds TSB director Philip Hampton. The aim is to keep the banks' stakes at arms length from the government. As Philip Hampton and John Kingham, who will run UKFI, said: 'our job [is] to manage the taxpayer's investments, not to manage the banks' (*Financial Times* 14 November 2008). The government was, after all, socialising the debts of the banks so that they could return to their central parasitic role in the British economy as quickly as possible and so ensure that 'London will retain its rightful place as the financial centre of the world' (Gordon Brown).

By the end of November 2008 the government was still desperately pleading with the banks to start lending to small businesses, personal consumers and home buyers at an adequate level again. The Bank of England governor called it 'the single most pressing challenge to domestic economic policy'. Banks, including the 'nationalised' Northern Rock, were vigorously repossessing the homes of those who had fallen behind with their mortgage payments, despite pleas from government ministers for more protection. It is clear who is calling the shots.

The pre-Budget report

On 8 October six of the world's most important central banks took unprecedented action and announced simultaneous interest cuts of 0.5 percentage points. The Bank of England cut its rate to 4.5%. On 6 November British rates were cut further by 1.5 percentage points to 3%, the largest cut the Bank has ever made and the lowest level of interest rates since 1954. The G20 summit in the middle of November came and went with little of consequence other than the vain intention of cooperative action to stimulate the world economy and maintain an open economy (avoid protectionism), with a decision to meet again in April 2009.

Still the economic conditions deteriorated. Monetary policy was having little impact and the banks were not really cooperating. The Labour government had little option but to gamble its future on a £20bn fiscal stimulus designed to take the economy out of recession by summer 2010. This came in an emergency budget on 24 November 2008, under the guise of a pre-Budget report. The Chancellor's aides maintained that it is coincidental that his economic plan dovetails neatly with an election in 2009 or June 2010 at the latest.

The contents of the pre-Budget report were both economic and political. The fiscal stimulus would come from a cut in VAT from 17.5% to 15%, to operate from 1 December 2008 until the end of 2009. The £120 increase in income tax allowance to compensate for the removal of the 10p tax band would be made permanent and increased to £145 from next April. Every pensioner is to get a one-off payment of £60 on top of the £10 Christmas bonus. The child benefit increase due in April 2009 will come three months earlier and an increase of £25 in the child element in tax credits due to come in April 2010 will come in 12 months earlier. For business, the rise in corporation tax for small businesses for next year has been dropped; empty commercial properties with a rateable value less than £15,000 – 70% of empty properties – are to be exempt from tax, and finally multina-

tionals will be allowed to repatriate foreign dividends tax-free from April 2009, costing the taxpayer £275m in 2011-12. On the spending side, £3bn on capital projects due in 2010-2011 will be brought forward and there will be a £1.8bn package to help the housing sector with extra money for social housing and for people struggling to meet their mortgage bills.

On the Chancellor's very optimistic projections, economic growth will fall between 1.25% and 1.75% in 2009-10, rising again by 1.25% to 2% in 2010-11 and 2.75% to 3.75% in 2011-12. The self-imposed fiscal rules of previous budgets have been thrown to the wind. Public sector net borrowing will reach an enormous £118bn in 2009-10, more than 8% of GDP. The accumulated public debt will rapidly rise to more than £1 trillion in 2012-13, 57.1% of GDP, massively breach-



Demonstrators clashed with police as 100,000 marched in Ankara, Turkey against unemployment, poverty and the effects of the capitalist crisis, 29 November 2008

ing Gordon Brown's so-called 'golden rule' of not being greater than 40% of GDP.

Some have questioned whether, in the midst of a deep recession, investors will be prepared to finance the explosive increase in government debt (Martin Wolf *Financial Times* 28 November 2008). Already UK government bonds are among the most risky in the western world, second only to Italy, which has government debt of more than 100% of its GDP. To insure £1m UK government bonds against default will now cost £9,000 a year. This compares with £3,000 in September and £1,000 in May 2008 (*The Guardian* 26 November 2008). But desperate times require desperate measures.

There will be payback for all this, but after the next election. There will be at least six years of austerity, hitting working class people hardest. The VAT rate will go back to 17.5% in 2010 – a regressive tax that hits the less well-off working class the most. National insurance on employees and employers will rise by 0.5% and there will be a rise in the top rate of tax to 45% on those earning more than £150,000, breaking with Labour's commitment in 1997 not to raise the income tax rate. In addition tax allowances will be reduced for those earning over £100,000 and withdrawn for those earning over £140,000. It is this which gave the liberal intelligentsia the smokescreen it needed to scurry back to the Labour Party.

The 45% rate of tax will hit around 290,000 people. It will raise only around £670m in 2011-12 and 'almost nothing' says the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), if widespread tax avoidance measures are adopted. When Thatcher came to power in 1979 the top rate of tax was 83%. It was reduced to 60% and remained at that level until 1988, when it was further reduced to 40%. Raising it to 45%

is simply opportunist and has everything to do with the next election. Lord Mandelson, spelt this out when he said that he 'did not have a problem with it. It was purely a pragmatic question of how we would repay the borrowing. There would have been a public backlash if those who are so clearly better off and have gained so much in the last 10 years were not seen to be shouldering their fair share of the burden. This is not a matter of envy, spite or the death of New Labour' (*The Guardian* 29 November 2008).

Fine words, but another smoke-screen for what is really planned. As the IFS has pointed out from a close analysis of the government's pre-Budget proposals, Labour is planning to dramatically squeeze public spending by some £37bn in the three years after the next election in order to reduce public borrowing. This will require job cuts, pay cuts and so-called 'efficiency drives' (privatisation and sales of public assets) which will have a dramatic impact on public provision in the years ahead.

Political struggles ahead

A crisis of this character will change the political landscape. Splits will occur in the ruling class, working class and middle class. The sheer size and importance of financial capital in the British economy raises important questions about the future of Britain as an independent imperialist nation and in that context the international role of the City of London.² British banks have assets worth five times British GDP. To that must be added the vast assets of foreign banks which are located here. Together they are a 'gigantic usury capital' so important

for the British balance of payments and hence for sustaining the living standards of the British people (see FRFI 194 and 205). It has become clear that Britain alone does not have 'the muscle to support the vast international centre that is the City of London' (Will Hutton *The Observer* 5 October 2008). Hutton believes Britain should join the eurozone. Other economic journalists, such as Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* are totally opposed, reflecting real divisions in the British ruling class.

The working class movement has to be clear on these issues, as they become part of the political struggles ahead. For the present we know that we will face extremely hard and dangerous times as the crisis of British capitalism deepens. It is clear that the starting point of working class resistance in the coming years has to be a complete and irrevocable break with the British Labour Party. It has not and cannot change its spots. It will always be a ruling class party that serves the interests of British imperialism.

¹ That is why we asked rhetorically in 'Capitalism in crisis' (FRFI 205, October/November 2008): 'Can anyone seriously call socialising the debt of failing banks and creating new banking monopolies a return to Labour's "social democratic roots"? See http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/frfi/205/FRFI_205_cri.html

² For an initial discussion of this question in the context of growing inter-imperialist rivalry see 'Britain: parasitic and decaying capitalism' FRFI 194 December 2006/January 2007. See http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/downloads/FRFI194_07_10_parasitic.pdf

Crisis at the Metropolitan Police: £300,000+ handshakes all round

Two senior police officers in the Metropolitan Police have departed their jobs in the middle of what everyone agrees is a crisis for policing in London. The Commissioner, Sir Ian Blair, resigned before his contract ended claiming that Boris Johnson, the popinjay, old Etonian, Tory London mayor, had driven him out. Resignation or not, Sir Ian pocketed a large pay-off from taxpayers' money on top of his pension. Britain's top Asian policeman, Assistant Commissioner Tarique Ghaffur, who sidled off a few days before Sir Ian clutching a fat cheque of his own, left having withdrawn a claim against his former boss for racism, promising to say no more.

In fact Mayor Johnson let the Commissioner off the hook. At the first meeting between Johnson and Blair after the Mayor took political control of the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) in September 2008, Johnson made it clear he had no confidence in the Commissioner. Sir Ian grasped this straw and resigned, claiming constructive dismissal. He was facing a number of serious scandals and accusations alleging, in no particular order, gross incompetence, corruption and racism.

For the Commissioner, who fondly regards himself as a liberal, Johnson's declaration of no confidence provided the bolt hole he needed to clear his desk in advance of three events in particular:

1. the imminent verdict at the inquest, which opened in September 2008, into the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes in July 2005;
2. the outcome of Tarique Ghaffur's claim of racial discrimination, alongside rumours surrounding another Asian senior officer, Commander Ali Dizaal, who was suspended from duty in September, and an accusation of institutional racism by the Metropolitan Black Police Association which advised black people not to join the Met;
3. an MPA auditors' investigation into accusations that Ian Blair used public



Jean Charles de Menezes' mother demonstrating for justice for her son

money to pay an image consultant who was a friend.

Despite emerging from the De Menezes execution debacle without any criminal charges against the officers involved, and himself surviving accusations that he misled the public, the controversy did not disappear. Assistant Commissioner Andy Hayman was the fall guy forced into retirement following the report on the De Menezes killing and the Met police shooting of another innocent man during a police raid in Forest Gate, east London, in June 2006. Blair then chose to fight the charges against the Met that it had breached Health and Safety laws in the De Menezes operation; a case that the Met lost in the midst of further bad publicity.

You might think that a Commissioner who had been involved in the shootings of innocent people, faced charges of corruption and racial discrimination from his senior colleagues, and who had supported all the Labour government's proposals for draconian police powers, including 42 days detention without charge, might take a moment to reflect on whether his record accorded with a 'liberal' reputation. Not Sir Ian Blair. At his resignation interview he claimed to have done no wrong. As for Ghaffur's claim, sounding more like a Mafia godfather, Blair claimed to have known that Mr Ghaffur 'would eventually withdraw his allegation'.

Jane Bennett

USA INC. TOO BIG TO FAIL?

US finance capital has gone through extraordinary turbulence in the last few weeks. Through a torrent of financial measures, the US Federal Reserve (Fed) has now become the main participant in the US money market, since it is the only bank that lenders trust. The entire total of handouts, bail-outs, loans and guarantees now comes to a staggering \$8.5 trillion – more than half the annual production of the US. The national debt is now over \$10 trillion. Debt on this scale is unprecedented. Can it be sustained? Is the US 'too big to fail'?

In past issues of FRFI we have shown how derivatives, exotic financial instruments, have proved to be so toxic to the financial system that leading US financial institutions have had to be nationalised or taken over to survive – or else allowed to go bankrupt. In our last issue, we showed that since the toxic assets have no market, they are difficult to price, hence cannot be used as security collateral in exchange for loans. The entire US money market began to freeze up; in place of credit, a furious hunt for cash began.

If the credit markets remain halted, non-financial companies will find it impossible to operate, throwing the economy into depression. So Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson insisted, in a three-page memo, that Congress immediately give him \$700bn and unlimited authority to use it to fix the financial system. Thanks to popular outcry at donating such an extraordinary sum of taxpayers' money, his request was initially voted down. After days of wheeling and dealing, Congress finally passed the 2008 Emergency Economic Stabilization Act on 3 October. Paulson's three-page memo had grown to almost 500 pages, festooned with so many ornaments that it looked like an overburdened Christmas tree. As well as the \$700bn for the banks, there was a host of tax cuts for businesses: wooden arrow makers in Oregon, racetrack owners, Puerto Rican rum ... and on and on. All this candy had sufficiently sweetened the legislation to enable previous objectors to swallow it.

The Act created the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), supposedly to buy up all the toxic assets, the derivatives of uncertain value which are the core of the problem, and to purge them out of the system. This would then remove uncertainty about the credit-worthiness of borrowers, free up lending and enable liquidity conditions to return to normal. At least that was the theory. But after it was actually passed, the money markets showed their appreciation by dropping further and locking up tighter.

Clearly, it would take months for TARP to be set up, and purge enough toxic assets to get inter-bank lending moving again. So the Federal Reserve, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and the US Treasury took steps to pump money into the banks, provide loans or provide guarantees. We don't have space to describe them all, but here are the main ones:

- The Treasury quietly changed the tax code without any public debate to enable firms that acquire other banks which have incurred losses, to use

them to offset the taxes on their own profits. Benefit – \$140bn.

- FDIC provided deposit guarantees of \$1.4bn and arranged \$139bn in loan guarantees for General Electric's financial unit.

- The Federal Reserve made \$150bn available to the banks and started paying interest on reserve balances from commercial banks deposited with the Fed.

- The Fed initiated two new programs to unplug the Commercial Paper market and to help Money Market investment funds – worth \$2.3 trillion.

- The Treasury has handed out \$250bn of TARP money straight to the banks.

- Citigroup, once the world's largest company and now limping along, received \$20bn in a capital injection, together with \$306bn of guarantees for toxic and distressed assets.

- Further assistance to AIG insurance company.

- A \$200bn 'facility' to rescue consumer debt – credit cards and auto loans.

- \$500bn to buy up mortgages from Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, and \$100bn to purchase some of their debt.

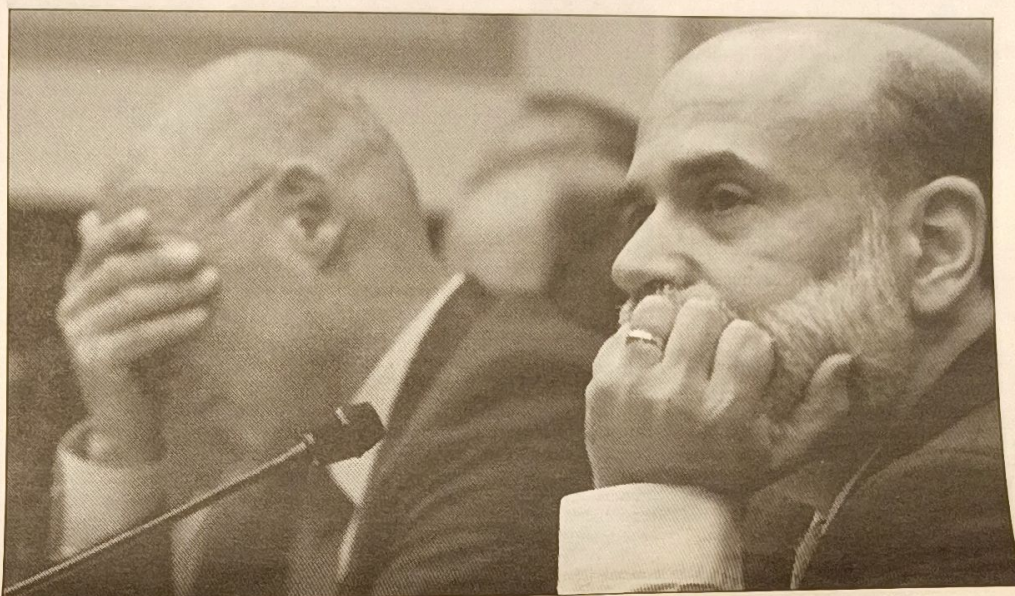
The accompanying table tells the story, comparing changes in the last two months with changes in the previous year:

- Federal Reserve lending to commercial banks jumped from \$309.9bn to almost \$1 trillion in the last two months.

- In the year from September 2007 to September 2008, commercial banks' reserve balances at the Fed remained relatively unchanged – about \$8bn – and their cash holdings were around \$300bn. But from mid-September to mid-November, reserve balances grew from \$8bn to \$633.9bn, while cash holdings grew from \$286.3bn to \$854.3bn. That's almost \$1.2 trillion not being lent, but hoarded!

- The New York Stock Exchange became a cash machine: in the year to September 2008, the Standard and Poor 500 index fell by 250 points; now, in just two months, it fell a further 425 as hedge funds and other investors dumped stock for cash.

This is in part being financed by banks borrowing from banks and affiliates outside the US – about \$887bn by mid-November. Federal programmes are being financed by huge sales of Treasury securities – \$550bn in the last quarter of this year. More money will need to be borrowed for further bail-outs, since US imperialism is clearly far from having surmounted this crisis. But borrowing has its limits: eventually it has to be



Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke at a Congress hearing

Credit Crisis – Critical Indicators¹

	Federal Reserve Bank (\$bn)		Commercial Banks (\$bn)		NY Stock Exchange
	Total Lending	Reserve balances	Cash	Overseas Borrowing	S&P 500 Index
1) 12 Sept 2007	36.3	8.7	301.1	1,869.2	1,484.25
2) 10 Sept 2008	309.9	8.0	286.3	1,761.2	1,232.04
3) 19 Nov 2008	999.6	633.9	854.3	2,649.0	806.58
4) (2) – (1)	273.6	–0.7	–14.8	–108.0	–252.1
5) (3) – (2)	689.7	625.9	568.0	887.8	–425.5

paid back. Yet, to pay it back, capitalism has to be sufficiently profitable – but it is the lack of profitability of US capitalism which has forced it onto the crutches of credit.

Despite these vast sums, the credit markets are still incapable of standing on their own feet. As a result, non-financial industries, such as the car manufacturers, are seriously threatened.

The car companies

With the leap in the price of petrol it was made obvious to all, that the 'Big Three' car makers – GM, Chrysler, Ford – had strategic problems. With the doubling of prices, the large 'gas-guzzlers' that were the cash cows of their business were now headed for the slaughter house. Combined with the credit crisis, which hit lending to consumers for car purchase, as well as routine operational financing, the 'Big Three' were now running short of cash, and came to Washington seeking \$25bn of bridging finance to support them while they reorganise and retool to produce different, smaller, more energy-efficient vehicles.

In the scale of things described above, \$25bn is small change – after all Wall Street has set aside \$20bn for bonuses (sorry, 'retention payments') for its staff and the US Treasury casually donated \$20bn to Citigroup bank over a weekend without any public debate or investigation. Yet the Detroit CEOs were greeted with a brutal, bruising and bitterly hostile series of interrogations and lectures from Representatives, including from Democrats who tried to out-do their Republican counterparts in heaping scorn and criticism on the auto

moguls. They were told to return with a plan in a few weeks and skulked out of the room back to Detroit.

However, if the ruling class decides to refuse support, there are serious consequences. First, the 'Big Three' directly employ about 240,000 workers, indirectly another 970,000 at suppliers, as well as about 1.7 million workers who are dependent on the spending of the directly and indirectly employed workers.² So, some 2.95 million jobs depend on the 'Big Three'. Secondly, the cut in personal incomes, hence consumption, by these workers will be about \$398.2bn over three years. Further, loss of taxes and increase in unemployment payments will mean government will lose some \$156.4bn over three years. Third, there will be financial consequences: GM has \$32.45bn in outstanding long-term debt, Ford has \$25bn of long-term debt,³ while private equity fund Cerberus bought an 80.1% stake in Chrysler from Daimler in 2007 and owns 51% of GMAC (GM's car loan arm). Now bondholders are wrestling with GM over attempts to reorganise its financing and Cerberus has suddenly discovered that Daimler 'intentionally and materially' misled it about the state of Chrysler. Defaults on these debts will have consequences for pension funds and other institutional investors. Finally, those 2.95 million workers, unlike the financial sector workers, are contributing substantial amounts of surplus-value to US capitalism: throwing them out of work is going to significantly reduce the profits of US capital and speed the decline into a full-blown depression. Throughout all this, the United Auto Workers leadership has had no inde-

pendent strategy for its members; it has negotiated away wages, benefits and jobs, despite the severity of the potential consequences of employer bankruptcy to the workers.

The US car industry is just the first of many industries and companies that will suffer as a result of the deepening of the credit crisis. Yet the workers, even if unionised, are really not prepared for the onslaught which is going to develop on jobs and wages.

The entire cost of this crisis – of the financial crisis, of the recession – will be forced onto the working class in the US. Jobs, wages, benefits, public services – all will be coming under the knife as this crisis deepens. The huge mountains of debt the US is building up threaten to overwhelm it. Is the US too big to fail? So far it has demonstrated that it is not big enough to succeed without savagely attacking the living standards of the American people.

Steve Palmer
US correspondent

¹ Federal Reserve releases: H4, I, H3, Standard and Poor's.

² *Impact on the US Economy of a Major Contraction of the Detroit Three Automakers*, Center for Automotive Research, Michigan, 4 November 2008.

³ 'GM, Ford, GE debt volumes exceed CDS exposures', Reuters, 5 November 2008.

Education notes Limits of privatisation

The great custard well

The 1944 Education Act set up a Ministry of Education as part of the new welfare state after the Second World War. This Act established local education authorities financed from both national and local taxation. The first and largest of these was the London County Council (later the Greater London Council), and teachers used to joke that under County Hall there was a deep well from which came the custard for school dinners, the paint for school walls and the glue for school work. The point of the joke was that the local authority was the custodian of all the resources necessary to run an education system including school buildings, school transport, acres of land and playing fields. It was also the employer of thousands of teachers, office staff, examiners, dinner ladies, accountants, decorators, caretakers, construction workers and maintenance and cleaning teams. Local education officers organised the bulk purchase of stationery and the provision of school dinners, and oversaw teacher training.

Privatisation makes an entrance

This vast not-for-profit sector catered for 93% of pupils up until the Thatcher/Baker Education Act of 1985. This Act introduced a national curriculum, a regime of constant testing and, most significantly, a campaign against local government. Thatcher set out to break up what she regarded as a local council monopoly and put its functions up for sale to the private sector under the mantra of 'value for money'. On coming to power in 1997 the Labour Party enforced 'outsourcing' with even greater determination. The measures to centralise the education system were measures to control and discipline both teachers and elected local officials, to undermine them, take



Arbitrary testing: Key Stage 3 tests were abandoned as soon as the private sector failed to come up with the marks

away local council 'monopoly' and deliver services into the hands of private business.

Ending local council monopoly

Today almost every school service possible has been privatised: school dinners, cleaning, maintenance, professional training, examinations, accounts, stationery, transport, special needs provision, etc. A whole new edu-business has arisen, making big profits for private firms. The latest news from Schools minister Ed Balls is that private companies will run small schools for excluded children, so-called 'sin bins' or Pupil Referral Units, and that 12 pilot projects have started. 'This is the creeping privatisation of education' said the National Union of Teachers general secretary in October 2008. Creeping? More like a smash-and-grab raid to enrich Labour's City friends for the last 11 years.

Privatisation is inefficient

Labour says that the free market economy will lead to economic growth and national competitiveness. In fact it is a more expensive and less efficient way of running a state education system than central planning and resourcing. Education businesses are only concerned to make profits, so they supply services as cheaply as they can. The result is failure to deliver on price and on time. This year the US Educational Testing Service (ETS) failed to mark the Key Stage 3 tests properly or on time. Not only did the government have to sack ETS from its £5 million contract but also KS3 tests were suddenly discarded in an Ed Balls announcement to an empty House of Commons. Similarly this term, hundreds of thousands of very poor students had to wait for months for their (very small) education maintenance allowances because the Libera

Company failed to deliver. Libera apologised saying it had not employed sufficient workers for the contract which it was awarded under the 'best value for money' guidance. It too has now been sacked.

Thousands of posts – managers, advisers, consultants, inspectors, improvement gurus of every kind – have been invented and financed by central government, whether by setting up quangos or by awarding contracts to the mushrooming self-employed education businesses. In state schools, infant classes still have 30 children compared to the private sector's 12, but an army of well-paid literacy and numeracy consultants give advice every day of the week. This is not the free market, this is not entrepreneurship – it is a transfer of public monies from the state to private interests. In the words of the *Financial Times*, education advisers are 'employees who formally work for a private company, but are wholly dependent on taxpayers for employment'. Privatisation is a con trick, slicing a top layer of funding off services previously provided and guaranteed by the state.

As the current credit crunch bites, small private schools are closing at the rate of one a week, and wealthy middle class parents are pushing and shoving their children into the best state schools. Now they are in the same position as the vast majority of working class parents who cannot pay for private education. Meanwhile, crisis-ridden banks and companies are becoming increasingly risky partners in the many Public/Private Finance Initiatives launched by this government. There is a threat of unfinished school building projects around the country, as the major building firms face bankruptcy and fail to complete contracts. The state sector which was opened up to competition, to entrepreneurs, to the free market, to enterprise will be grinding to a standstill as the recession deepens. The only real way to finance the education sector will be a return to the spirit of the 1944 Education Act – only this time, a great deal better.

Susan Davidson

DECENT HOUSING FOR ALL!

Defend council housing

Housing is becoming the bellwether of economic recession in Britain as well as in the United States. In Britain, the number of repossessions of privately-owned houses is rising rapidly as unemployment grows and falling house prices leave owners with negative equity. The already massive shortage of council housing is fast becoming a desperate crisis for working class people who have the choice of poor quality, often overcrowded conditions at inflated prices in the private sector or homelessness. Now is the time to invest massively in council housing and affordable good quality private housing to meet the needs of the working class. Instead the Labour government is, at best, dragging its feet, looking for more ways to ration council housing and ignoring the needs of millions of badly housed and homeless families.

In the lead-up to the issuing of a government Green Paper on housing, promised for early 2009, Housing Minister Margaret Beckett has been considering proposals from the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH, representing housing officials) which argue for an end to security of tenure for council tenants. This right to stay in your own home was won in 1979 through national campaigning by council tenants following reforms in the private sector. The CIH report *Rethinking Housing* suggests that there should be means tests for council tenants, and periodic reviews of tenants' financial situations. Should their income exceed a certain level, they should either pay a higher rent or be 'encouraged' to move into the private sector. Another report by the New Local Government Network (NLGN), a New Labour think tank, also recommends putting an end to secure tenancies, setting market-level rents and even proposes forcing elderly council tenants to leave their homes once their children have grown up.

Currently there are four million people (1.6 million households) on waiting lists for council housing; this will grow to five million people by 2010. In the poorest areas one in five people is on a waiting list. With only 170,000 council houses becoming available each year the situation is set to rapidly worsen. Between 1997 and 2006, local authorities built a mere 1,728 houses; in the same period the number completed by registered social landlords (housing associations etc) averaged 16-17,000 a year. According to the homelessness charity Crisis, there are 800,000 homeless people in Britain at any point in time. Further pressure will come from those whose houses are repossessed as they fall behind on mortgage repayments: an estimated 45,000 households in 2008 and rising.

Earlier in 2008, Beckett's predecessor as housing minister, Caroline Flint, suggested that security of tenure for the unemployed should depend on them looking for work. It shows that the instinct of the Labour government is always to find ways of punishing the poor and making life for working class people harder and harder. We need to expose this government's tricks and campaign to defend and expand council housing. It is the most basic human right that everyone should have decent, secure housing.

Mark Moncada

Health matters Inequality in the NHS

Primary care

■ In 1971, Dr Tudor Hart wrote in *The Lancet* that '...the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need of the population served'. This still applies: for instance, there are still twice as many primary care professionals per head of population in Cambridgeshire as there are in Manchester. Residents of Cambridgeshire will on average live six years longer. The Office for National Statistics released life expectancy figures recently showing that a child born in the South East and South West of England in 2005 had a life expectancy of 78.9 years for males and 82.9 years for females. This compares with Scotland, where it is the shortest, 74.8 years for males and 79.7 years for females.

■ In Camden, north London, a battle has been won to defend GP services. Camden Primary Care Trust (PCT) recently announced that it is no longer planning to establish a polyclinic at University College London Hospital (UCLH). It has backed down from its intention to move local GPs and/or new GP services to this polyclinic with a further threat of private tender to run it. This is a valuable lesson in the importance of local campaigning, as doctors, nurses and local people have kept up the pressure against the privatisation of primary health care services in the borough since the

PCT's first announcement. Campaigners opposed privatisation, demanding that money spent on the UCLH polyclinic should be spent on existing GP services in the borough and that consultation with local people about any further changes should be transparent from the start.

Precarious private finance

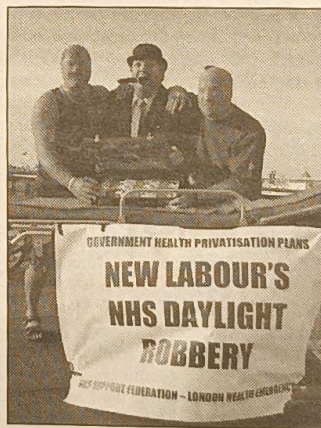
■ The Homerton Hospital in east London is a foundation hospital where 'more income is more security', the chief executive announced in a recent briefing to staff. A six-week consultation process ended in mid-November over the future of the acute stroke services. These services are being centralised and the hospital will have to bid against private sector companies to run them. In the current economic climate, such a step is very precarious, because if the successful company cannot sustain its financial commitment, there are no guarantees that the services will continue to exist.

■ On 31 October, Bob Ricketts, Department of Health (DoH) Director of System Management, confirmed earlier plans to force PCTs to outsource the community services they currently provide. This process has to be complete across England by April 2010. The plan will create 'real opportunities' for the private sector in the National Health Service, he said; the DoH estimates it would create a mar-

ket worth £10bn a year. It is setting up a panel to ensure that PCTs are properly considering bids from the private sector. Foundation trusts can also bid: on 1 November, Hartlepool and Stockton PCTs transferred over 850 community staff and all their services to the North Tees and Hartlepool Foundation Trust, the first services to be outsourced under the edict.

Top-ups allowed

■ On 4 November, Health Minister Alan Johnson announced the lifting of the ban on top-up treatment. People will be allowed to pay privately for expensive drugs without losing their entitlement to free NHS care. Johnson denied that this runs counter to the founding principles of the NHS – health care for all, free at the point of delivery. He muddled the issue by ordering the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) to speed up decisions on new drugs and be consistent in considering applications. He also raised the ceiling on the annual cost of drugs NICE could approve for NHS patients from £48,000 to £80,000 a year. This would make more drugs available through the NHS so that fewer people would want top-up care. Johnson said he was 'absolutely comfortable as Labour Secretary of State endorsing the recommendations' and that there was no question of a two-tier system developing.



Protesters in London against NHS privatisation

This is quite untrue. It is a crucial first step in undermining universal health care and moving the NHS to a point where it will provide only basic services, with anything extra depending on being able to pay. Insurance companies have jumped at the possibilities. The head of health at the Association of British Insurers said: 'Potentially the market is enormous... All of us potentially might get cancer and may want to have these drugs... Without insurance there are very few people going to be able to afford these drugs and insurance is something that would make them available to just about everybody.' On 26 November, in an article on the Pre-Budget Report, *The Guardian* suggested that one of the cuts in public spending a government could consider after 2011 would be to extend the system of top-up payments. The writing is on the wall.

Hannah Caller

PALESTINE

Gaza under siege

BOB SHEPHERD

As the six-month ceasefire in Gaza entered its final month before a planned renegotiation on 19 December, living conditions for the inhabitants of Gaza reached a terrible new low. On the night of 4 November Israeli forces entered the Gaza Strip and killed six fighters from Hamas's military wing, the Qassam Brigades. In retaliation the Qassam Brigades and other resistance groups fired up to 50 rockets into Israel. Israel immediately shut all Gaza border crossings, turning what was already a desperate situation for the people there into an impending 'humanitarian disaster', according to John Ging, the director of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) operations in Gaza.

On 13 November Ging said 'We cannot describe the situation in the Gaza Strip except as a terrible and terrifying one. There are 750,000 refugees who depend on what we offer them in food supplies. Israel is preventing us from distributing these supplies.' On 17 November Israel allowed a limited number of trucks carrying supplies for UNRWA to cross into Gaza and then immediately resealed the borders. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, declared on 18 November 'By function of this blockade 1.5 million Palestinian men, women and children have been forcibly deprived of their most basic human rights for months... only a full lifting of the blockade followed by a strong humanitarian response will be adequate to relieve the massive humanitarian suffering evident in Gaza today'.

Following a further week of complete closures, Israel briefly opened three crossings on 24 November to allow a few lorries carrying food and fuel to cross. This is a deliberate policy: by occasionally letting a trickle of desperately-needed supplies into Gaza, Israel is trying to disguise its genocidal activities. As Jamal Al Khundari, the head of the Popular Anti-Siege Committee in Gaza put it, 'how would 30 trucks of food allocated to UNRWA be enough when the agency distributes food to one million people?' Before the blockade around 1,000 trucks were entering Gaza every day.

The continuing closure of the border crossings is affecting all aspects of Gazan life, from the increasing shortages of basic foodstuff to the denial of medical care. On 19 November the Palestinian Flour Mill Company which supplies 50% of the flour needed in the Gaza Strip ceased production. It was the

first time since Israel imposed its blockade of Gaza in June 2007 that the company had been forced to completely stop production. There is now no flour for ordinary people to make bread.

Power shortages and blackouts are now the norm. Due to the blockade:

- Gaza's main power plant, which supplies around 25% of its electricity, is unable to operate most of the time because of fuel shortages.

- The electricity network that brings in power from Israel has collapsed; Palestinian technicians are unable to repair it as they cannot get the spare parts.

- The largest hospital in Gaza, Shifa, is facing continued power cuts and its own emergency generator is faulty with technicians unable to fully repair it, again because of a lack of spare parts. On 22 November doctors had to abandon electronic equipment in the neonatal unit when there was a power failure. Hospital Director Hassan Khalaf said 'When there was the power cut the generator kicked in but it had a problem... as a result all the machines shut down and staff had to manually pump oxygen to all the infants here'.

- Supplies of about 160 essential medicines at the hospital have run out and a further 120 are running low.

- On 24 November Gaza Health Minister Dr Bassem Naim said that 50% of ambulances were out of action because of the lack of parts, as were 220 machines used in treating cancer and other serious conditions, including dialysis equipment.

- The Health Ministry says that there are over 400 patients, mainly suffering from cancer and heart problems, in need of medical treatment in Israeli or Arab hospitals but 'Israel doesn't let them leave Gaza'. Since June 2007 over 250 people have died in Gaza after being refused permission to leave for further medical treatment.



Demonstration in Gaza against the continuing Israeli siege

The Israeli military action in Gaza and the subsequent sealing of the borders came just days before a much-heralded national reconciliation meeting between Hamas, Fatah and other Palestinian groups in Cairo, scheduled for 9 November. The talks did not begin because Hamas, supported by Islamic Jihad, refused to attend while the Fatah-run Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank refused to release over 600 political prisoners it is holding. PA security forces in the West Bank had arrested at least 60 Hamas supporters in the days leading up to the proposed meeting. Explaining Hamas' withdrawal, one of its leaders, Mahmoud Zahhar, said 'The reason is that Fatah has no real intentions to make dialogue succeed as they arrested hundreds of Hamas loyalists along with affiliates of the Islamic Jihad and Al Aqsa Brigades activists'.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah government in the West Bank have had no interest in the national reconciliation talks as they have supported the imperialist and Zionist attempts to crush the Hamas government in Gaza. As part of that effort, Abbas is pursuing the peace process he agreed in December 2007 at Annapolis, a process that was, according to the US, going to lead to a settlement before the end of Bush's presidency. On 7 November Condoleezza Rice conceded that this deadline would not be met, but praised Abbas's commitment to Annapolis and 'the work that has been done to reform security services and to really improve their capability... the willingness to fight extremists'. This is a 'pat on the head' for Abbas from his political masters, and shows why PA security forces have arrested the 600 resistance activists in the West Bank.

Abbas's tenure as President of the PA officially comes to an end on 9 January 2009. If he attempts to extend his term of office without an election, Hamas, which still constitutionally controls the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), will appoint the PLC Speaker, a Hamas member currently held in an Israeli jail, as interim President.

AUSTRALIA

Racism rules in Australian courts



SARAH KEENAN

On 24 October 2008 Aboriginal Australian Lex Wotton was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in Townsville District Court for 'inciting a riot with damage'. Wotton was one of a number of members of the Palm Island Aboriginal community who took part in burning down the police station, the attached courthouse and part of the police barracks following the death in custody of local man Cameron Doomadgee (now known as 'Mulrunji' - the Dead One) in November 2004. Mulrunji was arrested by Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley for public nuisance and was dead an hour later. The 'public nuisance' Mulrunji was making consisted of drunkenly singing 'Who let the dogs out?' while he walked past Hurley's police van while Hurley was in the process of arresting another Aboriginal man. Mulrunji, then 36, had never been arrested by Hurley before and had no criminal record. Mulrunji died from massive internal injuries including a ruptured spleen and having his liver 'almost cleaved in two'.

The initial inquiry into Mulrunji's death was conducted by two of Hurley's fellow officers, Stephen Kitching and Darren Robinson, the latter of whom is a friend of Hurley's. Hurley picked up both officers from the Palm Island airport on the evening of the death and had them round for dinner and beers at his house.

A few days later there was an official announcement on the island that Mulrunji's death was an unfortunate accident. In reaction to this announcement, the community set fire to the police station and ordered the police to leave the island. No police officers were injured during the riots, though one claims to have obtained a bruise on his hip when something was thrown at

him. At any rate, all officers present during the riots have been heavily compensated by the Queensland government, (including a A\$100,000 payout to Chris Hurley), as well as being awarded 'bravery medals'.

Due to the attention brought to Palm Island by the riots, Hurley became the first police officer in white Australian history to be charged with the death of an Aboriginal prisoner in his custody. The charges followed a two year coronial inquest which concluded that Hurley caused Mulrunji's death, and also that his arrest of Mulrunji was an inappropriate use of his powers.

Despite the coronial report and the overwhelming forensic evidence, Hurley was found not guilty of manslaughter or assault by an all-white jury in Townsville, a military base and a particularly racially divided town in far north Queensland. No disciplinary action has been taken against Hurley and he has recently been promoted to inspector.

In stark contrast, Lex Wotton has now been sentenced to six years in custody and the Palm Island community continues to suffer from Mulrunji's death and from ongoing police brutality. Mulrunji's mother died one week after Mulrunji; his only son Erik committed suicide one year later, as did Patrick Bramwell, the Aboriginal man who was in the cell with Mulrunji as he lay dying.

Despite the government apology to Aboriginal Australians late last year, the racist colonial policies which have been violently enforced on Aboriginal people since the white invasion are very clearly still in practice in Australia.

A demonstration took place outside the Australian High Commission in London on 6 November as part of International Solidarity Day for Lex Wotton. To get in touch with the campaign please contact freelexwotton@gmail.com.

GUANTANAMO

Justice for Binyam Mohamed

CAT WIENER

On 30 October 2008 it was announced that British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith had officially asked Attorney General Baroness Scotland to investigate 'possible wrongdoing' by the CIA and M15 in the case of Guantanamo detainee Binyam Mohamed, a British resident. On the same day, in a separate development, the US administration was finally forced to hand over to Mohamed's lawyers the full defence evidence they have been demanding since May. Both events represent significant achievements in Mohamed's long campaign for justice in the face of

desperate attempts by both the British and US governments to hide evidence of their involvement in Mohamed's extraordinary rendition and torture (see FRFI 205).

Binyam Mohamed, who has been detained at Guantanamo since 2004, was due to face trial at a US 'Military Commission' on a number of charges, the most serious being plotting to detonate a 'dirty bomb'. He faced a possible death sentence. The only evidence against him was a forced 'confession'; Mohamed argues that, after being illegally kidnapped in Pakistan in April 2002, he was then rendered to Morocco for 18 months and horrifically tortured at the behest

of the CIA until he 'confessed'. The evidence that could prove this consists of 42 documents which both the British and US authorities initially refused to release. A judicial review in the High Court in July ruled that the British government must disclose whatever evidence it held. It also criticised British intelligence services for complicity in Mohamed's torture.

The British government responded by filing a Public Interest Immunity Certificate (PIIC) arguing that national security requirements - Britain's 'special relationship' with the US - trumped Mohamed's right to a fair trial.

Meanwhile, in the US, Mohamed's case came up as one of a number of

habeas corpus claims for Guantanamo detainees and as part of this case, the US administration was also ordered to make the 42 documents available to him. However, only seven were handed over, so heavily 'redacted' (censored) as to be almost useless. But the US clearly felt under pressure: on 15 October the 'dirty bomb' plot charge was dropped without explanation. On 21 October, the Military Commission trial was also dropped, following the resignation of prosecutor Lt Col Darrel Vanderveld over 'ethical qualms' that evidence was being withheld from Military Commission defendants, depriving them of 'basic due process'. Bizarrely, Mohamed's defence counsel, Yvonne Bradley, was told that charges might be reinstated in 30 days.

On 23 October, the High Court in London grudgingly accepted the government's 'national security' claims but made it clear that if the US refused

to hand over the remaining documents to Mohamed's lawyers at the next US *habeas corpus* hearing on 30 October, they would reconvene and order disclosure. Judge Thomas ruled that the evidence was 'essential', 'relevant' and 'potentially exculpatory' and that the common law principle that a confession extracted by torture could not be used as evidence in any trial overrode the government's concerns. The government PIIC had, in the High Court's view, completely 'failed to address the abhorrence and condemnation accorded to torture and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment'.

Binyam Mohamed must now be released, and those implicated in his torture brought to justice.

The London Guantanamo Campaign holds a regular stall in Ladbroke Grove on Saturdays calling for the release of Binyam Mohamed. For details contact London.gtmo@googlemail.com

Racism and fascism stalk Italy

As economic crisis descends upon the imperialist economies of the US and Europe, bourgeois economists have turned to the financial crash of 1929 and the depression of the 1930s to explain the current chaos. What they fail to mention is the means by which the capitalist class in certain countries attempted to solve the worst economic and social crisis of the last century: fascism. Across Western Europe recent events provide a grim reminder of the depths to which the ruling elites of Europe, and Italy in particular, can sink. With one of the weakest economies in Europe, the country is set to plunge into possibly the continent's worst depression. Italian capital, perhaps more than any other European economy, desperately needs to increase the exploitation of immigrant workers and the working class as a whole; in doing so, it faces renewed levels of class struggle.

The anti-immigrant and anti-Roma legislation and violence implemented and encouraged by Silvio Berlusconi's coalition of xenophobes, 'post-fascists' and big business is increasingly being turned against the growing working class movement which has shaken Italy since October 2008. The crescendo of racist violence and terror, police brutality, anti-working class legislation and hysterical cries for the crushing of increasingly militant social movements is reminiscent of the fascist terror which the barons of finance capital unleashed across Europe 70 years ago.

Racist attacks

In June 2008, Berlusconi announced that Italy's 160,000-strong Roma population, including children, would be fingerprinted and identified by race. Interior Minister Robert Maroni, a leader of the xenophobic Northern League, insisted the scheme was necessary to help solve the 'security emergency'. Italy's highest court ruled it was acceptable to discriminate against Roma on the basis that 'all Gypsies were thieves'. In the face of international outrage, the plan was modified.

However, the counting of Italy's most oppressed minority, whether of Italian citizenship or not, has already been underway for some time. Italian journalist Giovanna Boursier visited a camp in the southern outskirts of Milan where the Roma told her that 'police arrived at dawn, woke everybody up, surrounded the camp and flooded it with lights and then went from home to home, demanding documents and photographing them.' All the residents were Italian citizens. It made no difference. 'This wasn't a census,' protested a Roma called Gorgio. 'This was an ethnic register.' (*Independent*, 16 May 2008)

The fingerprinting scheme was the culmination of intensifying rhetoric in Italian politics and media about crime and security in which immigrants and Roma have been reviled and scapegoated. In May 2008, rumours that a Roma woman had attempted to abduct a baby in Naples triggered what Seamus Milne described in *The Guardian* (10 July 2008) as an 'orgy of racist violence'. A gypsy camp near Naples was attacked, its poverty-stricken residents driven out by thugs

armed with Molotov cocktails, urged on by jeering local crowds and a silently onlooking police. The camp was finally razed to the ground by local Neapolitan gangsters. Umberto Bossi, the Northern League's leader, issued a chilling endorsement of mob violence, declaring: 'The people do what the political class isn't able to do.' Days later, a group of men went on a racist rampage in Rome, attacking stores run by immigrants. On 19 July, holidaymakers and sunbathing locals lounging on the beach in Torregaveta near Naples showed a shocking indifference to the bodies of two young Roma girls laid out on the sand for hours after drowning. After brief talk of 'outrage', the incident quickly faded from the national media.

Meanwhile the state has carried on its own campaign of terror alongside those of the criminals and mobs. The day after the violence in Naples, 400 immigrants living in Italy without identification were rounded up and arrested as part of a move to close down the 700 gypsy camps across the country and expel their inhabitants. For the Roma, the spectre of fascism is materialising by the day. Terry Davis, secretary general of the Council of Europe, stated that the move to fingerprint Roma 'invites historical analogies which are so obvious that they do not have to be spelled out'.

As reported in FRFI 205, in September 2008 riots broke out after six African workers were gunned down by the Camorra mafia near Naples, in what the Italian press smeared as a drug-related incident, and 85 immigrants rioted at a temporary detention centre in Sardinia, with 50 police in riot gear and paramilitary Carabinieri police officers dispatched to the scene. A Senegalese market trader in Milan was beaten with a baseball bat after stallholders reportedly accused him of 'stealing work from Italians'. When a Somali-born woman claimed she had been strip-searched and verbally abused at the airport in Rome, Roberto Maroni said he would personally sue the woman for lying.

As Italy's one black MP Jean-Leonard Touadi put it, 'Immigrants are becoming the enemy. With an economic crisis under way, Italy has found a scapegoat to blame its woes



The Roma camp near Naples burned down by fascists

on.' He blamed the Northern League for 'pushing discrimination, separation and xenophobia and dragging the government, and with it Italy, towards the systematic violation of human rights,' citing proposals tabled in October by the League which 'call for the expulsion of legal immigrants who commit a certain number of offences, restrictions on mixed marriages and a new obligation on doctors to report illegal immigrants in their care'. (*The Guardian*, 19 October 2008).

Creeping fascism

Gianni Alemanno, elected as mayor of Rome earlier this year, came to power promising to begin immediately expelling 20,000 migrants convicted of criminal offences. Leader of the extreme right 'post-fascist' National Alliance, another of the main groupings in Berlusconi's coalition, and formerly youth leader of the Italian Social Movement, one of the most powerful neo-fascist organisations in Europe, Alemanno was greeted by crowds giving the fascist salute. He stated: 'We will chase out the delinquents. There are 85 abusive nomad camps to destroy.' After his victory, Berlusconi announced: 'We are the new Falange' – a reference to the Spanish fascist party of the Franco dictatorship. Umberto Bossi, leader of the Northern League, said in the same week that immigrants had to be hunted out, and that if reforms were not forthcoming, his followers would take up arms. 'We have no fear of taking things to the piazzas. We have 300,000 martyrs ready to come down from the mountains. Our rifles are always smoking'. (*The Telegraph*, 30 April 2008) Alessandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the dictator and an open cheerleader for fascism, is also part of Berlusconi's coalition.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, far from fascist elements being purged from Italian society, the imperialist countries, and the US in particular, actively nurtured such forces, along with sections of the Mafia, to root out and kill Italian communists.

Today, as the capitalist crisis intensifies, this fascist ideology and violence, first targeted against immigrants and Roma, is increasingly being unleashed against the social movements which are battling against the government's attacks on the working class.

In November, some of Italy's top police officers were cleared of any role in the savage violence police inflicted on unarmed protestors sleeping in a Genoa school during the G8 protests in the city in 2001. The raid on the Armando Diaz school by around 150 truncheon-wielding riot cops left dozens of protestors hospitalised, some in comas; protestors were savagely beaten, stamped and

spat upon, left lying unconscious in pools of blood and battered in an orgy of relentless violence. They were then illegally incarcerated in a detention centre and subjected to a regime the public prosecutor described as 'torture'. Some were urinated on and battered for refusing to sing the fascist song *Faccetta Nera* or praise 'Il Duce' (Mussolini); others were forced to crawl, naked, on all fours and bark like dogs. The police who carried out the beatings were masked, nameless and numberless; only one has ever been identified and none have had to stand trial. As one of the victim's lawyers, Massimo Pastore, put it: 'This is a culture of fascism.'



Italian Roma families – Italy's most oppressed minority

Working class protests sweep Italy

The day after the trial of the police officers, across Italy hundreds of thousands of students, teachers and researchers engaged in another series of protests against massive education cuts. These protests developed into full-scale confrontation with the Berlusconi government. A one-day general strike on 30 October saw 90% of schools closed nationally; over one million teachers and students demonstrated in Rome, while elsewhere during October and November around 300 demonstrations took place in the education sector.

Education Minister Gelmini described the students as a 'terrorist' threat. Berlusconi stated: 'We won't allow schools and universities to be occupied... I will call the interior minister and give him detailed instructions on how to intervene with the police forces to stop these things happening.' Already, students attempting to occupy the Otiense train station in Rome have been subject to sustained beatings from riot police, while students gathered in the Piazza Navona after occupying La Sapienza University in Rome were attacked by members of the neo-fascist Cosa Pound movement. On 28 October, in an interview with far-right newspaper *Quotidiano Nazionale*, former Christ-

ian Democrat Prime Minister and Italian President (1985-1992) Francesco Cossiga, now a lifetime member of the senate, advised Berlusconi to 'do what I did when I was Home Secretary.'

'Withdraw the police from the streets and the universities, infiltrate the movement with agents provocateurs ready for anything and allow the demonstrators to run loose for a week or so, devastating shops, setting cars on fire and causing havoc in the streets...'

'Then, with public opinion on your side, the sound of ambulance sirens should drown out the sirens of police and carabinieri cars... the forces of law and order should massacre the demonstrators without pity and send them all to hospital. Not arrest them – the magistrates would set them free straight away in any event – beat them bloody and beat the teachers stirring them up bloody too.'

Asked if he realised that Europe would condemn such measures as a return to fascism, Cossiga replied 'Rubbish – it's the democratic way. Put out the fire before the flame spreads.'

As the movement against education reforms grows, together with massive national strikes of transport workers, public and private sector workers, and working class mobilisations against low wages and temporary contracts which have seen millions take to the streets and tens of thousands occupy buildings and clash with police from Milan to Naples, the measures spoken about by Cossiga will become the norm. The day after his interview, 50 fascists armed with clubs, acting as agents provocateurs, attempted to put themselves at the head of a demonstration in Rome but were driven away by other demonstrators.

The Italian state is no stranger to unleashing fascist terror to destroy a

militant working class movement. Cossiga was a founder of Operation Gladio along with elements of the CIA and British intelligence, established to deal with 'communist subversion' by committing terrorist actions which were then blamed on the left. In 2000, an investigation by the Italian senate finally revealed that the bombing of a train station in the communist city of Bologna on 2 August 1980, which murdered 85 people, had been carried out by 'men inside Italian state institutions and ... men linked to the structures of US intelligence'.

History does not go round in circles. The theatre of fascism past is unlikely to be played out again in Europe, with its blackshirts, militias and swastikas. But the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist crisis, if not solved by the victory of socialism, will be solved with the utmost violence of the ruling class whatever its form. As Nick Davies wrote on the 'Bloody battle of Genoa' (*Guardian*, 17 July 2008):

'This isn't fascism with jack-booted dictators with foam on their lips. It's the pragmatism of nicely turned-out politicians. But the result looks very similar. Genoa tells us that when the state feels threatened, the rule of law can be suspended. Anywhere.'

Joseph Eskovitch

Balkanisation of Congo begins

Rwanda invaded the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) in 1996, 1998 and 2004. Rwanda's fourth major incursion into DRC in 12 years, in October 2008, signalled an intensification of imperialist rivalry between the European Union (EU), which backs current President Joseph Kabila, and Britain and the US, which support Rwanda. The imperialists are battling for domination of mineral-rich DRC and for a stranglehold on the resource-rich region of central and eastern Africa. To camouflage the real reasons for the conflict, once again the distraction of 'ethnic conflict' is being promoted. Failure to remove Kabila from power may lead to the *de facto* annexation of eastern DRC and the balkanisation of the country. **CHARLES CHINWEIZU** reports.

Rwanda invades again

On 9 October Rwandan tanks entered eastern DRC via the North Kivu province on its border, to aid former Congolese army general Laurent Nkunda, leader of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP). The fighting between the CNDP, the DRC army (FARDC), the UN (MONUC) and various paramilitaries actually resumed on 28 August. Since then over 100 people have been killed, including more than 50 massacred at Kiwanja in November. Over 250,000 people were driven from their homes, fleeing south towards the provincial capital Goma, as shelters, clinics and homes were burnt down, refugee camps emptied, women and girls raped and property looted. At one stage 50,000 refugees went 'missing', their fate unknown. 12,000 have fled to neighbouring Uganda. This area of eastern DRC is clearly being depopulated – the people driven away in terror – and repopulated by people brought in from Rwanda and Uganda. The presence of Rwanda in eastern Congo is being consolidated so it becomes *de facto* part of Greater Rwanda.

The total number of people displaced in North and South Kivu in eastern Congo since 2007 is now over 1.2 million, many without access to critical humanitarian aid. Since 2007 cases of cholera and measles have rocketed. Most of those displaced have been on the run for years. Clearly neither MONUC nor FARDC are able to defend the people from attack. In eastern DRC local people attacked MONUC forces fleeing the fighting with stones. MONUC troops have proven better at looting gold and ivory and re-arming the very militias they were supposed to be disarming than at protecting civilians.

EU response

Nkunda's CNDP marched towards Goma and threatened to go all the way to the capital Kinshasa. On 29 October the government asked Angola for help. After meeting EU ambassadors in Brussels on 31 October, Angola agreed to send troops to DRC to prop up the Kabila government. The Southern African Development Community said a regional team of military experts would be sent immediately, and 'will not stand by and witness incessant acts of violence... against innocent people'. The Angolan troops will be 'overseen by the EU', according to Angolan foreign minister Georges Chicoty. Britain's Foreign Minister David Miliband and his French rival Kouchner immediately flew to Goma. France proposed 1,500 EU troops, which Britain rejected. The last time

EU troops were sent anywhere they were mainly French troops (DRC, 2003 and Chad, 2008). The UN agreed that 3,100 UN troops will be sent 'in six months' to support the 17,000 already there. France is not calling all the shots in the EU, and in March Sweden accused French soldiers of torturing civilians in DRC during *Operation Artemis* in 2003, one of the first EU joint missions.

The EU has invested a lot in Joseph Kabila's regime; it has been the main donor, funding €67m of the €97m (\$460m) total cost of an 'electoral process' from 2001 to 2006. It plans to double the €01m (\$267m) of aid given in 2002-2007 to €00m in 2008-2013. In 2003 the EU forced a transitional government on DRC and spent €01m in 2006 on legitimising Kabila's regime through elections. It imposed as vice-presidents two of the very 'rebels' who were looting DRC – Bemba (leader of Ugandan-backed MLC) and Ruberwa (leader of Rwandan-backed RCD) – handing them the important ministries of finance, defence and foreign affairs. The EU has demobilised the DRC army and forced 7,000 paramilitaries like Nkunda into the FARDC in so-called 'integrated brigades'. Nkunda ended up controlling five of the 11 FARDC brigades which received military training from MONUC in three-month cycles from July 2007 at a cost of \$4m. Far from 'integrating', the brigades organised themselves on ethnic lines and attacked only suspected Hutu militia and civilians in eastern DRC, forcing the DRC government to dismantle them.

Why DR Congo?

DRC is strategically placed at the heart of Africa, sharing common borders with nine sub-Saharan African countries. Controlling DRC is the key to controlling Africa. Tiny Rwanda (population 9m) is clearly imperialism's

control of the minerals, mines and transportation routes.

Rwanda's role

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is at the root of the current DRC crisis, but not in the simplistic terms posed by the British media.

Rwanda had been a Franco-Belgian neo-colony since 'independence' from Belgium in 1962. The Belgian colonialists had defined the people – between whom there were no blood or cultural differences – as 'Tutsi' (if they owned ten cows or more, predominantly ate meat and had straight noses) and 'Hutu' (less than ten cows, varied diets and blunt noses), creating two economic and social classes and favouring the minority 'Tutsis'. From

mer British Prime Minister Tony Blair became a special unpaid 'adviser' to the Rwandan government. Former US President Bill Clinton has appointed Rwandan President Kagame to the board of the Clinton Global Initiative. France has gone from being the largest donor before the genocide to the smallest. Britain is also the main donor to Uganda (£70m a year).

France flew in arms to the Rwandan Hutu rebels organised in the refugee camps in eastern Zaire. The ex-Rwandan FAR and *Interahamwe* remnants raided northern Rwanda frequently. With US backing, Rwanda and Uganda invaded Zaire in 1996 to remove Mobutu using another rebel alliance (AFDL) led by Zairean-born stooge Laurent Kabila, who became president in May 1997. Zaire was renamed DRC. Most of the two million refugees went back to Rwanda. Those left were said by the US and Rwanda to be 'genocidaires' (responsible for carrying out the 1994 genocide) and hence fair game: hundreds of thousands of people were massacred.

The presence of these *genocidaires* has been used since 1996 as an excuse to justify the repeated invasions of DRC by imperialism's clients. According to the UNHCR in North Kivu, 'the idea that there are large numbers of Hutu fighters [in the camps] is a fantasy. This has been about seizing territory' (*Observer*, 2 November 2008).

In August 1998, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda again invaded using the same recipe, a local rebel group fighting for 'freedom', this time the Rwandan-backed RCD and Ugandan-backed MLC. But the support of regional governments saved Laurent Kabila until his assassination in 2001.

Joseph Kabila was installed while Rwanda and Uganda looted DRC's mineral resources in the north (Uganda) and east (Rwanda) and transported them to Europe. According to a UN Security Council report in October 2002, high level political, military and business networks stole DRC's gold, timber, coltan and diamonds, and transferred at least \$5 billion of assets from the state mining sector to private western companies, including 18 British firms such as Anglo American, De Beers and Barclays Bank, as well as US, Belgian, Canadian, Swiss and German firms (*Observer*, 6 February 2005). In 2000 alone, Rwanda earned \$23m from its main official export earners tea and coffee, but \$250m from looting gold, diamonds and coltan.

However, despite his EU backing, in May 2007 Kabila announced a review of 63 mining contracts signed between 1998 and 2006. In March 2008, the Revisitation Committee published its findings that all the contracts would be revoked and renegotiated, or were null and void as they were all fraudulent. This affected British mining giants CAMEC and Anglo Gold Ashanti. In May British firm Tullow Oil had its concessions in Lake Albert revoked.

Then in May 2008, DRC state-owned mining company Gecamines signed contracts totalling \$9bn for infrastructure development with two Chinese firms who said their loan was 'based on mutual benefit and joint development', in return for a 68% stake to provide 10m tons of copper and 0.5m tons of cobalt to China. Chinese capitalism is a threat to imperialist interests and the US may well have decided to act. On 18 November Nkunda sought a 'review of commercial contracts' between China and DR Congo. France, acting through the EU, is not prepared to see Britain and the US carve up all DRC's resources and control Africa for themselves. Another genocide is looming in DRC and Britain is in it up to its neck. ■

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Congolese refugees forced to move again as violence intensifies

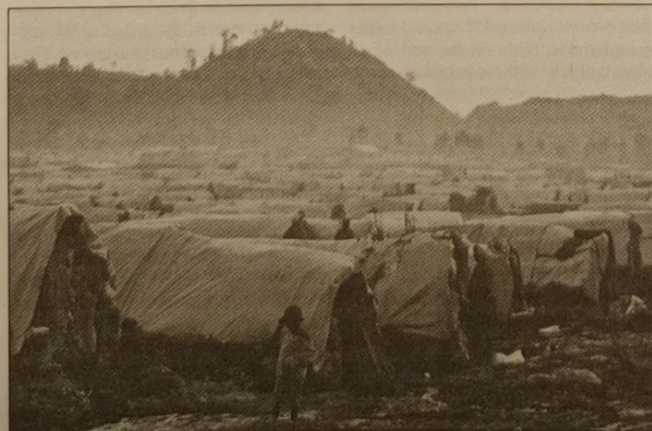
bridgehead into DRC (population 60m). The DRC owns a third of the world's reserves of cobalt, used in jet engines and rechargeable batteries, and 80% of the world's reserves of coltan, a rare mineral ore essential for mobile phones, laptops and wireless communication as well as aviation and nuclear energy, and one tenth of all copper deposits, essential for electronic, construction and biomedical applications. Significant oil deposits were discovered in Lake Albert, bordering Uganda, in 2006 and Lake Kivu, bordering Rwanda, contains 65bn cubic metres of methane, the principal component of natural gas and a potential source of energy. These resources, in addition to huge deposits of gold, uranium, diamonds and cassiterite (tin oxide), are vital for the developed industrial economies of the advanced capitalist countries. It is control of these resources by the imperialists and their local allies, rather than 'ethnic rivalry' between Hutus and Tutsis, that lies behind the constant wars that have raged in DRC since 1996. All the fighting has been around areas where these resources abound, especially deep inside eastern DRC, miles away from the border the Rwandan army claims to be protecting. 1,500 people die daily. Since 1996, over 6.4 million people in DRC have died, the majority from malnutrition, hunger and diseases, as paramilitary forces or 'rebels', of which there are about 22 groups, fight over

1959 to 1961 the first Rwandan genocide led to 200,000 Tutsis fleeing to Uganda and Congo, and a new Hutu elite came to power, supported by France.

By 1987, Rwandan refugees had formed the racist Tutsi 'rebel' Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) with the aim of returning to power in Rwanda. Members included former Ugandan army officer and current Rwandan president Kagame. When Museveni came to power in Uganda in 1986, military training and funding for RPF increased from Britain and the US. French president François Mitterrand increasingly feared 'an Anglo-Saxon plot to oust France from the region' (*Independent*, 3 July 2007).

In October 1990, Uganda invaded Rwanda with Kagame's RPF rebels leading the way. A guerilla war ensued. Desperate to hold onto its foothold in the resource-rich region, France flew in troops and weapons, and stepped up military training for the Rwandan army (FAR) and a racist Hutu paramilitary force, the *Interahamwe*. The assassination of Rwandan President Habyarimana in April 1994 by the RPF provided a trigger for a well-planned genocide by the Hutu government to be unleashed, with about one million people massacred by French-backed forces. But despite France's efforts, the RPF took power. France flew in troops to provide safe exits out of Rwanda to Belgium, Germany and France for the fleeing Hutu regime under cover of the peace-keeping *Operation Turquoise*. French soldiers also massacred many Rwandans and raped many women (*Independent*, 31 August 2007). The RPF was installed as the new government in July 1994 as the officials and soldiers of the previous Hutu regime fled to Zaire along with two million refugees. The RPF then massacred a further 45,000 people in 'revenge killings' to remove any potential opposition to the new regime; these killings were covered up by the UN and the US. Laurent Nkunda fought with the RPF.

Hence France was replaced as the major imperialist power in Rwanda by Britain and the US. Britain has become the largest donor, spending £46m in 2007. In January 2008, for-



A 'displaced people's camp' in Mugunga, on the outskirts of Goma

AFGHAN WAR

Problems deepen as more troops are promised

In October, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, commander of the 16th Air Assault Brigade, told the *Daily Telegraph*, 'We're not going to win this.' He had just returned from his second tour of duty in Afghanistan. Three months earlier Carleton-Smith had claimed that the Taliban leadership had been 'decapitated' and that the 'tipping point' in favour of the occupation forces had been reached.

The imperialist's exasperation was emphasised by Major Will Pike, a former serving officer in Afghanistan, saying, 'No real thought is going into what we are doing and why. Who is in charge of the campaign in Afghanistan – the Secretary of State for Defence, the Foreign Secretary or the Minister for International Development?' Major Pike highlighted the dilemma for British imperialism, the second biggest imperial power in terms of overseas assets, yet militarily too weak to defend its global interests without riding on the back of the US. He said, 'If the UK wants to play on this stage, across the world, then the will has to be backed by the resources. Otherwise it's a bit of a con.'

JIM CRAVEN reports.

Afgghanistan is central to US ambitions of global domination. It is at the crossroads of Eurasia. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Adviser, wrote in 1997, 'A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions ... most of the world's physical wealth is there ... [including] about three quarters of the world's known energy reserves'. The US wants to replace Russian influence in the central Asian republics and secure an oil pipeline from them through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the sea, avoiding an alternative route through Iran.

NATO and the Afghan government want to delay or even scrap next year's elections. One option is to call a *Loya Jurga*, a tribal council of (all male) warlords and elders, that would overrule elections. A NATO official said they wanted to avoid 'that whole messy business of democracy'. The British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, remarkably claimed, 'The foreign forces [ie US and NATO] are ensuring the survival of a regime that would collapse without them. In doing so they are slowing down and complicating an eventual end to the crisis.' He stated that 'an acceptable dictator' would be the best solution!

Problems have deepened for the occupying forces in recent months. Despite an increase in US/NATO troops of 7,000 since the spring, bringing the total to around 52,000, they continue to lose ground to the Afghan resistance, which now controls large parts of the country in the south and east. The 190-mile highway from Kandahar to Kabul, described by the US State Department as 'the most visible sign of America's post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan', is now impossible to pass safely without a military guard. The number of imperialist forces killed in 2008, 254 by the end of October, is likely to be close to

the number killed in Iraq by the end of the year.

The imperialists have increasingly relied on air power. The number of bombs dropped – 1,853 in the first half of 2008 – was more than in the whole of 2006. This does not include cannon and rocket fire from aircraft or helicopter raids. Air attacks have caused indiscriminate death and destruction among Afghan civilians. According to UN figures, 1,445 civilians were killed between January and August 2008, up 39% on 2007. At least 577 deaths were due to pro-government forces. Deaths from air strikes have tripled since 2006. On 8 November, 40 people attending a wedding party at Shah Wali Kot in South Kandahar were killed by a missile attack. The US military invariably denies the evidence, claiming only Taliban fighters have been killed in such attacks, even when faced with photographs of shattered bodies and distraught relatives. The Shah Wali Kot dead included 24 children.

Ineffective government

The Afghan puppet government has little power outside Kabul. It is dominated by tribal warlords and corrupt officials, many of them drug dealers. President Karzai's brother is among them. The top police officer in Kabul, it is believed, has a property portfolio worth \$2 million accrued from bribes. The last head of the Afghan anti-corruption office was jailed in Las Vegas for selling heroin.

Government ministers and their cronies have stolen most of the aid intended for reconstruction. They have done little or nothing for the Afghan people. Unemployment is at least 40%. Life expectancy is just 43 years, while infant mortality is 135 per 1,000 live births. 60,000 Afghan children are addicted to opium and 100,000 have been disabled or severely physically affected due to the war. Tuberculosis levels, indicating poor diet and living conditions, are among



Demonstration against US attacks on the Pakistan border areas, Peshawar, September 2008

the highest in the world. Over eight million Afghans face hunger this winter. The adult literacy rate is 23.5% and 12.6% for women. These are appalling facts. Not surprisingly, the puppet government is intensely unpopular among Afghan people.

Imperialists attack Pakistan

The imperialists claim that the semi-autonomous tribal areas between Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and the Afghan border are being used to train resistance fighters and provide them with safe passage into Afghanistan. Since March, US and British special forces have been carrying out reconnaissance missions in the tribal areas. US unmanned drones have launched rocket attacks there, at least 20 this autumn, with devastating consequences for the local people. Several massacres of civilians, including many children, have occurred. In two days at the end of October at least 42 people were killed in three attacks in North and South Waziristan.

Earlier in 2008, President Bush gave orders to allow US special forces to undertake 'raids on the soil of an important ally without permission'. In

September, the US admitted that their ground forces had carried out an attack inside Pakistan. Forty US Special Operations Forces killed 15 to 20 people in the village of Musa Nika in South Waziristan on 3 September.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani called the US attacks 'a form of terrorism'. President Zardari warned the new US head of Central Command, General Petraeus, that the attacks caused 'outrage' and were creating a credibility gap between US rhetoric and reality. Briefly Pakistan's government cut the supply route from Peshawar to the Khyber Pass through which passes 85% of the oil for NATO troops. These were empty gestures to try and satisfy the intense anti-Americanism growing among the Pakistani people. The new Pakistani government knows it would not last long without US backing. The US could dump President Zardari whenever it liked, just as it abandoned his predecessor, President Musharraf.

The US demands that the Pakistan armed forces take stronger action against those in the tribal areas supporting the Afghan resistance. They believe that sections of the Pakistan

'The anger of the Pakistani poor, directed against a ruling class seen to be co-operating with the US, could bring with it greater opposition to US military action in the country and further support for the Afghan resistance.'



army and the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) support the Taliban. Benazir Bhutto's government supported the Taliban government in the 1990s. Indeed, the Taliban were more or less the creation of the Pakistanis and the CIA at the time of the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Sections of the Pakistani ruling class regard Afghanistan almost as another province of Pakistan and the Taliban as one of their assets.

New heads of the Pakistan army and of the ISI have been appointed. Since mid-August up to 120,000 Pakistani troops have been fighting in parts of the tribal areas and the Swat Valley. At least 200,000 Pakistani villagers have had to flee their homes because of the fighting. Some 20,000 have gone to Afghanistan. The Taliban control about 80% of the Swat Valley. In October, Maulvi Omar, a spokesman for around 40 Taliban groups offered talks with the Pakistani government, but it refused.

US imperialists may think they are receiving more support from the Pakistani forces but they face huge problems in the country. Suicide bombings in Pakistan in the first eight months of 2008 killed more people than in Iraq or Afghanistan. There have been over 100 since July 2007. The destruction of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad by the Pakistani Taliban followed news of US attacks in Pakistan.

Crisis for Pakistani people

Together with hostility to the US/NATO occupation of Afghanistan and their attacks on Pakistan, there is growing anger among Pakistanis at the divide between rich and poor. Officially, 25% of the Pakistani population live below the poverty line of \$1 a day. Oxfam calculates that the number of poor has grown from 66 million to 77 million out of a population of 169 million. 60% of all Pakistani children are born underweight due to malnutrition.

The capitalist economic crisis is hitting Pakistan hard, reducing foreign reserves to \$4.5 billion, equivalent to six weeks' imports. Foreign investment has fled the country and government borrowing has risen 100% in three months. Inflation is running at 25-30% and the value of the rupee has fallen by a third during 2008. There are frequent power blackouts and food prices have doubled. Equity values have plummeted and small investors have been ruined. The police were called in to guard the stock exchange. The US National Intelligence Council's assessment of Pakistan is 'no money, no energy, no government'. Pakistan, it claimed, was 'on the edge'.

The potential for social unrest worries the Pakistani ruling class. Main opposition leader Nawaz Sharif said, 'Pakistan is going through the worst crisis of its history'. The anger of the Pakistani poor directed against a ruling class seen to be co-operating with the US could bring with it greater opposition to US military action in the country and further support for the Afghan resistance.

Change of strategy?

The imperialists are being forced to reassess their strategy in Afghanistan.

A year ago the US was adamant that they would not talk to 'terrorists' and two British/UN diplomats were forced to leave the country after holding secret talks with the Taliban. Now US Defence Secretary Robert Gates and General Petraeus say they could 'ultimately' contemplate talks with the Taliban and reconciliation as part of a political outcome. A British Ministry of Defence spokesman claimed, 'We have always said there is no military solution in Afghanistan. Insurgencies are ultimately solved at the political level, not by military means. We fully support President Karzai's efforts to bring the disaffected into the mainstream'. This is a reference to Karzai's talks with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord who was backed by the US and Pakistan against the Soviet forces but who has supported the resistance for the past couple of years. Karzai is also said to have asked Taliban leader Mullah Omar to stand in next year's presidential elections. Saudi Arabia has offered to broker further talks. Karzai's brother and former Pakistan Prime Minister Sharif met members of the Taliban at a dinner at King Abdullah's palace, though the Taliban denied talks had taken place. The official Taliban position is that there will be no talking until all foreign troops have left the country.

Despite its rhetoric about 'terrorists' the US would have no qualms about working with a Taliban government in Kabul. After all, it negotiated with the previous Taliban government about the oil pipeline and, as late as May 2001, approved \$40 million in aid to help the Taliban regime act as a Sunni buffer against Iran. Russia, China and Iran, unhappy at the prospect of a long-term US presence in Afghanistan, have been holding joint talks.

NATO rivalry

The imperialists will want to negotiate from a position of strength. The Bush administration has said it will send another marine battalion and a combat brigade to Afghanistan and has asked NATO to contribute as well. General David Richards, new head of the British Army, called for 30,000 more troops in Afghanistan. Most NATO countries show little inclination to contribute further. As imperialist rivals as well as sometime partners, they see the US in difficulties while they stand to gain nothing themselves. French Defence Minister Herve Morin confirmed France will not send any more troops. A meeting of NATO countries in October failed to agree a funding plan for more helicopters in Afghanistan. The imperialists want to double the size of the Afghan army over five years but have had to ask Japan and NATO to pay the \$17 billion costs; unlikely in the present economic crisis.

President-elect Barack Obama considers Afghanistan a 'good war'. He always wanted to 'get more troops into Afghanistan, put more pressure on the Afghan government to do what it needs to do, and eliminate some of the drug trafficking that's funding terrorism'. He did not criticise the recent attacks on Pakistan and Syria and has said he is willing to order unilateral attacks anywhere that is 'harbouring terrorists'. Obama proposes sending two or three additional brigades to Afghanistan and will ask Britain to send 3,000 more troops.

Last he falter, three weeks before the election, the *New York Times*, main mouthpiece of the so-called liberal section of the US ruling class, demanded that the next president 'end the downward spiral... the breakdown in central authority and the Taliban's rising power... the rampant corruption... and begin a swift and serious build-up of troops'.

All British, US and NATO forces out of Afghanistan!

IRAQ

Imperialists attempt an orderly retreat

Months of wrangling resulted in a vote for the Status of Forces Agreement between the US and Iraq by the Iraqi parliament on 27 November. 'All US forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than 31 December 2011.' Make no mistake: if this is enforced it will be a defeat for US imperialism. All US forces are to pull out from cities, towns and villages 'on a date no later than 30 June 2009'. From the boast of 'Mission Accomplished' in 2003 to the so-called victory of the surge in 2007, the reality is that the ground has given way beneath the imperialists' feet until they stumbled and fell and could no longer claim success. They have accepted a way out that allows them to claim an orderly withdrawal - leaving behind over one million Iraqi dead, and, thus far, 4,136 US soldiers killed.

Among the Agreement's clauses is the removal of foreign contractors' legal immunity, the insertion of an Iraqi veto over all US military operations from Iraqi territory and rules directing that no Iraqi can be arrested by US forces without Iraqi permission and requiring that any who are so arrested must be handed over to Iraqi forces within 24 hours. Of 275 members of parliament, 198 were present and of these 149 voted in favour of the Agreement. MPs who support Moqtada Al Sadr voted against, demanding an immediate withdrawal of US forces and shouting 'No, no, no to the US.' Sunni MPs supported the Agreement, winning the provision that a national referendum is held on it next summer. The original US proposals had been dismissed following widespread opposition among the Iraqi people, not least from supporters of Al Sadr who held weekly demonstrations against the continued presence of US troops. Iran had also tried to persuade Iraqi MPs to reject the original deal and the final Agreement demonstrates Iran's influence with the clause prohibiting US operations against other countries from Iraqi 'land, sea or air'.

President Bush and Prime Ministers Blair and Brown repeatedly said that any pull-out must be linked to conditions, for example that the Iraqi forces be judged capable or that US and British air forces retain the right to fly freely over Iraqi airspace and to use their military bases in Iraq. These conditions have gone; President Bush congratulated the Iraqi parliament, saying that the vote affirmed 'the growth of Iraq's democracy and increasing ability to secure itself'. The imperialists must present their adversary as success, until the end.

US attacks Syria

On 27 October US forces in Iraq attacked Syria. There was no consultation with the Iraqis. The Iraqi constitution does not allow the country to be used as a staging ground to attack its neighbours. A US officer in Washington later explained, 'We are taking matters into our own hands.'

The attack, involving four helicopters and 24 US special forces, took place five miles inside Syria on a civilian building under construction in the village of Sukkariyeh, close to the border crossing of Bou Kamal. Eight Syrians were killed. The US military said the target of the raid was Abu Ghadiyah, who they claimed facilitated the flow of men and supplies to Al Qaida in Iraq. The Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al Moualem condemned the attack as 'criminal and terrorist aggression'. The Secretary-General of the Arab League said the incursion 'should not pass without



Funeral for the victims of the US attack in Sukkariyeh Farm, Syria

clear condemnation'. Anti-US demonstrations followed with demonstrators shouting 'Down with Bush and the American enemy.'

Syria is on the US list of 'countries that support terrorism' and has suffered US sanctions since 2004. Israeli planes attacked what the Zionists claimed was a nuclear reactor site in the country last year. In recent months, though, Syria has had talks with Israel and taken diplomatic initiatives in Lebanon. Furthermore, there has been little activity by the Iraqi resistance recently in Anbar province next to the Syrian border. The US raid was meant to indicate that their military ambitions were not going to be restricted by paper agreements and that no country in the region was immune from attack. That the US has conceded the right in the Agreement to use Iraq as a base for attacking other countries indicates considerable pressure from the Iraqi people, Syria, Iran and other Middle Eastern countries on the governing Iraqi bourgeoisie to stand up to the US state.

Earlier this year, President Bush passed \$300-million plans to assist covert attacks by non-US forces (he was particularly keen to get British special forces involved) on 'an important close ally' without seeking permission. This deliberately vague formulation, apparently intended to suggest Pakistan, means General Petraeus, head of US Central Command, has power to order strikes throughout the Middle East from Afghanistan to the Lebanon and in Africa, where Kenya, Mali and Sudan are considered to be likely targets. Only in the case of an attack on Iran would Petraeus have to

inform the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

No end to suffering and violence

In Iraq the reduction in violence over the past few months, remains, as Petraeus consistently warned, 'fragile'. The thousands of former Sunni resistance fighters who sought protection from Shia death squads by joining the Al Sawah 'Awakening Movement' under US patronage are to come under Iraqi government control. The mainly Shia government has attacked and arrested Al Sawah members and stops them joining the Iraqi security forces. Disenchantment among the Sunnis and the need to protect themselves from government attacks could lead some of them to rejoin the resistance. Sunni MPs insistence on a referendum on the Agreement in the summer is intended to serve as an insurance against Shia domination.

Baghdad remains a series of fortified townships, each surrounded by concrete walls and checkpoints that create huge delays for the local people. Unemployment is running at 50-60%. Most of the city receives only five hours electricity a day and half the population has no access to clean water. In the summer, seven people died in a cholera outbreak south of Baghdad. It was caused by corrupt officials buying outdated chlorine to 'purify' the water. Last year, nearly 5,000 people fell ill in another cholera epidemic.

Patrick Cockburn of the *The Independent* described the Iraqi government as a 'patronage machine'. It employs two million people, more

than under Saddam, and receives \$80 billion a year in oil revenues, yet it cannot supply food, electricity and water to its people. Last year it spent barely a quarter of its \$12 billion reconstruction budget. In 2009 the Iraqi government plans to spend \$78.9 billion on reconstruction, welfare and utilities; whether it will do so remains to be seen.

Security has improved in the past year, but this is only relative to the mass slaughter of 2007. Hundreds of people are still killed every month. In October, Saleh Al Auqaelli, an MP and supporter of Moqtada Al Sadr, was killed by a bomb at an Iraqi army checkpoint. Both the Badr militia, which supports the rival Shia ISCI party, and US forces were implicated. When an Iraqi soldier was killed by the resistance, also in October, the Iraqi security forces arbitrarily arrested 23 local men. Of the 17 eventually released one had smashed teeth, another had a broken arm. All had been tortured. In Kazimiriya, a Shia district of Baghdad, a secret hanging chamber has been uncovered where hundreds of suspected members of the Iraqi resistance have been executed without trial.

The Turkish government recently extended its mandate to attack PKK guerrilla bases in northern Iraq. The PKK has waged a long struggle for an independent Kurdish state. Its homeland was split between Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran by British imperialists in the 1920s. Turkish forces have made several attacks across the Iraqi border in the past year.

The Kurdish north of Iraq was an area previously considered relatively free of violence. But since the end of September, thousands of Iraqi Christians have fled from sectarian attacks there. At least 11 people have been killed. The number of Christians in the area has fallen over the past five years from 800,000 to 250,000. They have joined the over four million Iraqis who have been forced to leave their homes because of the war, more than two million of them having left the country. So far, despite an Iraqi government campaign, only 20,000 families have returned. Not surprising, since most no longer have homes to go to and several of those returning have been the victims of sectarian killings.

Of the 34,000 Iraqi doctors registered in 2003, 2,000 have been killed and 20,000 have fled the country. The Iraqi government offered to allow those who returned to carry weapons! Dr Fatin Mohammed, however, said 'Doctors abroad should stay where they are because the situation there is a hundred times better than it is here'.

The Iraqi government has cancelled six 'no-bid' service contracts signed with western oil companies earlier this year because the multinationals were insisting on first refusal on subsequent long-term contracts. However, the push to grab Iraqi oil continues. Shell has opened a secret office in Baghdad and signed a multi-billion dollar contract (49% stake) to process natural gas in southern Iraq. In October the Iraqi oil minister travelled to London for further discussions on contracts.

Labour Defence Secretary John Hutton has announced there will soon be a 'fundamental change' in the British role in Iraq. Having been responsible for much of the violence in the south and having been effectively defeated and kicked out of Basra by the Iraqi resistance, British forces will be 'moving towards an increased focus on military training and education'. Commenting on revelations that the top 10 military officers receive up to £225,000 a year in pay and share £18 million a year in other benefits, a Ministry of Defence spokesperson argued, 'Its value should be judged by the achievements of our armed forces in helping to bring stability to Iraq and Afghanistan.' All US, British and foreign troops out of Iraq!

Jim Craven

Improving access to land and cultivation in Cuba

On 23 November 2008, a collective of workers and farmers in San Agustín in Camaguey province, central-eastern Cuba, celebrated the first official hand-over of land in 'usufruct' (as a free loan) with a day of voluntary work in homage to Che Guevara. HELEN YAFFE reports.

13 farmers each received their property titles in return for a commitment to cultivate 12.5 acres of land with vegetables, grains and fruits, as well as breeding cattle and other animals. This is part of a new campaign to give access to currently idle land to Cubans who apply to turn it to production. The producers do not pay rent, nor can they purchase the land, but it is granted in usufruct for ten years to individuals and for 25 years for collectives and cooperatives. The land cannot be sold or transferred to third parties and the new farmers of the land must pay taxes and sell an agreed proportion of their produce to the state at fixed prices.

This measure reflects a drive to increase production – without perma-

nently changing property relations. It does not signify a preference for 'private' or decentralised production. This point was underlined by President Raul Castro who, whilst introducing the new law in July 2008, told the National Assembly: 'I am a firm admirer and defender of large socialist state enterprises, be they agricultural, industrial, or otherwise.'

Low salaries and high food prices are a principal concern for the government and the people in Cuba, as they are for an increasing proportion of the world today, because although the population is protected by highly subsidised state provision covering all necessities, 84% of the basic food basket is imported, according to Magaly Calvo, Vice



Minister of Economics (*Granma*, 26 February 2007). As a result of the dramatic global rise in prices, the volume of food imported in 2007 cost an extra \$1.1bn to import in 2008, seriously jeopardising the country's investment

plans. In addition, Cubans augment their ration allowance with produce bought in markets and shops at relatively high prices. In the case of domestic produce, high prices mainly reflect low efficiency in agricultural and

manufacturing output. In order for prices to go down, production and productivity must increase.

In July 2008, a survey by the Ministry of Agriculture's municipal offices calculated that there were over two million hectares (about five million acres) of idle or under-utilised land nationwide. This will change quickly with the new law. In one week in September, 445,347 hectares of land in usufruct were applied for by 34,661 individuals or legal entities throughout the country to exploit free of charge. The vast majority of applications (26,800) were from individuals who have never owned land. They can receive up to 13.42 hectares (about 33 acres) each.

This will provide necessary employment for thousands of highly qualified agronomists who will be needed to support these new farmers with their expertise, potentially taking many of them out of other employment and incorporating them into the state sector. New farmers will also receive help from the Credit and Service Cooperatives and from the National Association of Small Farmers. Those who hold land that is already in full production can expand their farms to 40 hectares (about 99 acres). 45% of land applications are for dairy-farming, an industry being stimulated with higher prices paid by the state for milk and meat. Another 41% of applicants intend to cultivate diversified crops.

Raising the age of retirement

In December 2008, Cubans will find out the results of a national consultation on proposals to raise the age of retirement by five years – from 60 to 65 years for men and from 55 to 60 years for women – when it is discussed in the National Assembly. The reform under consideration was proposed by Raul Castro in the July meeting of the Assembly, the highest decision-making body in Cuba with over 600 representatives from local areas and different sectors of society.

The current retirement ages relate to the much lower life expectancy for Cubans at the start of the revolutionary process that has transformed their human development indicators. Cuba is now categorised as a 'high development' country by the United Nations. The Social Security Law reforms are necessary to cope with an aging population – Cuba has the oldest population in the Americas and it continues to grow annually with rising life expectancy and reduced birth rates. Under current trends, by 2025 a quarter of the population will be over 60 years and there will be 770,000 fewer people of working age than in 2007. The proposal is part of the vital push to dramatically increase national production in

order to reduce dependency on imports, whilst increasing exports and lowering domestic prices.

Throughout September and October, 80,000 assemblies were held to discuss the proposal involving 3.4 million workers in work centres throughout the island. The fact that these debates have involved over 30% of the island's population – 70% of the total workforce – is another demonstration of how a socialist state endeavours to ensure true workers' democracy. The system contrasts starkly with ours in Britain where, from the Home Office's National Identity Card Scheme, to mass privatisations, to the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the government consistently ignores public opposition to its decisions. Here we are passive subjects, in socialist Cuba they are active citizens!

If approved by the National Assembly in December, the changes will be implemented gradually over the following years. Speaking to a committee of the National Assembly, Social Security Minister Alfredo Morales said he hoped to be able to increase pensions by 20%. This second reform would be implemented alongside the first. Already, a new law introduced in

July authorised retired school and university teachers who are able to return to work to receive the full salary, in addition to their pension. This is a provisional measure introduced to bridge the gap until the new retirement ages are implemented. It is also necessary to alleviate pressure on young and inexperienced 'emergency teachers', introduced with the decision that class sizes must be cut to a 20 student maximum. The government is also studying ways to increase the birth rates to offset the aging population.

Juventud Rebelde, newspaper of the Union of Young Communists (UJC), pointed out that 'while in 1970 there were 7.1 active workers in Cuba for each retiree...as of 2007 it had declined to 3.2 to 1 [and] the projection for 2025 is only 2.3 workers for every retiree.' *Granma* said that because of this decreasing ratio the retirement reforms must be taken up to ensure the country can 'achieve greater economic development, which is the only way to continue supporting its high social expenditures, among them those of Social Security and Welfare.' In December we will see if this bill gets passed by the National Assembly, but until then we can simply marvel at the organisation and political involvement of everyday Cuban people.

Luke Lucas

UN annual vote on the blockade



'You are alone, isolated!' Cuban Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque told outgoing US President Bush at the UN General Assembly on 29 October 2008 after the vote on Cuba's proposal to lift the US blockade of Cuba. The overwhelming majority of votes were against the US blockade of Cuba for the 16th year in a row – so why is the blockade still in place? Yet again, the US has used its veto on the Security Council to overturn the decision. Some democracy! Of 192 UN member states, 185 voted in favour of the resolution to end the blockade. This is the highest vote yet. Three voted against: US, Israel and Palau (population 21,000); two abstained, Marshall Islands (population 61,000) and Micronesia (population 108,000).

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, the US blockade is increasingly recognised to have failed to destroy the revolutionary process. However, the blockade, which is illegal under international law, has resulted in massive avoidable economic hardships for the Cuban people over the last five decades. In 2006, Cuba compiled a comprehensive report detailing how the blockade had cost the Cuban economy over \$86 billion since 1960. It remains to be seen what direction Barack Obama's administration will take with regards to Cuba and the blockade.

End the US blockade of Cuba now!

Hannah Callier

Three strikes in 70 days: hurricanes batter Cuba



In early November, Hurricane Paloma hit Cuba, the third major hurricane in ten weeks. Cuba yet again confirmed that socialism prioritises people. More than 1.2 million people in total were evacuated, no-one was left unprotected and no-one died.

'Paloma' means dove in Spanish, but Raul Castro nicknamed the hurricane 'Imperial Eagle' as he travelled round with other heads of the government and the army to visit some of those affected in the eastern provinces. In the small



coastal town of Guayabal in Las Tunas, 100 of the 273 homes were totally destroyed and the rest damaged by coastal flooding with waves a metre high travelling 700 metres inland. In Santa Cruz del Sur in Camaguey, nearly 10,000 homes were damaged including 1,353 which totally collapsed. Many towns were left without electricity and telephone lines; roads were damaged, and agriculture was devastated in some areas and there was severe flooding. The Cuban people responded with their

unwavering commitment and complete mobilisation to initiate recovery.

Cuba was already reeling from Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. The total cost of the damage inflicted by the three hurricanes is estimated at \$10 billion, with half a million homes damaged. Raul Castro said: 'We have the will to overcome, to confront these natural phenomena and draw the relevant lessons, given that we have to live with them, but the most important, the principal thing, is life.'

Cubans are now battling to reduce future damage and to find practical solutions to the problem of increasingly frequent and more violent hurricanes. Pinar del Rio province had 102,000 homes damaged by hurricanes between 2002 and 2005. 85,000 homes had been restored before the 'nuclear strike' – as Fidel Castro described the force of Hurricanes Ike and Gustav – which hit

the region in September damaging another 98,000 homes.

Now in Pinar del Rio engineers and construction workers are installing for the first time and on a large scale a new type of roofing, more resistant to strong winds. The system has a simple and fast assembly procedure which does not require cranes and heavy operating equipment. The aim is to restore over 2,000 houses by the end of 2008 using this technology. To accelerate the process, local people are getting involved in reconstruction and brigades are being formed to train people from other provinces. The country is mobilising – only a revolutionary, empowered, disciplined and literate society could withstand these onslaughts and move forward. *Viva Cuba socialista!*

Hannah Callier

To make a financial donation to Cuba's recuperation process, see **Rock around the Blockade's** website at www.ratb.org.uk

News in brief

Oil-lay!

In mid-October 2008, Cuban oil officials announced that the country's recoverable oil reserves off the Gulf Coast of Cuba were estimated at 20 billion barrels – enough to convert Cuba into an oil exporter. Production from these reserves is planned to begin in late 2009. Already Cuba produces 60,000 barrels of oil daily – covering 50% of its energy needs – and 20,000 barrels equivalent of natural gas from onshore wells along its northern coast.

Chinese-Cuban ties strengthened

Chinese President Hi Jintao arrived in Cuba in November 2008 for his second visit to the island. During his visit, China and Cuba signed documents enhancing cooperation in the economic sphere and in the education sector. In 2007, two-way trade between the two countries was worth \$2.2 billion.

VENEZUELA

PSUV success in regional and local elections

ALVARO MICHAELS

The first electoral test of the new United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in the 23 November 2008 regional and local elections was a significant success. The government now faces the task of deepening the revolution as world capitalism struggles with its crisis.

vote's abstentions. President Chavez and his supporters have now won 13 of 14 national elections and referenda held since 1998. In 40 years prior to Chavez's election, Venezuela staged only 15 national electoral contests.

In the 2004 regional elections, the opposition refused to stand, so this time some seats in reactionary wealthier and middle class districts were ex-

norships, one of two Metropolitan mayoralties – 41 more than in 2004 – and the majority of the 251 local state legislature seats up for election.

The level of democratic choice and debate is much higher than elsewhere in Latin America, with 17,308 candidates competing for the 603 positions. Around 295 political parties participated. 134 observers from Latin American states observed 100% computerised voting, with every voter getting a receipt. As Chavez said, 'Who can say there is a dictatorship in Venezuela?'

Clear polarisation

The results show clear political polarisation. The wealthy and much of the middle class want to prevent any improvement in living conditions for 80% of the population. PSUV candidates defeated incumbent opposition governors in three states (Guarico, Sucre, Aragua). The opposition retained its governorships of tourist centre Nueva Esparta and the oil state Zulia; it also won in Tachira, bordering Colombia, and Carabobo. Its victorious candidate in Miranda was Henrique Capriles Radonsky, who tried to burn down the Cuban embassy during the April 2002 coup attempt. Significantly, the opposition won the Greater Caracas mayoral election and took over a fourth municipality to add to the three wealthiest already in its hands – Chacao, Baruta, and El Hatillo. The opposition won in Sucre with 56% of the vote. Sucre includes the vast Petare slum.

Socialism and realism

Venezuela's diversification away from US imperialism's grasp has alarmed President Jefferson's political descendants. US imperialism has backed coup and assassination attempts against President Chavez, and has updated its military 'options' against his government. It has supported bombings in Venezuela and provided asylum for the perpetrators. In July 2008, 'to back counter-terrorism operations', the US Fourth Naval Fleet (disbanded in 1950) resumed operations in the Caribbean and along the length of Latin America. In response, Venezuela is carrying out joint naval manoeuvres with Russian warships in the Caribbean. The arrival of Russian fighter aircraft and President Medvedev's tour of Latin America, following Venezuela's \$4.4bn purchase of arms (including a Kalashnikov factory) from Russia, have put a spoke into the wheel of any immediate direct US military intervention. November's Russia-Venezuela agreement to develop nuclear power will block any attempts by the US to claim 'terrorist' motives by Venezuela. On 26 November at the Third Extraordinary Summit of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) Chavez proposed the creation of a regional monetary bloc with its own currency to break the US dollar's hegemony. US imperialism is being thrown on the defensive.

Workers' unmet demands for clean drinking water and proper waste collection, together with a rejection of high crime levels, were central to the opposition campaign. Caracas' largest and poorest municipality, Libertador, was won by former Vice-President Jorge Rodriguez, a Chavez supporter.

The next tasks

The PSUV victory creates the basis for a socialist programme with which to respond to the deepening imperialist crisis. Most Venezuelan firms are heavily indebted to the state and local banks. The government must lever these firms into changes that democratise operations at a local level and redesign production and distribution to meet the masses' needs. \$40bn reserves will provide elbow room, but constraining the capitalist class and their links with international capital, through trade and credits, is essential. It will mean a continuing struggle against the private owners' nine-year campaign of sabotage. Exchange controls must be extended, further regulating import and export contracts to inhibit the destructive effects of the world market on the economy. The government knows that a democratic transformation of inept and reactionary bureaucracy, inherited from previous regimes, is essential.

The 70% fall in oil prices has hit Venezuela's principal export earnings. However, the government has maintained most of its funding for social programmes and continued its nationalisation of major cement, steel, financial and other capitalist property. Working class voters were more selective regarding 'Chavista' candidates – rewarding candidates who met popular demands for health, education and other local services and rejecting those who did not, such as the outgoing Governor of Miranda and the Mayor of Caracas.

Opposition-controlled state governorships and municipal mayors will attack the national government, demanding more resources, but this will expose contradictions in their anti-socialist propaganda. Either the global crisis will drive political parties along the road of constructing a socialist state, or Venezuela will return to the imperialist domination with all its horrific consequences.



PSUV supporters in a pre-election rally, Caracas, November 2008

With a 65.45% turnout of almost 17 million registered voters (exceeding all previous non-presidential elections) and 95% of the vote announced, the PSUV and its allies increased their vote by 1.1 million over the last national turnout – the December 2007 constitutional amendment referendum. This reversed that

pected to change hands, with the help from much of the media. The PSUV and its coalition allies won 58% (5.5m) of the popular vote for a total of 603 elected positions. The opposition received 200,000 fewer votes than in the 2007 referendum. Pro-Chavez parties won 17 of the 22 gover-

ECUADOR

Epoch-making change

FIDEL NARVAEZ

An increasing number of Latin American countries are opting out of the neoliberal system. In the words of Bolivian Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, 'the continent of Latin America is today in the vanguard of global mobilisation and is asking the questions that really matter – "How do we escape the neoliberal model? And then what?"'

The global financial crisis, which springs from the speculative economies of the 'North', gives such questions a renewed urgency. In the absence of a united response, every Latin American nation is having to find its own answer. For Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa that has meant joining Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia in stating that the only escape strategy must be what they call 'socialism for the 21st century'. Even if this is a model whose 'theory' will only be tested as it develops, the new Ecuadorian constitution approved by national referendum on 28 September 2008 offers the basis for the construction of a new society, founded on a participative democracy, with an economy based on human need, planned by the state, and no longer dominated by the market and consumption.

The new Ecuadorian constitution is a response to the demands of decades of popular struggle which culminated in the election of President Correa in November 2006. In barely two years, Correa's government has achieved significant political, social and economic changes. These include regaining state control of national resources, a key factor in a country dependent on the export of petrol; free education guaranteed up to university level; universal health

care and free medicine for serious illnesses and total health cover for the disabled; social security for housewives and casual workers and paternity leave for men.

This country, so rich in biodiversity, is scarred by neoliberalism's devastating footprint. A new economic model will have to respect the environment and live in harmony with nature. Ecuador now has the first constitution in the world to accord rights to the environment, so that any person will be able to table demands in its name and insist on wholesale restoration of the natural environment.

Every revolution contains its own contradictions and weaknesses. In defiance of international financial organisations, a no-holds-barred audit of external debt, the first of its kind to be initiated under the aegis of a government, is being carried out with a view to declaring the illegitimacy of that debt and a refusal to pay it. In demanding, in addition, the closing down of the US military base in Ecuador and abandoning its free trade agreement with the US, Ecuador has shown that it is ready to stand up to imperialism.

By declaring itself the first country to abandon visa requirements and open its doors to any person in the world, Ecuador is also sending out a clear anti-racist message.

President Rafael Correa described what is going on right now in Ecuador and throughout Latin America when he said 'We are not only living through an epoch of change, but, in truth, a whole change of epoch'.

Fidel Narvaez is an activist with the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights of Ecuador and the UK Ecuadorian Movement (MERU)

USA

Obama: one leap forward – and ten steps back

STEVE PALMER, US CORRESPONDENT

With Barack Obama's election, the United States has taken a big leap forward – not because it has elected a black person President, but because of what had to happen for him to be elected.

Leap forward

In its analysis of the US, FRFI has emphasised the changes in the US working class: the declining importance and power of the better-off workers, the labour aristocracy, and the growing significance of people of colour – particularly of the Latino population. We argued four years ago that the decline of the labour aristocracy and the political demoralisation of the most oppressed workers had undermined the class coalition with liberal middle-class whites which formed the political basis for the Democratic Party – and that this cost it the Presidential election in 2004: 'This Presidential election marked the exhaustion of the political strategy which the Democratic Party has been following for the last half-century' (FRFI 182). We have argued that political progress in the US can only be achieved if the left organises with the most oppressed workers, black people and Latinos.

The necessity of doing this and the possibilities it opens up have been demonstrated in the recent election. The Democratic primary election between Hillary Clinton and Obama was a competition between the old political strategy and a new one. Clinton was the candidate of the Democratic Party



machine. In order to succeed, Obama had to build a completely new political machine outside the traditional party structure, aim it at the youth and the black and Latino communities and go directly to the electors, knocking on doors and talking instead of relying on TV advertisements alone. This strategy included voter registration drives, bringing in several million new voters, generating huge enthusiasm, particularly amongst the black community. The campaign motto 'Yes we can!' was taken from the mobilising slogan used by the Latino community during the 'Mega marches' against immigration repression: 'Si se puede!'. The result was to inject real political life into these communities and bring them into national politics for the first time, not on the basis of some sectional issue like Civil Rights or immigration, but around the future of the United States. In the election, 55% of whites voted for McCain. But 72% of Latinos and 95% of blacks voted for Obama.

Change – for the worse?

Unfortunately, the change that brought Obama to power will bring few progressive changes to US foreign or domestic policy. The Bush coalition of the politically reactionary, the administratively incompetent and the mentally unhinged is being replaced by Obama's seasoned team of professional bourgeois politicians. But the imperialist agenda remains. Most of them are veterans of the Clinton administration and they include the current Defence Secretary, Robert Gates. The important post of Secretary of Homeland Security looks as if it will be filled by Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano, who has been fanning anti-immigrant hostility and actively helping militarise the border with Mexico by mobilising the National Guard. His National Security adviser is expected to be retired Marine General James Jones who used to work for John McCain. The anticipated Secretary of State (foreign secretary) is Hillary Clinton who is tight with the Zionist lobby – as is Obama himself. When Obama mentioned change, he forgot to add that he meant changing personnel, but only fine-tuning the policy – less Gitmo and Iraq, more Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has also spoken of reasserting US power in South America. Real change? No way.

Asked what Obama's progressive supporters would do, adviser Stephen Walt cynically responded: 'They have nowhere else to go'. Not yet, that is: it is up to the US left to take advantage of the huge political stir created by Obama's election to prepare for the deep disappointments which are coming and to point the awakening movement in the direction of real change.

HARMAN: making imperialism disappear

Capitalism's new crisis: what do socialists say?

Chris Harman,
Socialist Workers Party,
ISBN 9781905192458,
£1.50

This pamphlet, written by leading Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) ideologue Chris Harman, claims to present a socialist standpoint on the crisis. It does anything but. Its analysis of the crisis lacks coherence; in arguing for action on the series of demands which form the 'People before Profits Charter' it does not acknowledge, let alone explain, why the socialist and working class movement in Britain is at its weakest for more than a century. Furthermore, at a time when millions of people throughout the world are struggling against imperialism, the word imperialism does not appear once in the pamphlet's 34 pages.

Harman on capitalism

In order to understand the crisis, socialists have to be clear about the laws of motion of capitalism as a whole. Harman is not. Throughout the pamphlet he presents capitalism and its crisis from the standpoint of the individual capitalist who experiences life as one of constant competition. Marx understood that it is accumulation that is the driving force of capitalism, but for Harman: 'The driving force of capitalism is not the satisfaction of people's needs, but the competition between capitalists to make profits. Human needs are only satisfied insofar as doing so contributes to the profit drive' (p11). He repeats the point:

'However, the system... also escapes to a very great degree from the control of the capitalists themselves. Each time one capitalist succeeds in accumulating and expanding the means for producing wealth other capitalists are forced to do the same if they want to stay in business. Competition means they have no choice but to accumulate. They have to accumulate in order to make profits and make profits to accumulate in an endless process' (p13).

Marx showed that it is not competition that leads to accumulation, but accumulation – the expression of the social relations of production of capitalism – that necessarily provokes competition. Marx develops the concept of capital before consideration of 'many capitals' or their interaction through competition. He argues that 'a fall in the rate of profit connected with accumulation necessarily calls forth a competitive struggle... not vice versa' (*Capital* Vol 3 p251).

Harman replaces Marx's materialist analysis with idealism: capital is about 'drive' and 'choice', or lack of it, a 'competition to see who is greediest' (p3). Accumulation is not contained within the concept of capital but is the outcome of individual capi-

talists' desire to stay ahead of each other (p16). By presenting competition as the primary force within capitalism, Harman cannot analyse its tendency towards monopoly, conveniently avoiding that ultimate expression of monopoly capitalism, imperialism. But, by the same token, if we are just dealing with subjective questions as choice, drive or greed, might these not be held in check by some external intervention – say, by the state?

Not just an idealist, Harman is also an eclectic: he presents different explanations as to why a crisis occurs within capitalism. On page 3, greed is the 'the simple explanation for the cause of the crisis.' On page 14, however, it is because of a shortage of raw materials and components leading to rising costs. Later on in the same page it is because there is 'overproduction' – people cannot afford to buy the goods that have been produced. Further on, on page 16, it is because of a 'downward pressure on profit rates', a consequence itself of the competition process. Which 'cause' is decisive is never clear. For Marxists, however, the crisis occurs when:

'the expansion of production outruns its profitability, when existing conditions of exploitation preclude a further profitable capital-expansion or what amounts to the same thing, an increase of accumulation does not increase the mass of surplus-value or profits, an absolute over-accumulation has occurred and the accumulation process comes to a halt. This interruption of the accumulation or its stagnation constitutes the capitalist

weaken or eliminate the breakdown tendency. This explains its aggressive policies at home (an intensified attack on the working class) and abroad (a drive to transform foreign nations into tributaries). This is the hidden basis of the bourgeois rentier state, of the parasitic character of capitalism at an advanced stage of accumulation. Because the valorisation of capital fails in countries at a given, higher stage of accumulation, the tribute that flows in from abroad assumes ever greater importance. Parasitism becomes a method of prolonging the life of capitalism.' (Henryk Grossman: *The law of accumulation and breakdown of the capitalist system*, Pluto Press, pp122-3). [*By valorisation is meant the reproduction and expansion of capital through the exploitation of labour.]

Imperialism is not a political expe-

opportunities to lend money so as to reap vast amounts in interest payments, undertaking speculation, and raking in fees from overseeing takeovers and privatisations.' (p6)

A succinct statement of parasitism, but one which he cannot take further because he is never clear whether or not such activities produce profits, or whether they merely represent a claim on profits made elsewhere. He continues:

'In the 1970s and 1980s this had focused on the poorer countries of the world – lending them so much at such high interest rates that in order to keep up their repayments they were forced to borrow more at even higher interest rates. When such countries ran into trouble, the US, British and European Union governments sent in the IMF to bend them to its will, forcing them to open up their markets to giant Western firms, to sell off their industries to them, to privatise healthcare and to force the poorest parents to pay for their children's education' (p6).

This is indeed what happened, but at the time the SWP denied it was of any significance! They wrote then:

'In fact neither the export of capital nor the "super-profits" of imperialism play the role they once did... It is arguable that there has been no net capital export at all (to the Third World) for long periods in the recent past... Export of capital plays a vital role in modern capitalism but it is overwhelmingly export from one developed country to another. Its economic significance is entirely different...' (*Socialist Worker* 28 April 1979).

In other words, there is no imperialism, and the SWP could conclude that this export of capital 'cannot account for the "corruption" of "labour aristocracies"... by the crumbs of super-profits'. Therefore there was no opportunism, either.

Harman obscures the question as to whether the financial system he describes is productive of surplus value, or profit. On the one hand he says 'so long as the mountain of debt had produced profit there was nothing but praise for those who ruled over the financial system' (p8). On the other he says that 'the great bulk of [the financial system] is concerned only with the distribution of profits between sections of the capitalist class'. Yet if the

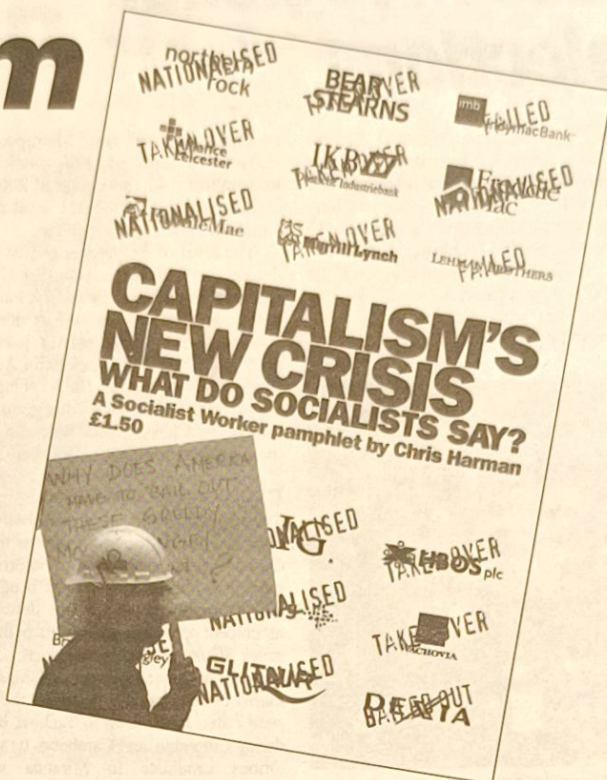
financial system does not produce profit, where is it all coming from? And, equally importantly, how have the ever-increasing number of workers in the financial sector been getting paid? After all, even Harman has to note that 'Finance and business services grew to account for four times as much investment as manufacturing and other industries and for almost a third of the economy in 2004' (p23); in 2005 they employed six million workers. So where on earth was all the money coming from? You will seek the answer in Harman's pamphlet in vain.

Marx is quite clear: labour in banking and financial services is entirely unproductive of surplus value or profit, and is financed out of the surplus value that is generated through the exploitation of workers employed productively, mainly in industry, manufacturing and transport. Yet, as Harman and many others have noted, there are fewer and fewer such workers in Britain, and their labour does not sustain even a small part of the edifice of British capitalism. There is only one coherent explanation: that Britain's vastly expanded financial sector and the many well-paid workers it employs are paid out of surplus value sucked in from overseas, specifically through the super-profits derived from the exploitation of productive workers throughout the world, the vast majority of them in the underdeveloped countries. And the figures show this: British imperialism's external assets expanded from £1,976 trillion (244% of GDP) in 1997 when Labour came to office to £6,486 trillion in 2006 (470% of GDP). This represents in Lenin's words, 'a gigantic usury capital' (see David Yaffe, *Britain – parasitic and decaying capitalism*, www.revolutionarycommunist.org/frfi/pages/194/FRFI_194_pdc.html). For Harman it is a closed book.

It is this 'gigantic usury capital' and the super-profits it extorted that explains why there is no socialist movement in Britain today. Between 1992 and 2006 such super-profits had supported a continuous rise in living standards for the majority of the British working class and petit bourgeoisie. They did not have any need for socialism. So when Harman presents the People before Profit Charter and its basic demands, we have to ask what sort of movement will fight for it. Is it one that continues to make alliances with Labour lefts and their trade union leader allies on the latter's terms? Or one that breaks completely with that rotten tradition and stands firmly on anti-imperialist principles? Given the various Keynesian journalists and intellectuals, Labour MPs and trade union leaders who have endorsed the Charter, it is evident that Harman and the SWP think that the way forward is once again through compromise with the reformists.

At the end of the pamphlet, Harman says that 'The answer to the banking crisis is not regulation, or nationalisation of one or two banks, but a takeover of the whole banking system. And the nationalisation should be to stop repossessions and to stop debt strangling the world's poor...' (p33). He needs a reality check. At a time when the bankers are dictating to the government, he is calling on the government to nationalise in the interests of the working class what is essentially the core of British imperialism. However if you were a socialist you would have to add that in order to do this you would first have to overthrow the British state, and before that, you would have to build a new movement. This is what socialists should be saying: stand against imperialism and opportunism, break with Labour, and build a new working class movement based on these principles.

Robert Clough



Postal workers protesting against job cuts

crisis. It represents an *overproduction of capital with respect to the degree of exploitation*. From the point of view of profitability at this stage, existing capital is at the same time *too small and too large*. It is too large in relation to the existing surplus-value and it is not large enough to overcome the lack of surplus-value.' (Paul Bullock and David Yaffe, *Inflation, crisis and the post-war boom*, www.rcgrfi.plus.com/marxism/post-war-boom.html)

At a certain historical point the tendency towards capitalist breakdown or crisis expresses itself in the development of imperialism:

'The aggressive character of imperialism likewise necessarily flows from a crisis of valorisation.* Imperialism is a striving to restore the valorisation of capital at any cost, to

dient or whim, but arises from the crisis of accumulation. Whilst Lenin in his writings was primarily concerned with the political consequences of imperialism – the division of the world into oppressor and oppressed nations and the split in the working class in the oppressor nation – his standpoint followed from an understanding of the capitalist crisis which we have set out. Not to mention him in a pamphlet of this character demonstrates a complete lack of Marxist understanding and in the end justifies opportunism.

Yet, despite himself, Harman is forced to demonstrate the development of parasitism when he writes:

'Finance's destructive role has been quite simple. In its pursuit of profit it scoured the globe looking for

Government tightens legislative noose on foreign prisoners

On 1 August 2008 the section of the UK Borders Act 2007 which provides for 'automatic deportation' of 'foreign criminals' came into force and more legislation against foreign national prisoners is in the pipeline. These measures were introduced by the Labour government following the Tory and press outcry in April-May 2006 over the release of foreign national prisoners which led to the resignation of Home Secretary Charles Clarke.

NICKI JAMESON reports.

Clarke was forced to admit that during the previous seven years 1,023 foreign national prisoners, who had completed their sentences, had been released without being considered for deportation. As FRFI wrote at the time: 'The numbers concerned are in effect tiny – in the region of 90,000 people are released from prisons in England and Wales each year – and the danger to the public negligible, but it was more than enough for the government's opponents and the press. Just before the local elections, for papers like the *Daily Mail* the combination of bogeymen was irresistible. Every attack on terrorists, asylum seekers, benefit scroungers, out-of-control youths, drug addicts, paedophiles and generalised low-life scum came together in a mighty cacophony of outrage against 'foreign convicts' and the soft Home Office that had let them out.' (See www.revolutionarycommunist.org/frfi/pages/191/FRFI_191_pri.html)

Under the new law, non-European Economic Area (EEA) citizens who have been sentenced to a prison term of 12 months or more can now be automatically deported when their sentences end unless they can show that this would breach their rights under the Human Rights Act (HRA). This is not easy as many immigration judges take the stance that if someone with family in Britain is to be deported, their partner and children can move as well so



their rights under Article 8 (family life) are not breached.

Those prisoners who can successfully prove that they should not be deported, for example because they face the threat of torture or inhuman and degrading treatment contrary to Article 3 of the HRA now face a new problem. Although they will be able to contest the 'automatic deportation' provisions, if they then succeed in being released from custody, when Part Ten of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 comes into force they will find themselves subject to a new 'special immigration status'. This 'status' has similarities with that accorded to the handful of non-British citizens who were first indefinitely detained

without trial under the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act and, when this was declared unlawful by the House of Lords, subject to control orders.

Any non-EEA citizen who has been sentenced to two years' imprisonment or more or to any length sentence for a 'particularly serious' offence (including minor theft and criminal damage) can be 'designated' as subject to 'special immigration status'. So can any member of his or her family. It is a limbo status under which you have no right to be here but it is recognised that you cannot safely leave. Any rights someone who was settled in Britain had before going to prison such as rights to work, housing or benefits, are removed. The designated person may

be told where to live or work, required to report to the police, the Home Office or immigration officers, and subjected to a curfew, which may be electronically monitored. They may then be sent to prison for up to 51 weeks for breach of any of these conditions. They can be provided with support similar to NASS support, but not with cash support.

EEA citizens can also be deported following imprisonment in Britain, although they are exempt from automatic deportation and the decision to remove them has to be taken on grounds of 'public policy, public security or public health'. Irish citizens can only be deported in exceptional circumstances.

Double punishment

The reality is that Britain's laws are racist and discriminatory. Many foreign national prisoners do in fact want to return home as soon as possible, in particular those arrested at ports of entry. However, a significant number have been living here for many years, have families, had jobs and were settled here; some arrived as tiny children, have no recollection of their country of origin and do not speak its language. Some have fled torture and successfully sought asylum. For others their only criminal offence is itself tied up with their immigration situation as the Labour Party has turned a myriad of violations of immigration law, such as using false documents to travel or work into criminal and imprisonable offences. For all these people deportation is an additional and far worse punishment than imprisonment.

FRFI opposes all immigration controls. We believe that in an imperialist nation they can never be anything other than racist. This is never more starkly demonstrated than by a system in which British citizens convicted of a crime are punished once and foreign nationals who are convicted of the same crime are punished twice. ■

Legal Information in this article from *Pressure to deport foreign national prisoners* by Frances Webber, Institute of Race Relations www.irr.org.uk/2008/september/ha000007.html

INSIDE NEWS

Spot the extremist!

Official visitors to high security White-moor prison find themselves confronted by a white board giving a break-down of the population into the numbers of prisoners on each wing in the following categories: Category A, Muslim, 'gang-affiliated', Black and Minority Ethnic, and Terrorism Act. This labelling process renders any Muslim or non-white prisoner automatically suspect, automatically part of some group to be watched and goes hand-in-hand with repeated press stories over the past year about 'Muslim gangs' and Al Qaida prison recruiters. The Prison Service has set up an 'Extremism Unit' and has issued all members of staff with a handy, pocket-sized guide to spotting extremists. The guide is mainly concerned with Islamic militants, but also gives clues on identifying dissident Irish Republicans, loyalists, animal rights activists and anarchists.

Stop Titan prisons!

A well-attended meeting in London on 2 November began the process of campaigning to prevent the construction of the massive prisons planned by the British Labour government. A further meeting is to take place on 6 December and the embryonic campaign can be contacted at building.safe.communities@googlemail.com. There is not yet a postal address but prisoners who want to contribute to the discussion can write to FRFI and we will ensure you are posted copies of the minutes of the meetings and will circulate any material you wish to have considered.

California prisons

And if any indictment of massive, unmanageable, inhumane prisons were needed, a court in California is currently hearing evidence that the state's huge overcrowded prisons have led to constitutionally poor medical and mental health care. The Californian prison system is designed to hold around 100,000 prisoners but currently holds over 156,300. One prison holds more than 7,000 prisoners; three hold over 6,000; 11 hold over 5,000 and nine hold over 4,000. Three prisons are 230% overcrowded and the others are close behind. This is a direct result of get-tough drug laws and three-strikes sentencing laws first introduced in the 1970s. California's prison suicide rate is double the national average and there are around 12 murders a year.

Scottish prisoner wins battle for medical treatment

On 28 October after nearly two months on hunger strike William Johnston finally won his battle for proper medical treatment. He suffers from a spinal condition and before his imprisonment had a steel support rod inserted into his back. In prison he was effectively taken off painkillers and denied contact with the doctor.

On 27 October William, who for almost the entire duration of his hunger strike had lain neglected and ignored in his cell, was summoned to the prison's health care centre and informed by the manager and a senior nurse that his conflict with the medical authorities at the prison had to be resolved as a matter of urgency. This sudden apparent eagerness to discuss William's grievance had of course absolutely nothing to do with concern over his seriously deteriorated physical condition and everything to do with inquiries made about his treatment by local MP Gordon Banks, as well as the Scottish First Minister and the British Medical Council. The rec-

ent involvement of such figures and organisations in response to a campaign on William's behalf by friends and supporters on the outside had begun to make the governor's attempts to defend the medical administration at Glenochil increasingly ineffectual and unconvincing. Completely unaccustomed to such a degree of interest or interference by influential individuals on the outside in the treatment of a prisoner, the administration reacted with alarm and an anxiety to defuse a situation that might potentially lead to greater scrutiny of medical maltreatment at the prison.

At the meeting with the health care manager, William requested the attendance of the prison's governor, Dan Gunn, and was informed that he was 'on holiday'. Gunn's initial attempts to vociferously deny medical neglect in letters to William's supporters outside soon evaporated in the face of inquiries from Gordon Banks MP and others, and his silence became noticeable as pressure on him began to in-

crease. Instead William was invited to meet with the prison doctor, an individual notoriously compliant to the authority of junior medical staff at the prison and totally subservient to the disciplinary ethos of the prison. William agreed on the condition that a fellow prisoner of his choice be permitted to attend and witness the meeting, which provoked the sudden and emphatic reply that under no circumstances would 'John Bowden be allowed to attend the meeting'. William had not named me but I had clearly been at the forefront of the governor's mind as someone responsible for mobilising outside support and using his situation to highlight medical neglect generally at the prison. In fact, the governor had himself provoked concern about William's situation by lying about his non-existent treatment plan and doing absolutely nothing to investigate and improve the behaviour and attitude of medical staff at his prison.

Finally on 28 October William met with the prison doctor and a

proper and appropriate treatment plan for his condition was agreed. As a result William agreed to end his hunger strike.

Sadly, though typically, the reaction of the administration at Glenochil to this case was not to assuage concerns by improving standards of medical care and the attitude of those employed to administer it, but instead to seek revenge for the embarrassment caused. Because of my perceived role in highlighting William's situation, my 'supervision level' (something that will impact directly on the length of time I remain in prison) has been recommended to be increased from medium to 'high risk'.

The morning after William's hunger strike ended he went to collect his medication and was told that the medical department would only issue his painkillers one at a time so that he would have to go and collect them three times a day. That afternoon they gave him the painkiller and then ordered him to open his mouth. After an intrusive

search of his mouth and a drug test he was told that this was how it would be from now on. In other words, he would get his medication but it would not be made easy for him. The next morning he was called to see a doctor who apologised for the treatment he had suffered from the medical staff and told him he had handed in his resignation and that there would be no more victimisation.

After almost two months on hunger strike and a sustained campaign by Brighton Anarchist Black Cross, John McGranaghan and Dr George Coombs, William has finally received the treatment his condition requires. One can only wonder at his fate had he, like the majority of prisoners, been isolated and unsupported.

William's case highlights two irrefutable truths: the callous disregard of medical staff at Glenochil for the health care of prisoners, and the effectiveness of genuine and committed prisoner support.

John Bowden, HMP Glenochil

FRFI ROUNDUP

CAPITALIST CRISIS: FRFI active across the country

FRFI has been active over the recent period campaigning on many issues, increasingly focusing on the current capitalist crisis. Here are reports of just some of the events that have taken place from around the country. For details of meetings and actions to come in your area see our Events column.

London

Activists in London have opened the academic year with the re-establishment of a Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! student society at the London School of Economics. On 1 November our opening dayschool was on the subject of 'Che Guevara, Cuba and socialism in Latin America', with the main speakers being Helen Yaffe (UCL/Rock around the Blockade), Al Campbell (Utah University, US), Robert Clough (FRFI) and Fidel Narvaez (Movement of Ecuadorians in the UK).

The dayschool was set in the context of a revolutionary socialist movement that is gathering pace in Latin America. Helen Yaffe spoke about Che's concept of socialist transformation through the development of productivity and socialist consciousness. She discussed how Che's analysis is being debated and developed in Cuba, particularly in relation to the Battle of Ideas, as well as in the rest of Latin America. Al Campbell spoke and discussed with the audience about the challenges facing President Hugo Chavez and the socialist movement in Venezuela, as they struggle to overturn capitalism and fend off imperialist aggression and interference from the United States.

In the afternoon we heard an update on the class struggle in Bolivia and exciting news about Ecuador's new anti-imperialist constitution, which has provided the starting point to free Ecuador from the exploitation of oil multinationals and its crippling overseas debt. The economic model being adopted by the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas has global consequences. It is directly challenging the crisis-ridden capitalist system by showing a living, developing and working alternative. The necessity for similar meetings in the future is clear. FRFI is proud to stand in support of the anti-imperialist and socialist movements in Latin America, and will continue to publicise their achievements.

In London FRFI has also:

- continued the weekly pickets of Marks & Spencer – a protest against the company's support of Zionism.
- held weekly street stalls against the war and on the economic crisis.
- organised monthly demonstrations in support of asylum seekers outside Communications House reporting centre.

Northeast

On 25 October FRFI joined the second Northern March Against Racism, called by Tyneside Community Action for Refugees (TCAR) and took the message of anti-racism, working class solidarity and internationalism to the streets of Newcastle. Anti-racists from Jarrow to Carlisle, Sunderland to Durham, Zimbabwe to the Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo to Iraq, young and old, employed and unemployed, chanted together: 'Unemployment and inflation are not caused by immigration – Rubbish, come off it, the enemy is profit!'

Marching from the West End to Grey's Monument, the protestors demanded decent living conditions for all. As the march passed the offices of Angel Group, who make millions of pounds every year by providing sub-standard and unsafe accommodation to asylum seekers on government contracts, chants of 'Angel Group – Devil Group!' rang out. On Stanhope Street passers-by showed their support for the march by buying TCAR's newsletter, *Resistance*.

As the protestors arrived at Grey's Monument they were confronted by a counter-protest of around 20 fascists from the National Front and Combat 18, holding a banner reading 'Stop Immigration – Start Repatriation'. The police stood by and allowed them to continue with their open racism for some time before politely asking them to move on. Their chants and insults were drowned out by the united chanting of the anti-racists, joined by many passers-by.

The street meeting following the march went ahead despite intimidation, visibly from the fascists and from behind the scenes by the police and council. First the police had claimed that they couldn't 'accommodate' the march due to the Sunderland-Newcastle derby on the same day. When TCAR informed them that we had no need to be 'accommodated' and that the march would go ahead regardless, they backed down. They then threatened that as they did not consider the rally to constitute a 'meeting in the open air', they would not allow a collection to be taken without a permit. Both council and police have refused to define what they do consider to constitute a meeting. In the face of concerted opposition on this point the police also backed down, and took no action on the day.

Speaking at the rally Sam Magill from Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! pointed to the roots of the current crisis in capitalism's inherent contradictions, and the urgent necessity for socialism. She made the point that in order to rebuild a socialist movement in Britain it would be necessary to confront and destroy the Labour Party. TCAR will continue the struggle in Newcastle for all refugees' and migrants' rights. To get involved contact tynesidecam@yahoo.co.uk

FRFI activists in the Northeast have also organised or supported the following events:

- student societies set up at Northumbria and Durham universities and Newcastle College.
- educational series on the global economic crisis.
- a protest demanding decent food and housing for all.
- a protest against the commercialisation of education.

- Rebel MC all-dayer, raising money for the Monument 4 Defence Campaign.
- street events with the Northern Alliance for Police Accountability.

Glasgow

On Saturday 8 November at Celtic Park, Glasgow FRFI activists joined around 400 Celtic fans gathered outside the stadium, before and during the match against Motherwell, chanting slogans and singing songs against British imperialism in Ireland and around the world. In the face of an intense propaganda campaign waged by the government and risking demonisation by the media, hundreds of fans walked out of the game in opposition to the club's support for the British Legion and its annual poppy appeal.

This was not just an explicit protest in opposition to British imperialism in Ireland, but also included chants in opposition to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and support for the Palestinian resistance. The RCG recognises the political significance of the protest led by a section of the Celtic support on a clear anti-imperialist basis. This protest comes despite the failure of the anti-war movement in Glasgow and elsewhere to build any real and meaningful opposition against British imperialism. Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! and Celts Against Imperialism were the only political groups on the left to support the protest.

Comrades in Scotland have also held weekly street stalls against the ongoing occupation of Iraq and about the capitalist crisis.

Manchester

In the last two months FRFI and supporters have been supporting the various groups of migrants organising against the appalling treatment of refugees in Britain. On 18 October we supported a demonstration organised by the International Organisation of Iranian Refugees, which marched to the BBC offices to protest against their censorship of the death of Iranian refugee Nadir Zarebee. It was the third demonstration since his death. Nadir hanged himself in a park in Longsight, a suburb of Manchester, on 5 August 2008, after being evicted from his home in Trafford by the racist Home Office-appointed 'accommodation provider' M&Q Properties Ltd.

Liverpool

RATB has had three film showings followed by political discussions. There has been particular interest in Che as a theoretician, and also on the contrast between the development of socialism in Cuba and the absence of any socialist movement in Britain.



Northern March Against Racism, 25 October 2008



FRFI street event highlighting the crisis of capitalism, Islington, London, 15 November 2008

EVENTS

LONDON

Tuesdays 6 January and 3 February 1-2pm

Against Labour's racist immigration laws and practices

Picket Communications House, Old Street, EC1. Nearest tube Old Street

Wednesday 14 January 7.30pm

The Marxist theory of crisis and breakdown

FRFI LSE student society, Rm S75, St Clements Building, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, WC2. Nearest tube Holborn

Every Thursday 6-8pm

Support Palestine – boycott M&S

Outside M&S, Oxford Street, WC1 Nearest tube March Arch

For further details, call 020 7837 1688 Or email londonfrfi@gmail.com

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

Wednesday 10 December 7pm

Rebel Cinema Film Club: John Pilger's War on Democracy

Training Room, Northumbria Students' Union, Sandyford Road

Saturday 20 December 12 noon

Protest against racism, called by TCAR Grey's Monument

Thursday 8 and Friday 9 January 9am

Protest outside the appeal of four FRFI activists prosecuted for accepting donations at a street event in May 2007 Newcastle Crown Court, Quayside

Saturday 17 January 1pm

General Meeting of TCAR

St Thomas's Church, Haymarket

Every Saturday 3pm

Weekly meeting of Tyneside

Community Action for Refugees

Downstairs at Amnesty Bookshop, Westgate Road. Monthly general meetings in St Thomas's Church, Haymarket. tynesidecam@yahoo.co.uk 07504 174 530

For street actions in Newcastle every Saturday 11am-2pm and other stalls around the region: call or email for details

Tel: 07858 346 276

Email: frfinortheast@googlemail.com

Website: www.frfinortheast.co.uk

DURHAM

Sunday 14 December 4pm

Public forum: Capitalism in crisis: developing a Marxist analysis Upstairs at the Big Jug, Claypath

Thursday 15 January 7pm

Rebel Cinema film club: The Revolution will not be televised

Upstairs at the Big Jug, Claypath

GLASGOW

Tuesday 9 December 7.30pm

Marxist forum: Imperialism and the struggle for self-determination – Ireland, Palestine, Iraq Phone for details

Thursday 5 February 7.30pm

Marxist forum: Socialism and Revolutionary Cuba

Junction Bar, Queen Street Station

Tel: 07779 785 529

Email: frfiscotland@yahoo.co.uk

MANCHESTER

Regular street actions 07519 427 093

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE

LONDON

Saturday 3 January 12-3pm

Street rally to celebrate 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution Trafalgar Square

Saturday 17 January 12-5pm

50 years of revolution in Cuba Afternoon of presentations and discussion about Cuba and Latin America followed by live Latin bands in the evening. Venue to be confirmed. Contact us for details.

Tuesday 10 February 7.30pm

Rock around the Blockade monthly educational and campaign meeting Ye Olde Cock Tavern, 22 Fleet Street WC2. Nearest tubes Holborn and Temple.

For further details, call 020 7837 1688 Or email office@ratb.org.uk

DURHAM

Thursday 11 December 7pm

Rebel Cinema Film Club: Salud! Cuba's contribution to world health care Upstairs at the Big Jug, Claypath

Saturday 13 December 11am-2pm

Protest against banks' role in the arms trade and the blockade of Cuba Market Place

Tel: 07858 346 276

MANCHESTER

Sunday 7 December 2pm

Film – Cuba! Africa! Revolution! Percival Suite, Cross Street Chapel, Cross Street.

Saturday 3 January, 12pm

Celebrate 50 years of the Cuban Revolution Piccadilly Gardens

Email: manc@ratb.org.uk

Tel: 07535 616 325

LIVERPOOL

Saturday 3 January 1-3pm

Street meeting celebrating 50 years of the Cuban Revolution Church Street

Saturday 24 January 12pm till late

Cuba dayschool and social El Rincon, Roscoe Street

Tel: 07956 458 331

DUNDEE

Thursday 29 January 7.30pm

Viva Socialist Cuba! Public meeting celebrating 50 years of the Cuban Revolution. Room G7, Dundee University Tower, Perth Road

Tel: 07779 785 529

Email: scotlandratb@yahoo.co.uk

GLASGOW

Saturday 3 January 12-4pm

Street meeting celebrating 50 years of the Cuban Revolution Outside Borders Books on Buchanan Street

Sunday 25 January 2-5pm

50 years of socialist revolution – Cuba leads the fightback against global capitalist crisis

Central Hotel, Gordon Street, adjacent to Central Station

Tel: 07779 785 529

Email: scotlandratb@yahoo.co.uk

CHOOSE THE

RCG

If you believe that the treachery of the opportunist British labour and trade union movement must be challenged, then there is no alternative – **Join the RCG!**

I would like to join/receive more information about the RCG ☐

I would like to join an FRFI Readers & Supporters Group ☐

Name _____

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Psychiatric injustice

To quote Martin Luther King's words from Hannah Callen's letter on racism in hospitals (FRFI 205), 'Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhumane'. Psychiatry is an injustice. Its so-called 'medication' is a torturous, humiliating and inhumane act. Something should be done about the shocking powers doctors have in mental health.

JAMES HAGGERTY
 Glasgow

LETTERS

FRFI BCM Box 5909 London WC1N 3XX e-mail: editorial@rcgrfi.plus.com
 website: www.revolutionarycommunist.org

Prison Officers Association debate No solidarity with other trade unionists

In December 2007 RMT News printed a letter I wrote criticising the union's support for the Prison Officers Association (POA). However I don't feel that the responses in the subsequent issue from former RMT President Tony Donaghey and current Executive Council member, Alex Gordon addressed the concerns I raised. It is up to prison and police officers how they organise themselves. But just because they are organised doesn't mean the RMT should support them. The POA and Police Federation are very effective at representing their members and securing generous pay and conditions. However it's all about the role these two groups of workers perform in capitalist society. They are servants of the Crown, paid to uphold and enforce the laws of the ruling class.

Alex Gordon painted the POA as some sort of liberalising or progressive influence on penal policy. This is laughable. In all major investigations, inquiries and reviews into the prison system (eg post-Strangeways, Learmont Inquiry...), the POA has always advocated greater repression of prisoners. The POA may be involved in a battle with the government over the growth of the private sector in the prison system but it has not, for instance, spoken out against the new proposed 'super prisons'.

Tony Donaghey's response stated that the POA 'has always been at the forefront of the struggle against anti-union laws' but there has never been one instance of POA members taking a stand and refusing to lock up militant trade unionists involved in struggle.

From the upheavals of the 1970s to the Miners' Strike and Wapping, they've willingly behaved as just another arm of the state. The RMT rightly prides itself on its support of other workers in struggle and adopts an internationalist outlook. When has the POA ever acted in solidarity with other workers?

Whilst most other sectors of the workforce have felt the squeeze throughout the last three decades, under Labour and Tory administrations, the POA and Police Federation have been rewarded very well for doing their dirty work. If an individual or group is to be judged by the company they keep, then the sight of the BNP mayoral candidate at the front of the Police Federation march in London spoke volumes.

PHIL
 Brighton RMT member

Racist and brutal

I have spent the last eight years in prison resisting the brutal oppression of the POA in its rawest form, so when reading comrades John Bowden and Nicki Jameson's debate over the POA's feeble attempts to be accepted by the progressive working class, I felt inclined to give my perspective.

Many years ago I was 'visited' by a POA committee of half a dozen drunk 'working class' men who beat me unconscious and called me every 'black bastard' under the sun for my heinous crime of ringing the cell bell and kicking the door in an attempt to establish why I had not been allowed a Christmas visit from my family. When I regained consciousness, I was confronted with POA members brandishing a home-made noose and spouting threats and racial abuse. This history was accepted by 12 jury members and a judge at Sittingbourne Crown Court, where I was cleared of stabbing two POA scum in self-defence.

After this I was sent from segregation unit to segregation unit, where I was enlightened as to the true nature of the 'working class' POA: • Whitmoor, where I suffered multiple fractures and received an out-of-court settlement at the County Court, following my taking

action against Whitmoor's long renowned brutal racist POA scum fraternity;

• Frankland, where I unexpectedly found a POA member pouring a translucent liquid from a small medical vial covertly into segregated inmates' water flasks;

• Long Lartin, where POA militia rushed mob-handed onto the field and attacked inmates indiscriminately on camera, wielding batons and unleashing dogs, after an officer falsely claimed an incident had taken place;

• Full Sutton, where, having been put on trial for attacking three racist prison officers, my solicitor uncovered POA-written phone records with such quotes as 'wog speak' and 'nigga talk – can't understand'. I was cleared of three counts of GBH. At a later date I returned to Full Sutton to have my left arm broken by the POA 'working class'.

Similar brutality has continued ever since at HMPs Wandsworth, Strangeways, Blakenhurst, Birmingham, Swaleside, Hull, Leeds, Bristol, Cardiff, Gloucester – to name but a few. The POA grapevine targets inmates and ensures perpetual torture while covering each others' backs with a secret society-like kinship. Twelve Crown Court cases later I am still

targeted at every level from mail/money/property going 'missing' or being damaged, right down to the POA members bribing inmates with drugs to do me harm. I have seen the POA in its raw, uncensored form and know it to be nothing more than a club of corrupt, racist, brutal thugs employed by an equally uncouth Prison Service. Though a few prison officers may still harbour notions of their job as a valued necessity in this crumbling society, every prison officer soon becomes fully aware of the real underbelly and criminal actions of many other officers. With such knowledge, even if they as individuals take no active role in corrupt/racist/brutal actions, they ensure the POA status quo by their silence and corrupt partisanship.

The 'bad apple' argument is like claiming some Nazis were good officers. The root of the POA's authority and the abuse of it are built upon the oppression of inmates in the service of a government that propagates brutality, racism and torture towards all humans – be they civilians or prisoners, here or abroad – who resist repression. The POA are to be regarded as scum, bottom line.

SEAN HIGGINS VA3977
 HMP Cardiff

Guantanamo: stop the torture

Barack Obama's victory was welcomed by many as a watershed, an opportunity to close the door on much of the country's shameful past. But will Obama also close the door, as he has promised, on the US concentration camp at Guantanamo?

Since it opened in January 2002, approximately 775 people have been detained at Guantanamo in appalling conditions. These include: repeated beatings; prolonged solitary confinement; threats of attack from unmuzzled dogs; forced nakedness; injection of unknown substances and deliberate denigration of religious beliefs and practices, including submerging the Koran in a filthy toilet bucket.

550 detainees have been released, five committed suicide, and only three were convicted of any crime. 86% of the men were gaoled after being turned over to Coalition forces by Afghan or Pakistani citizens in return for a bounty of \$5,000 – for many, their only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The future of Guantanamo's remaining 255 detainees looks precarious. The military commissions set up by the Bush administration in 2006 to try them have been criticised by defence attorneys, human rights activists and even some military prosecutors for its disregard for detainees' legal

rights. Whether Obama's proposed alternative will be an improvement remains to be seen.

As inauguration day approaches, let's keep up the pressure on Obama and his supporters to keep their promise to the victims still incarcerated. The London Guantanamo Campaign is organising events in January to mark the seventh anniversary of its opening and to remind the new US administration that until it closes Guantanamo, The US's image as an arrogant, bullying, Islamophobic superpower with blood on its hands will remain unchanged. For more details, contact the London Guantanamo Campaign: London.gtmo@googlemail.com or visit www.guantanamo.org.uk CORINNA MULLIN
 London Guantanamo Campaign

Hungry for justice

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having me on your mailing list for FRFI, which I enjoy reading.

Truth has not surfaced and justice has not been done in my miscarriage of justice case. I was convicted over 20 years ago on police fabricated evidence. I am a totally innocent person. My request is that a helpful criminal solicitor would take an interest in my case

Land reform key to Zimbabwe crisis

I liked Carol Brickley's article on Zimbabwe in your August/September 2008 issue. Settler colonialism and land reform are indeed key to understanding politics in Zimbabwe. The question I have is why do most of the left press seem intent on demonising Mugabe? Nobody seems to wish to explain why the white farmers are part of the MDC.

MILTON TAKEI
 Eugene, Oregon, USA

Prison screws smear white Muslim

In August 2007, the door of my cell flew open and in came the 'riot squad' all geared up in their crash helmets and shields to remove me to the segregation unit 'due to ongoing security concerns'.

In the segregation unit, I was strip-searched in front of numerous staff and videoed by a female member of staff with a camcorder. Despite my numerous protests and my clear distress, I was forced under threat of violence to continue to strip while they all looked on smirking.

After this I was put on 'multi unlock', which means my door was only opened three times a day to 'plate my food in' – riot screws in full gear would run up to my cell, stop with their shields inches from my face, 'plate my food in' and retreat – after tipping cold water over my food. I was refused a shower or exercise period for about nine days. I just spent 24 hours a day locked in the seg, constantly bullied and oppressed. Why? For being a devout Muslim who is also white.

After a month I was back on a wing, eventually moving to C Wing. But after three days I was back in seg 'for security reasons' yet again. During the next three weeks, I was harassed and provoked. I ignored the screws'

comments until one said: 'How come you've gone from BNP to a Muslim?' This angered me greatly as I would never be part of such an organisation! Two days later, to my horror, I found myself plastered all over national newspapers and the television, described as 'ex BNP activist turned radical Muslim', who was 'financed by Al Qaida to radicalise and recruit'. This was always followed by my full name and prison number and was everywhere – national news, regional news, *Panorama*, Islamic papers, even the BBC website. This had clearly come from those Whitmoor screws, no doubt with the intention of getting me killed in prison.

I have since been transferred to the seg at Long Lartin – despite seg-to-seg transfers being against prison rules. To give him credit, when I told the number one governor here I was not and had never been in the BNP, he did some checks and had those lies removed from my history and security files as being 'fabricated'. If it was that easy for him to check, how could the BBC and others broadcast such lies about me without checking their facts?

STEVE JONES FW9741
 HMP Long Lartin

Lloyds TSB attacks charity for Palestinians

FRFI 205 reported on Lloyds TSB's covert attack on Cuba. Readers should know that on 12 November the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund (Interpal), the largest charity in the UK working solely on the provision of humanitarian aid to Palestinians, was informed by its bank, the Islamic Bank of Britain (IBB), that Lloyds TSB (their clearing bank) had served notice on IBB to cease all dealings with Interpal from 30 January 2009 or risk the suspension of all its customer payments.

Since being set up in 1994, Interpal has been harassed and accused in both Britain and the US of being linked with Hamas and hence of being 'supporters of

terrorism' but was cleared of any illegal activity by the Charities Commission.

Lloyds TSB has just been bailed out by British imperialism to the tune of billions of pounds. No wonder it is such a keen defender of imperialist interests.

To register your protest at this blatant attack on Palestinian refugees contact: Gay Campbell at their head office – 020 7661 4778; gay.campbell@lloydstsb.co.uk and Chief Executive Officer Eric Daniels at eric.daniels@lloydstsb.co.uk. See www.interpal.info for more details.

BOB SHEPHERD
 Manchester

Inspiring

Thank you so much for delivering FRFI for such a long time. I always pass it on to other prisoners, sometimes to my grandma. But now you inform me the subscription will end soon, so I ask you: please can I get FRFI for free again? It's really such an inspiring paper!

THOMAS MEYER-FALK
 JVA Bruchsal, Schoenbornstr. 32,
 76646 Bruchsal, Germany

Thomas has been imprisoned since 1996 for trying to rob a bank to fund left-wing projects. He has now served two thirds of his sentence and should be up for release but is still locked up. More details of his campaign from www.freedom-for-thomas.de FRFI assures Thomas that he will continue to receive FRFI free of charge. We urge readers to support our practice of sending FRFI free to prisoners on request by taking out an annual subscription for a prisoner – send £10 to Larkin Publications, BCM Box 5909, London WC1N 3XX.

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Thanks to you, our readers and supporters, we have raised £10,288, meeting the target we set ourselves for our 2008 fund drive. This gives us the means to sustain our work going into the New Year.

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Phil Woolas – front man for Labour Party racism

He is MP for Oldham East and Saddleworth which has a high Pakistani and Kashmiri population. He says, 'It's had a race riot, it's had a huge British National Party (BNP) presence and it's a marginal seat. It's a complete crucible but we've never had a BNP councillor – I hope I've had something to do with that by getting in and getting dirty'.

Woolas gets very dirty indeed by playing the BNP at its own game. 'We need a tougher immigration policy and we need to stop seeing it as a dilemma. It's not. It's easy. I'm going to do my best to help the British back to work. Britain has to get working again. The easiest thing for an employer to do is to employ an immigrant. We need to help them to change that.'

Woolas poses as the straight talker who is going to get things sorted out. 'It's been too easy to get into this country in the past and it's going to get harder,' he says, while at the same time he also wants to 'be nice to people who do come and settle here'. But Woolas' record is one of racist swagger and British supremacy and he specialises in provocative sound bites that hit the headlines of the tabloid papers and get him interviewed in the broadsheets. He has attacked the organisations that defend asylum seekers and attacked the European Convention on Human Rights. This is the man who called Boris Johnson, the Conservative Mayor of London, 'naïve' because he proposed considering an amnesty for immigrants who have worked and lived in London without

Newly-appointed immigration minister Phil Woolas is the current front man for a very nasty racist British Labour government that is facing a downturn in the economy and turning on the traditional scapegoat in times of domestic difficulty – the foreigner. In Phil Woolas it has found its man. SUSAN DAVIDSON reports.

full legal permission for some years. Altogether Woolas is a useful bully appointed by Prime Minister Gordon Brown because he is 'outsoken' and because of his claim that dealing with immigration is his 'lifelong purpose' since his support for the Anti Nazi League in 1976.

Recently, however, there was a sudden cancellation of Woolas' appearance on the BBC *Question Time*. Woolas had just made a pledge to follow Tory policy and put a limit on immigration into Britain and also stated that the population of Britain must not rise from the current 61 million to 70 million. It seems that Home Secretary Jacqui Smith pulled Woolas from *Question Time*, uncertain about letting this 'shock jock' off the leash in front of a BBC audience.

He was replaced by Roy Hattersley, retired former Deputy Labour Party Leader and Shadow Home Secretary. Hattersley had an active role in implementing racist immigration law throughout his time in parliament and, like Woolas today, rationalised immigration controls saying 'Without inte-

gration, limitation is inexcusable, without limitation, integration is impossible'.

Today Phil Woolas takes on the role of the brave vanguard who will 'bloody well' talk about immigration but in truth he is but the latest in a long line of Labour Party representatives, pushing this line of 'stopping the BNP' by beating it at its own game. David Blunkett banged this drum in 2004; then last year it was Margaret Hodge, Children's Minister and MP for Dagenham in Essex, who said that the 'white working class' would turn to voting for the BNP if Labour ignored their concerns about immigration. This year Hazel Blears is saying the same.

The Labour Party has always been racist and imperialist, and in government it has passed legislation and driven through policies to try to ensure immigration is a tap that can be turned on and off as capitalism demands. With capitalism in crisis, Woolas is the front man for the latest offensive against immigrant workers and asylum seekers.



Phil Woolas – latest in a long line of Labour ministers promoting racist immigration laws

Support sacked cleaners!

On 21 November 2008, five Latin American migrant cleaners at National Physical Laboratories (NPL) in London lost their appeal against their sacking by cleaning contractors Amey plc.

Amey, which has an annual turnover of £75m, took over the NPL contract in December 2006. Faced with a well-organised and recently unionised workforce of mainly Latin American migrants, Amey took immediate steps to attack working conditions and fragment the workforce in order to drive down costs. One of its first acts was to summon all the workers to what turned out to be a fake training session: the doors were then bolted and the police summoned. Seven workers were taken away by police and three subsequently deported.

Eventually ten workers were expected to do the work of 36; terms and conditions were changed without consultation and grievance procedures ignored. Five Amey cleaners protested and started leafleting other NPL staff. They were suspended for 'bringing the company into disrepute' and then sacked.

Similar attacks on migrant workers have been carried out elsewhere. Amey is a major shareholder in Tubelines, which cleans part of the London Underground. Tube cleaners, who went on strike against low pay in the summer, were then subjected to a wave of immigration raids and deportations. British companies are happy to use migrant labour as long as it means their profits grow on the backs of low pay and oppressive working conditions; the moment workers organise, the full force of Britain's racist laws is marshalled against them.

The sacked Amey workers, who have organised regular protests, meetings and pickets since their dismissal in September, are taking their case to an employment tribunal and the fight goes on. On 8 December, there will be a protest outside Amey headquarters in Oxford.

Cat Wiener
For more information contact latin_americanworkers@hotmail.com

Frontex – the face of Fortress Europe

'...with external land borders of 8,000 km and sea borders of 80,000 km, migration to [Europe] is a considerable attraction for those seeking the chance of a better life, or simply trying to escape from their own countries for whatever reason. The abolition of nearly all the internal borders makes it all the more important that the external borders should be efficiently policed, and that there should be close cooperation between the border guards of the different States.'

(FRONTEX: the EU external borders agency, House of Lords Report 2007-08)

The EU Borders Agency Frontex was set up in 2004, the year the EU expanded to include eight countries in Eastern Europe. Its head office is in Warsaw and it became operational in October 2005. Frontex is responsible for strengthening Fortress Europe technologically and militarily, and co-ordinating the deportation of unwanted intruders more efficiently. It is doing this by attempting to pool resources, not an easy task in a time of national tensions between European countries. For example, in 2006 when Spain pressed for more support in blocking immigration via the Canary Islands, Germany, Austria and Italy initially objected. Similarly, the House of Lords report concludes that 'a major problem has been the failure of some member states actually to make available the resources they have promised'. Despite these tensions, strengthening Fortress Europe is a high priority for all member states. This is reflected in Frontex's considerable increase in power and resources. In 2005 it started with a budget of 6.2 million. By 2008 its draft budget was over £0 million.

One recent development is the con-



Demonstration outside the Frontex headquarters in Warsaw, Poland

solidation and training of Rapid Border Intervention Teams (RABITs). These are mixed teams of national border guards that can be deployed at short notice. There is currently a pool of 629 border policemen drawn from 25 of the 27 EU member states – the exceptions being Ireland and the UK, which are not part of the Schengen Agreement and cannot therefore participate fully in Frontex. EU Home Affairs Commissioner Franco Frattini referred to RABITs as 'the best ever example of European solidarity'.

Frontex is also responsible for 'co-operation' with third countries, such as Senegal and Libya. In September 2006, for example, mass deportations from Spain to Senegal became possible, following negotiations with the Senegalese government, which had previously refused to accept those without papers. Since the talks, joint patrols have taken place in Senegalese waters and Senegalese authorities have been to the Canary Islands, employing dubious methods involving facial characteristics and dialect to identify migrants.

On 30 August 2008 Italy and Libya signed a friendship, partnership and co-

operation treaty, which included an agreement to set up a border control system for Libyan land borders, with Italy providing half the funding. Italy already funds detention centres in Libya, which are notorious for poor conditions and human rights abuses.

As Fortress Europe is strengthened, desperate migrants are forced to use increasingly perilous routes, resulting in hundreds of deaths each year. Dutch NGO 'UNITED for Intercultural Action' estimates that 11,105 deaths since 1993 can be attributed to European border controls and immigration laws. The vast majority occur at sea, where overcrowded and flimsy boats often capsize or sink and migrants can be forced to go for weeks without adequate food and water. In the first four months of 2008 alone there were 23 incidents in which 90 migrants died from drowning, starvation and dehydration.

**No to Fortress Europe!
Fight all Europe's racist
immigration laws!**

Annabelle Richardson

For more information see Frontexwatch
<http://frontex.antira.info/en-english/>

Sans-papiers struggle in France

The occupation of the Bourse du Travail in Paris by the *Coordination des sans-papiers 75 (CSP75)* entered its eighth month on 2 December 2008 (see FRFI 205 for background). 1,300 workers are now involved in one of the longest occupations in the history of the movement of undocumented migrants.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) had tried to retain total control over the migrant workers' regularisation movement, accepting government-imposed criteria and 'case-by-case legalisation'. The occupation of the CGT-owned Bourse building began after the Paris police authority rejected 1,000 CSP75 workers' files on the pretext that they were not submitted by the CGT and the CGT refused to submit them because the workers were not CGT members.

The CGT has lied that the occupied building is infested with rats and that drugs are being dealt there in order to justify forcible expulsion of the migrants. Paris CGT Secretary Remi Picard accused the CSP75 of 'exploiting people in a dramatic situation' and CGT thugs attacked a CSP75 stall at the Communist Party-run *Fête de l'Humanité*. In October, after three months of either ignoring or threatening the CSP75, the CGT proposed 'joint actions' in exchange for the CSP75 leaving the Bourse, but it still refused to support the CSP75's 1,000 cases.



Sans-papiers demonstrators in Paris

There has also been constant harassment by the police who surround the building, watching and photographing the occupants. Arrests are a daily occurrence and on 16 November the first migrant to take part in the occupation, Mamadou Diarra, was deported to Mali.

However, the struggle continues and *sans-papiers* continue to hold protest marches every Wednesday and Friday. Meanwhile, in Ponts de Cé near Angers, homeless asylum seekers and their supporters have squatted a former police station.

**Victory to the sans-papiers!
No to immigration controls!**

Charles Chinweizu

See <http://www.bourse.occupee.free.fr/>