USA, Britain, France: fight back against the bosses’ offensive

World war on welfare

THROUGHOUT the world, working people, the unemployed and the very poorest are facing an onslaught as right wing governments seek to slash tax cuts by slashing front-line welfare services.

In the USA, the Republican-led Congress has voted through draconian cuts in the Medicare and Medicaid services which deliver health care to the elderly, and opted to slash Federal spending on social security, education and other vital services. The objective of the $270 billion cut over five years in health spending is to finance a $250 million tax hand-out over the same period, designed to buy votes for the Republicans in the coming Presidential elections.

In France, the right wing offensive unleashed by President Chirac and his government led to last month’s public sector general strike, with walk-outs by 2.5 million workers, including two thirds of teachers, hospital staff and council workers, protesting at plans to freeze wages, cut jobs and attack pensions.

And in Britain, Chancellor Kenneth Clarke, the key to any possible revival of flagging Tory electoral fortunes, is piecing together his budget.

Once again, cynical tax-cutting bribes seem the best hope of buying back lost Tory support among the middle classes.

Tory ministers have already agreed strict limits on public spending that will tighten the squeeze on health services, education and housing, and redouble the attack on the unemployed and social security claimants.

The British fightback is not as developed as the French: but the Tory onslaught is being resisted.

Campaigns are fighting cuts and closures in the NHS, and the FAPE campaign against education cuts is gaining strength across the country; last month thousands backed the NW TUC march on the Tory conference in Blackpool, which centred on defence of the welfare state. And on Budget Day, November 25, the Welfare State Network is coordinating a lobby of parliament.

Fighting now to defend key elements of the welfare state in Britain not only challenges the Tories, but strengthens the base from which trade unionists and socialists must put demands on a new Labour government for a complete change of course.

Editorial comment p2.
THE FIGURES may be bigger, but the formula will be grimly familiar to Brit- ish readers: the Budget cuts now being proposed by the Republican-controlled US Congress would slash at least 10 percent ($2.7 billion, £1.8bn) from federal education spending.

Much of this would come from the federal assistance programme for poor children, which states rely on to pay for special needs help for teachers. School lunch pro- grammes would be cut, along with multi-lingual teaching, anti-violence programmes and job skill training.

In California alone the school cuts would be at least $260m next year. Republicans adamantly defend the cuts as a device to balance the Federal budget, and facilitate tax cuts for the "middle class": "It’s definitely a belt- tightening year, but this one pen a scaled to education, not a meat-axe," insisted one spokesperson.

Meanwhile Congress has also voted to scrap a 60-year-old federal commitment to guarantee help to the poor, with the decision to abolish central funding of social se- curity, devolving budgets to state level. A massive $270 billion is to be slashed from the Medicare and Medicaid budgets over five years, forcing up monthly payments by US pensioners, while cutting $25 billion from the taxes of the well-to-do.

The theme behind the Rep- ublican offensive is also fa- miliar to British readers: the argument is that ‘middle class’ Americans – which is loose enough to include those who work – are paying too much, and that cuts in these welfare and education programmes would enable them to ‘keep more of their own money.’

Of course it is a fraud. The gains may be held down, but the costs of welfare services fall instead on each individual worker and family. Income taxes – progressive, in that the richest pay most – are mini- mised, but indirect taxes – which hit the poor hardest – are increased.

The withdrawal of the fed- eral safety net for social secu- rity will enable some hard-pressed state governments to buy a few votes by cutting state taxes even as they widen still further the gap between the haves and have-nots, trig- gering even more misery, social anxiety and crime.

Such policies, in the USA and elsewhere, are based on a cynical calculation – that the poorest millions who live out of attacks on vital services can be electronically discounted, so long as the support is en- listed of the middle and wealthy layers of society.

Widening gap

The Thatcher government in Britain pioneered this ap- proach. But through the gap between rich and poor in Brit- ain has been massively wid- ened by tax concessions to the rich, and while state pensions have been squeezed, benefits cut, and services axed, the ba- sic core of health and welfare services has been too popular for the Tories to launch an open assault.

Instead their attacks on the welfare state have helped re- duce John Major’s govern- ment to record low levels of public support, while sections of the rural middle classes have led the ranks of those fighting cuts in education spending.

Opinion polls suggest that the US Republicans, like the Tories in Britain, may have miscalculated. The impact of New Gingrich’s ‘Contract with America’ seems to have boosted Presi- dent Clinton’s standing in the polls and undercut the Repub- licans, who recently won landslide support.

In France, too, the Chirac government has rapidly plunged for a new record low in opinion polls. The policies of the populist right always seem better to voters in sound-bites than they do when implemented.

Their attacks on NHS and welfare state have weakened Tony Blair in opinion polls.

But in each case the radi- calism of the right wing in pursuing its agenda has produced a corresponding re- treat by the opposition.

Bill Clinton promises nosily to veto the Republican cuts, but counterposes his own package of spending cuts and tax reductions, which would also flow new borders onto the working poor while lining the wallets of the rich.

And Tony Blair, despite riding high on a tide of popu- larity to the Tories, has not only ditched Clause Four but bre- breached the principles and methods of the socialist mar- ket system, courting business leaders with promises not to increase taxation.

Without creating more money from the rich, Blair can do nothing to improve the situation of working people.

That’s one key reason why his right wing team is incapa- ble of continuing the chal- lenging the Tory attacks.

The retreat can only be stopped by building a strong enough resistance at the base of the unions, the Labour Party and the local communites which are feeling the brunt of these attacks.

That’s why the campaigns of parents, students and teachers against education cuts, the efforts of trade unionists and workers and campaigners against cuts and privatisation of the NHS, and the solid re- sistance of the striking Liver- pool fire fighters are so important.

Though each is limited in scope, by drawing a line in defence of welfare and public services, these struggles im- plicitly fly in the face of the dynamic of capitalism. They serve to link the poorest and the middle classes with each other – in struggle against the politics of the wealthy few.

However, the right wing, as defined by the Blairite Blair, and his timid co- thinkers around the world.

Fanatic slays war criminal

By Roland Panic

THE IRONY of the murder by a Zionist fanatic of Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin is that one of the Middle East’s leading war criminals is likely to be re- membered as “a martyr for peace”.

As a young officer in 1948 Rabin forcibly expelled tens of thousands of Palestinians from their homes in Lydda and Ramle. In 1967, as Chief-of-Staff, he planned and ac- combated the invasion of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.

In 1982, as Defence Minister, he was responsible for the brutal re- pression of the Lebanese, where troops the notorious order to attack the Palestinians with "force, might and might" and for making clear "who rules the territories". Rabin’s period as Prime Minis- ter since 1992 has been marked by the Israel-PLO “peace agreement”, which is an attempt to divide the Palestinian people by forcing the capitulation of the PLO leadership and its reconsolidation with the Zionist project.

His murder reflects a – possibly unbridgeable – polarisation in Is- raeli society, and to the extent to which its centre of gravity has moved towards the fundamentalist religious and nationalist right.

This was not the first political murder of a Jew carried out by Zionist extremists.

Among others, Dutch poet Jacob de Haan was killed in the 1920s when he denounced Zionism. Zionist leader Chaim Arzoukov was shot in 1935 in the course of his parallel negotiations with Nazi Germany and Palestinian leaders; peace ac- tor Emil Grunewald was mur- dered during a Peace Now demonstration in 1965.

None of these murders was carried out by a "jew madman", as the Zionist “moderate” right. Observers in Jerusalem report that violence has been in the air for many months.

Israel papers report that the Shin Bet had received reliable warnings of a threat to Rabin, and had even compiled a remarkably accurate psychological profile of a potential assassin, but Rabin had refused to wear a flak jacket.

In a television interview re- corded during the demonstration, Rabin’s wife Leah was asked whether she was afraid for her husband’s safety; she replied “Are you mad? This isn’t Africa”.

According to T話を Parnas of the Revolutionary Communist League, the action of the Fourth Interna- tional in the Israeli state, a civil war in Israel is unlikely because the “moderate” and nationalist right has been severely shocked.

The Labour Party has been strengthened by the death of its martyr, and is likely to win the forthcoming elections of Gaza, which lack a credible alternative.

None of this will come as any comfort to the thousands of Palestinian- ans, for whom Rabin, Peres, Ne- tanyahu and now Ariel would represent their dispossession.

Murderous internal struggle within the ranks of the oppressor will not, it’s own, lead to their liberation.
### Why Tories cracked down on Hackney

**By Roy Leach**

THE INSPECTION blitz unleashed against every school in Lambeth and Walthamstow Forest has nothing to do with the needs of students and teachers. The move was announced just before the Tory conference in order to appease the rabid right.

All schools in the boroughs are to be inspected within six months - as opposed to the national programme of one in four over a year. It represents an intensification of the education policies.

Waltham Forest and Lambeth are both cities with high levels of unemployment which, unsurprisingly, do not dwell in exam league tables. More importantly, they have both been tagged as the "loopy left" label by the Tory tabloids.

Hackney Downs school has been taken over by an Education Authority. A media collection of government-appointed industrialists and "experts," including Michael Barber, a former NUT bureaucrat and key player in the formulation of Labour's education policies. In cases like this they have two options: either close the school or cackling all the staff, or "save" it as an op-ed school.

**Kick-start**

This whole exercise is a crude attempt to kick start the governments stalled opt-out programme into two vulnerable areas where parent and teacher opposition to Grant Maintained status has been particularly effective.

If this tactic works then it will be repeated and used against areas that have already suffered from chronic underfunding of education, combined with the social problems caused by government policies.

The inspections will have a devastating effect on teachers in the two boroughs.

It is clear how the inspection reports are intended to be twisted by the Daily Express (21.11.95) said the government policy is only to weed out 15,000 teachers.

This is just one example of the increasing number of redundancies in education in the run up to the general election.

A strong and effective resistance is needed.

### Birmingham fights back

**By Bob Whitehead**

THIS time the Tories have gone in for the kill: £20m from the budget, a cut of 15 per cent in some areas.

For the third year in a row Birmingham City Council has been fighting a war against cuts imposed by the government.

With the Tories now in charge of the city, the fight has become more difficult, but the council has been able to resist the cuts with some success.

The leader of the council, Cllr Bob Whitehead, said: "We have won a battle against cuts." He added: "We have been able to resist the cuts with some success." The council has managed to keep the budget below the government's target, but it has not been easy.

### North West marches to battle for welfare state

**By Alec McFadden**

THE 1995 Peoples March from Bury to the Tory Party Conference in Blackpool was dedicated to the campaign to defend the Welfare State.

Trade Union Councils from the North West of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Britain supported the march with donations.

The march started with a "Jobs for all, that's our call," and "When do we want it? We want it now!" The favourite chant was "Boos up Major's arse!" When we marched into Blackpool we were met by dozens of pensioners, trade unionists and students.

The march around the Tory conference was loud with supporters and well-wishers: over 8,000 was the estimate. At the first sight of Tory delegates, the Korova chant we all know too well was heard: "Going down, going down, going down..."

Even some young police constables began to join in.

The final rally heard a host of fine and emotional speeches, but the address by 71-year-old marcher Steve Stevenson won a standing ovation. He said: "If we can spend millions on war, surely we can spend millions on the welfare of our people."

The theme of the whole march has been to attack the record of the party of the nining class, which for past 16 years has systematically attacked the fabric of the welfare state - eroding education, the NHS, community care, disability rights, housing and social security.

Our march was not only a protest at the evils of the Tory cuts, but a demand to raise expectations of the people for their future and the future of their children.

Sadly, Labour politicians have now joined Tories in telling us that our country is not able to afford the most basic necessities: the right to useful work and a living wage; the right to health care; the right to education; the right to free movement; the right to housing and security.

With the Tories now in charge of the city, the fight for the marchers and the Welfare State Network are combining in a Budget Day Lobby of Parliament on November 28. A big turnout will strike a further blow at those who would cut welfare at the Tory onslaught to con-
Police attack on right to protest

By Kathryn Marshall

500 protesters against French nuclear testing recently took their anger to Chequers to coincide with a visit by Jacques Chirac.

They took flags, banners, hooters, whistles and a desire to make a lot of noise.

Protestors of this kind are designed to draw attention to the issue. They are peaceful—there are no planned riots, no attempts to torch buildings or to beat anyone up.

This event was organised by CND and Greenpeace. They try to maximise public support for their cases, which does not include starting brawls.

Despite this, demonstrators were met by mounted police. They were served with a written order to leave the lane.

The Criminal Justice Act has created two new offences—aggravated trespass and remaining on land after being served with a written notice.

Twelve were arrested. Several required hospital treatment after being injured by horses and dogs.

The Act strengthens the right of police to use strong-arm tactics whenever they please. They are now entitled to make arrests for trespass and staying "too long".

This attack on our democratic right to protest potentially affects campaigns right across the board—from action to defend the welfare state to road campaigns, through to animal welfare demos.

This occurs in a wider context of the attacks which were reinforced and added to at Tony Blair conference.

Home Office figures reveal that the Stop and Search legislation in the CIA is most regularly used against black and Asian people.

It serves as another feature of the government's racist legislation.

"The right to protest" is under attack. Squatters' and travellers' rights scarcely exist.

More money is being spent on prisons, presumably to house these new categories of "criminals".

There is a need to maintain and step up campaigns so that the CIA does not win.

It is also essential that the labour movement wakes up to the implications these measures have for them.

Labour movement leaders must be bound until they acknowledge that attacks on democratic rights will not be accepted any more than a crumbling welfare state.

Debating the way forward on Ireland

FIFTY people attended a debate in Birmingham on the Irish situation organised by the far left.

Workers' Power and Socialist Outlook suggested that the Alliance for Workers' Liberty were mistaken in their welcome for the Peace Process.

Labour movement leaders were grossly imperilling the interest of disarming republicans and all British forces opposed to their control over the six counties.

Socialist Outlook argued that "Troops out now and full-democracy for the Irish people as a whole" should remain our watchwords.

No let-up in East Timor crackdown

By Paul Walker

TRUCKLOADS of armed troops and riot police continue to circle the streets of East Timor capital Dili as Socialist Outlook goes to press.

Indonesian police are continuing house-to-house searches for suspected Timorese political prisoners.

A US citizen was arrested in Dili last week. The police have a warrant for his arrest in a case of "high treason".

Riots spread across East Timor continuing into September and October. On November 1 residents of Dili reported that the security forces were firing into the air to disperse small crowds.

The Indonesian military remains unconcerned. "It will continue to look for and capture the youth who are involved," said Colonel A. Giandet, chief of police of the occupying forces.

Local parliamentarian, Manuel Carascal, told journalists that about 23 youths who had been released after they were arrested with electro-shock batons.

The repression is intended to quiet the population in the run-up to the fourth anniversary of the Dili massacre at the Santa Cruz cemetery.

Attention

Jakarta is well aware that the attention of the world's media will be focused on East Timor for the day. With the 20th anniversary of the invasion coming up on December 7, and the situation tense throughout East Timor, the Indonesian government is looking for new ways to present the conflict to a skeptical outside world.

Stirring up "religious conflict" is one option. It is unhelpful for the Indonesian press to be allowed to report religious conflict.

In the case of East Timor it is encouraged.

The government has also encouraged Muslim organizations in Indonesia to side with the Muslim minority in East Timor against the Catholic majority.

The leadership of the resistance are combating this tactic, pointing to the fact that such conflicts have only occurred in the last year after massive provocation by the Indonesian military.

A pattern of organised provocation has emerged. In every single instance there have been Indonesian intelligence agents on the ground to instigate the violence.

The CMRM (National Council of Mascarres Resistance) published a statement in late October arguing that "Few conflicts in the world are so clear-cut and simple as the East Timorese conflict.

Here we have a people with a clear historical identity, invaded and occupied by another country without a prior and clear established claim to rule.

There are no overlapping, conflicting claims on East Timor by the neighbouring countries. Only Indonesia stands in the middle between the people of East Timor and self-determination.

It is tragic that the Indonesian occupation forces are now irresponsibly attempting to obstruct the issue by inciting religious conflicts."

Ending The Nightmare

Socialists against racism and fascism

Socialist Outlook has published this new collection of articles, including Ernst Mandel's "Learn the lessons of Germany, to examine the roots of racism and fascism and outline a strategy to defeat them.

How strong are the far right today? Why are racism and fascism on the rise in Eastern Europe and in the West? Can the ethnic cleansers of ex-Yugoslavia be called "fascist"?

For your copy of this 128-page book, send a cheque for £6.95 plus 75 pence postage, payable to "Socialist Outlook Fund", to PO Box 1108, London N4 2UJ.

Ending The Nightmare

Socialists against racism and fascism

Solidarity day November 12

The international solidarity movement has several plans for the anniversary of November 12.

Socialist will be taking place across North America and in Europe. In the Asia-Pacific area, atrium in Kuala Lumpur, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In the US, an event in Chicago and in the UK, a protest in London.

Socialist Co-operation Forum APES will be holding a meeting on November 12 in London and there will be a protest outside the Indonesian Embassy, Grosvenor Square Central London on November 12 from 5.30pm.

Solidarity day November 12
RMT to strike against victimisations

Last week Tom Richie, the membership secretary of Manchester South RMT at Piccadilly station Manchester, was sacked for putting up a branch notice on a notice board. This follows the sacking of Chris Lines from Longsight Manchester British Rail depot at the end of September.

Weaken unions

This second sacking indicates a determination by British Rail to weaken unions in Manchester area in the run up to privatisation. The sacking of four years ago at Piccadilly three years ago was designed to break the union. It failed. Management are back for a second go.

The response of the RMT however will make management think again about their actions. The National General Grades Committee has voted for simultaneous strike ballots and action against all three cases. This is exactly the response needed.

The continued strength of the RMT remains a massive obstacle to the privatisation. The sacking of militants is designed to undermine this strength.

The inclusion of the reps sacked three years ago marks a significant victory for those activists at Piccadilly and elsewhere who would not let the matter drop. The four’s success this year resulted in the RMT AGM voting for a strike ballot to be held—a decision that the GGC has now voted to carry through.

All RMT activists need to build a campaign to ensure that the GOC does not back off in the face of the inevitable management legal response. All militants in the trade union movement should prepare to organise support for the forthcoming strikes.

by Simon Deville

Around 8,000 people joined the TUC Unity Against Racism demonstration in Manchester on 28th October, marking the largest anti-racist demo this year.

This demo could not have been at a more opportune moment, amidst preparation by the Tories for a massive attack on the rights of asylum seekers and black people more generally.

Even many Tory MPs have expressed unease about proposals to make public sector workers, police and employers responsible for carrying out immigration checks. However most of these Tories have been prima facie concerned about the possibility of employers being fined for employing "illegal" immigrants, rather than the racism these laws will promote and institutionalise.

Anti-racists must welcome the fact that many trade unionists now have anti-racist policies which had been unheard of just ten years ago.

The fact that the TUC has organised two national demos against racism in recent years is a massive step forward. But this in itself is far from adequate.

That only 8,000 attended the demo showed how much this opportunity was wasted. Any media mobilisation by the trade union movement and anti-racist movement should be able to mobilise at least tens or hundreds of thousands.

The sectarian divisions within the anti-racist movement have created an obstacle to an authoritative movement that can make a real impact in the workers’ movement and force its demands upon the government.

If the trade union movement is really to fight racism, one demonstration every couple of years is nowhere near adequate.

Public sector workers must start organising now to refuse to implement racist laws, and all workers should be organising to oppose employers carrying out immigration checks.

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by Simon Deville

Network AGM: key test of strength for Labour left

By Simon Kennedy

After the spin doctors’ carefully crafted Labour conference in Brighton, the left continues to fight and organise.

There is a genuine and widespread discontent among the rank and file in the Labour Party at Blair’s rightward lurch.

In the days of obligatory standing ovations it gets harder and harder to see the reality behind the phony opportunities, but there is real anxiety at the patriotism and Christianity that is now being passed off as a socialist vision.

There is very little enthusiasm for Blair’s politics in the Party. There is a great deal of desire to get rid of the Tories.

The Socialist Campaign Group Network is emerging as a central organising force for the left. It has over 50 groups around the country and is continuing to grow.

An all-hands discussed the way forward at the Socialist Campaign Group Network conference fringe.

It is taking the first steps from being a network to becoming a more organised political tendency. There are the signs that significant sections of delegates from both the CLPs and trades unions are forming an umbrella or alternative.

The Network AGM—to be held in Manchester Town Hall on 11 November—is an opportunity to build on these openings, especially over the minimum wage and education policy.

These issues are central. They give us a chance to break through the electoralist Blair’s clique so ruthlessly exploits.

Nothing could be a better vote winner than a minimum wage, giving millions of low paid workers a reason to vote Labour.

Education

The same is true of education. All levels of society are effected by the Tory cuts. The rapid growth of the PACE campaign shows the potential of this issue to link up those on the ground with a fight to put demands on an incoming Labour administration.

This is a job for the Network. It has to take up every opportunity to campaign on the issues that are affecting the daily lives of working class people.

By doing this it can achieve the dual task of reaching out to those fighting in the communities, and strengthening the left in the Labour Party and trades unions.

We must face facts. The right was able to win at conference because the left is weak. The Labour movement has suffered more than a decade of heavy blows. The balance of forces is not with us.

But times change. By building campaigns on the ground and organising the left in the labour movement to put demands on our leaders, socialists can help change them.
The Nation of Islam: radical conservatives or heirs of Malcolm X?

By Joe Auciello

Farrakhan’s movement is building a base in Britain’s black community: here at a protest against the murder of Brian Douglas. What are the reasons for his growing influence? Why is the NOI flourishing, especially when other Black organisations are wrecked by crisis and decline? How can a man whose policies are in many ways highly conservative become the champion of Blacks who are angry and fed up with oppression?

Conservative

White Farrakhan takes a conservative stand on a range of issues, he is openly defiant and unafraid to denounce the racist history and practices of the US government in the fiercest, most uncompromising terms.

For this reason, Farrakhan and the NOI have become the vehicle for a mass Black nationalist sentiment demanding the “freedom, justice, and equality” which is long overdue.

In some portions of his presentation in Springfield he sounded as conservative as any of the Republican candidates. “What’s going on?” he repeatedly asked, denouncing the social ills and moral failures that, in his view, bode evil America - the increased visibility of gays, indecent dress among women, the prevalence of nudity in Hollywood films, condom distribution in high schools, the legality of abortion and especially the lack of parental consent laws to restrict abortion for teenagers.

He criticised feminism, rap music and videos, and granite culture: “you young white people with your head full of dope and your damn guitar and your long hair - you don’t know whether you’re a man or a woman - am I right?”

Khomelni

He praised religious fundamentalism, Islam as well as Islamic, especially that of Ayubollah Khomelni. Yet this conservative emphasis on morality and self-improvement is not entirely negative. It is an antidote to the advertisers who have made the African American community the special target for liquor and tobacco sales.

The meaning of the massive march

The platform of the march

In an April 1 speech in Massachusetts Farrahhank made the following points.

1. The march is a protest against the oppression of Black people and a declaration of our “right to justice and our right to determine the future of ourselves and our people.”

2. The march is a “day of atonement” in which the Black man will apologize to the Black Woman for his sins, his sloth, his personnel failures, and will pledge to live up to his personal responsibilities.

3. The march is a work stoppage and economic boycott. The date is set for Monday so that Black men will not go to work that day. Black Women will support the march by staying at home, buying no products. This boycott will show the power of Blacks in the American economy - "this modern-day Babylon." - by refusing to participate in it for one day.

4. The march makes a political call to all black people to leave the Democratic and Republican parties, which have failed to address Black issues and needs, and to re-register as independents.

5. The march is a call to unite among Black people in the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.
How US left saw Million Man March

IT WAS the biggest all-black mobilisation in the US since the 1950s: a march which brought hundreds of thousands into activity for the first time — led by a conservative leader who is vulnerable to politically challenge that oppression.

Revolutionaries in the US took a range of stance. These edited selections put forward the main views.

Socialist Workers’ Party

THE SWP was once the fraternial section of the CPUSA. But in the 1980s, it broke with Trotskyism and now aligns itself with the Cuban Communist Party. Which, on the October issue of The Militant, the weekly paper reflecting the views of the SWP, Sam Manuel and Greg Rosen argue that “a host of capitalist politicians along with leaders of national civil rights organisations, businesses’ groups and other organisations endorsed the October 16 march.

“Not a single demand is placed on Washington in defence of affirmative action, against cop brutality, for a jobs programme, or any other measures to protect the working class in general, or black workers in particular, from the ravages of economic depression and the employers’ offensive.

“The march emphasises the themes of repressing black, family and country in an effort to split black men.

“While the march initiators’ central purpose was — and is — to build the Nation of Islam financially and politically, a raft of political groups and individuals moving to the right found cause to associate with the action.

Socialist Action

SOCIALIST ACTION was founded by SWP members expelled for defending the SWP’s Trotskyist continuity. It has fraternal links to the Fourth International, the worldwide socialist organisation which Socialists Outloud also supports. Writing in the October issue of Socialist Action, Jim Hahn explained that the march “does signify that a section of the black community has tried of being taken for granted by the Democratic Party.

“The overwhelming majority of African Americans are working class, disenfranchised workers, a black worker in America — no Black Rockefeller or Perot. The fact, no other section of American society has less of a social or financial base for the blooming of capitalism; on the contrary, any mass mobilisation of the black community tends to trigger an anti-capitalist dynamic.

“The majority of people who participated went beyond Farrahkhan and the Nation of Islam. They went to stand up, not just for black men, but for racism in the US.

“The Nation of Islam is primarily a black sect. Its programme includes sexist attitudes towards women, and Farrahkhan has made many anti-semitic and anti-gay statements. But Farahkhan is not the leader of the black community. It is just that he fills a real leadership vacuum in the black movement at the moment and that’s why people marched at his call.”

International Socialist Organisation

THE ISO IS the US wing of the Socialist Workers’ Party here in Britain. In the October edition of the US Socialist Worker, the editorial notes that “Support for the march upon the ideological spectrum from the Rev. Jesse Jackson to Black conservatives.

“The march’s message is unabashedly conservative. ‘We must repent of the laziness that has caused us not to be willing to take up our responsibility to do for self.”’ Farrahkhan wrote in a motivational.

“This amounts to little more than blame-the-victim rhetoric that echoes the right-wing’s attack on welfare for destroying the black family.

“While it is certainly true that many — if not most — of those attending the march will not support the NOI’s agenda, the event’s politics still reflect Farrahkhan’s reactionary views.

“A march that targets the people responsible for racism today — the corporations and their politicians — would be a step forward. The Million Man March represents a step backward.”
From pessimistic analysis to ultra-left conclusion

Militant fails to define the moment

In *Socialism Today*, the monthly journal of Militant Labour, Peter Taaffe writes that Tony Blair’s triumph at this year’s Labour Conference and the scale of the defeat for the left represent a ‘defining moment’.

According to Taaffe, there has been a historic realignment of British politics, with the transformation of the Labour Party into a new ‘One Nation’ Labour.

Here DAVE PACKER argues that the left has suffered serious watershed defeats, but that this cannot be equated with a change in the class character of the Labour Party itself.

Even if such a change occurred, it would represent an historic defeat for the working class.

PETER TAAFFE writes: “Socialism Today and its predecessor Militant International, have argued that the Labour Party under Blair was in the process of being transformed from a workers’ organisation at bottom with a pro-capitalist leadership, into a wholly ‘liberal’ capitalist party.”

“Blair’s 95 confirmed this. The majority of capitalist commentators, either implicitly or explicitly, accepted it.”

“The only issue under dispute is whether the process has been completed, that the

How many Labour Party activists would split to join Militant’s ‘Real Labour Party’?

Labour Party has new ex- hibited any historical role as a vehicle for socialists and workers in the struggle against capitalism, or if it is still possible to halt the Blair juggernaut.” (pp9-10)

He continues: “The decisions of the conference held little encouragement for those on the left who, hoping against hope, believe that the Labour Party can be rescued.”

The whole weight of Taaffe’s argument is that the transformation has been more or less completed and is irreversible. Later in the same text, he writes that Militant Labour has been right about “the processes which have led to a fundamental change in the character of the Labour Party.” (p12)

New party

Taaffe draws the conclusion: Militant Labour, with others, should take the opportunity and build a new party of Labour!

His argument is based not simply on the recent defects for the left and the dramatic rightward shift of party policy, but also on Blair’s successfull structural and social changes to the Party.

“Left candidates are blocked and Howarth, one of the Tory authors of the Poll Tax, is welcomed on board. ... Thousands of socialist stalwarts have already gone rising the Clause Four de- feat). ... Workers drop out and are replaced by a Blair ‘ley’ of politically raw types, many middle class. ...”

Even more significant, according to Taaffe, is that Labour’s key defining feature has been overthrown. It is no longer a ‘federation of different trends and ideological currents ... which allowed the freedom of Marxists and others to put forward their ideas and have such a decisive influence at different stages in history.”

Given these fundamental changes in the character of the party, Taaffe insists that “A left transformation is now the most unlikely perspective for the Labour Party.”

Of course this breaks from their previous analysis, held for more than forty years.

The article rightly emphasises the significance of the new rule changes and changes in social composition, but wrongly argues that these features define the class character of the Labour Party.

Crucially, the most important federal element, trade union affiliation, remains intact.

Militant used to understand this. It is clear that Blair wishes to secure the historic link with the trade union and transform the Labour Party into a European-style social democratic-type party: but a deal was struck at conference guaranteeing (for the moment!) no further reduction in the union’s 50 per cent share of votes.

Unbroken link

Blair achieved his victory because he was able to forge a new alliance with the trade union bureaucracy, although mostly on his terms. The trade union link has not been broken, and there is everything to fight for.

The great mass of the working class still see Labour as their party and will turn out to vote for it at the next election in order to get rid of the Tories.

For Militant Labour to stand against the Labour Party and be seen as a diversion by the masses. Even the broad vanguard, who have few illusions in Blair, will see standing candidates against Labour as sheer folly.

Taaffe’s analysis, crucial to his argument for building a new socialist party in the medium term, is unsatisfactory: he claims that the class character of the Labour Party has already changed.

He argues that a right wing Labour government, intent on attacking the working class, will result in demands on wages, education, and housing, but that Blair is preparing to ‘rule out any opportunity’.

He therefore needs to make the Labour Party ‘safe’ from any pressure from the organised working class, hence the attacks on democracy.

Prejudged

The problem with this analysis is that Taaffe is prejudging the outcome of struggles which are still unfolding or yet to begin.

If Blair really were strong enough to brush aside resistance, it would imply a weak or non-existent fightback, and little or no mobilisation of class struggle left in the unions: yet if these are not the very forces on which any ‘new party of Labour’ would have to base itself, who does Taaffe see as the target audience of his new initiative?

The whole project of building a new left party at this stage faces an insurmountable contradiction: its political justification rests on an analysis — a critical historic and irreversible defeat for Labour’s left wing — which suggests the least favourable conditions ever for creating a class struggle organisation.

Despite Taaffe’s pessimism, Blair has not yet succeeded: on the contrary, despite the treachery of the union leaders, the pressure of the masses will be felt directly by a Labour government.

Ruptures

At first the union bureaucrats will try to hold the lid, exploiting the initial mood of ‘give them a chance’, but a struggle will at some point break through, and ruptures will probably appear within the bureaucracy.

How do we know? Because this was the way previous Labour governments have run into conflict with the rank and file of the unions.

If we face this situation again in three or four years time, Labour’s analysis of the Labour Party would naturally lead him to fight for the unions to disaffiliate. He writes that once Blair refuses to satisfy working class demands, ordinary trade unionists will decide to cut away.

The party could go for unions to disaffiliate from the party, as happened with the New Zealand Labour Party in the 1930s. The ground will be prepared for splits towards the left.

Will the left-wing moving sectors of the bureaucracy detach from the trade union left, Labour Party and affiliate to Militant Labour? Or will they be forced to place themselves at the head of a struggle to regain control of the Party and its leadership?

At first, at least, the latter scenario seems the most probable. Depending on the character of the left leadership fought up in this situation, the fight for the soul of the Labour Party would be on. Under these conditions it would be a sectarian division to campaign for the disaffili- ation of the trade unions. The task would be to join that fight.

Whatever scenario unfolds in three or four years time, the task of the left today is to fight for a Labour government, and to continue the struggle against the Tories.

In the unfolding process of Labour’s realignment, and defeat of the trade union link, the left in the Labour Party must break from its narrow parlia- mentarism and place itself at the forefront of the coming struggles.

This means focusing on the battles in the trade unions, and fighting for the Labour Party to take up the struggles of the oppressed and the youth.
Labour left fights on -- against the odds

By Neil Murray

THAT BLAIR would have a “good” conference was mostly predictable. In any football match, if you have far more players, the match officials on your side, and have also removed your team’s goalposts, then you stand a good chance of winning.

But to read press reports you would hardly think there was a challenge from the Left. Yet time and again there was a fight from the Left – on the witch-hunt of Liz Davies, on education, on the minimum wage amongst other things.

That the Left failed to win anything was primarily because the leaders of the main unions were committed to not rocking the boat – for them winning the election was more important than ever price took precedence over their unions’ conference policy.

Several smaller unions voted with the Left throughout, and even in the other there was often a battle in the delegations over how their votes were cast.

To make sure nothing went wrong with the manipulation of conference reached new heights, such as the “planting” of an IGC executive member to move the motion on the minimum wage and the work reluctantly agree to remit.

Blair’s speech was a mixed bag. Of course, it got the obligatory standing ovation, but many were disguised with its mixture of patriotism and everything.

The commitments made by Blair (and other front bench speakers) were by and large hollow, but it was significant that they were made at all, given the previous refusal to be pinned down.

Where vague commitments were made – on class size, railways, VAT on fuel, Compulsory Competitive Tendering – they were on issues over which there has been public protest. Even Blair feels that he has to pay lip service to popular demands.

Lousy

The Left has a lousy conference, but it was there, and it was fighting. The Campaign Group and Tribune rallies and the Labour Left Briefing launch were all big, as was the Socialist Campaign Group Supporters’ Network round-up meeting attended by about 100.

The Network’s daily bulletin went down well, and it now has about 50 affiliated groups around the country.

Significant sections of delegates from both the unions and the CLPs are looking for an alternative - a fight for which the Left must provide a lead, around issues like the minimum wage and education policy, as well as providing an overall analysis of where Blair is leading the Labour Party.

Instant success is not on the cards, but without this preparatory work disillusionment will lead to despair when a Blair government fails to address the questions facing millions of working people.

Arthur Scargill’s musings over whether to leave the Labour Party were as confused as they were a diversion from this task.

Scargill believes that it was Clause 4 alone which disintegrated the Labour Party from the Tories and Liberals, revealing the view that the Labour Party was at some time a socialist party, which it never was.

The real distinguishing feature is not an unclear paper policy – to which every Labour government has contributed during its time in office.

In fact administering capitalism – but the link with the Labour Party has with the organised working class, which remains unchanged in its fundamentals.

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Challenging social democracy

By Fred Arkwright

THE RIGHT wing leadership of the Labour Party is increasingly emerging as the favoured option for the ruling class, with large sections of the membership welcoming this as a sign of Labour’s “electability”

This is as usual, when the bourgeois is prepared to support Labour, this should warn the alarm bells. The question is posed of what attitude we should take towards New Labour.

The ease at which Blair has been able to forge through changes in the Labour Party is a reflection of the weakness of the left, but this hasn’t happened in a vacuum.

These deficits for the left are not down to insufficient organisation over the last year but a reflection of the significant deficits of the working class over the last decade.

Despite its victories over the working class, the ruling class has rejected Thatcherism, looking to European integration to re-establish an industrial basis.

Blair’s programme is to lead the bourgeoisie into bourgeois democracy. This means integration into the whole project of the European bourgeois state, including dismantling large sections of the welfare state, the creation of authoritarian regimes in which the police are given massive new powers, and the establishment of racist immigration laws that are uniform throughout Europe.

The Tory Party is divided, so Labour look the best bet for the ruling class.

The problem for Blair is something quite different. The Labour Party still has links with the unions and will depend upon the support of large sections of the Labour movement for the implementation of his programme.

The real test will come when Blair tries to implement his programme in office, the real defeat would be if Blair can smash Labour’s link with the working class.

Reflection

It is true that the Labour Party is weak. However, there has not been yet a historic defeat. The Clause Four defeat, despite being a significant setback, does not mark a qualitative change in the party. Any upturn in workers’ struggle is still likely to have a reflection in the party.

When struggles re-emerged in the mid-1980s - like the miners’ strike - they attempted to find political expression in the Labour Party. Much of the far-left outside the Labour Party, failed to challenge either the Bennite or Militant leadership of these struggles.

What both Bennism and Militant shared was a mis-conception that socialism could be achieved through bourgeois-democratic means, and on a municipal level. Even when the Labour left did attempt to mobilise workers, it was at a stage where the army was called in to support changes through local government, rather than with the workers to fight for their own class interests.

We must not make the same mistake this time. The struggles of youth and the socially oppressed will find a political expression. That is to say they will find a way to implement their demands. Whilst the masses still look towards parliament to bring about change they will continue to test the limits of bourgeois democracy.

That means taking up the struggles of workers and the oppressed within the Labour Party.
Yeltsin may be back: but can Russia recover?

By Rick Simon

BORIS YELTSIN’S heart problems mirror the general state of the Russian economy and politics. Russia also has a fundamentally unhealthy body (politic) on the brink of collapse. Yeltsin’s personality is so low that even should he fail to recover after his re-emergence from hospital last week he has no chance of being re-elected President in next June’s elections.

Given the new constitutional powers of the President, the policies of Yeltsin’s successor may not be that different. The odds of it being someone from Yeltsin’s camp are slim; but first Russia’s liberals have to negotiate next month’s elections to the State Duma.

Yeltsin’s destruction of the old parliament provided an opportunity to create a consolidated legislature. This is a long way from the old duma, which was two houses: Communist and liberal.

The new parliament is a two-party system, with a majority of Yeltsin’s own candidates. This will make it even more difficult for the opposition to gain a foothold in the legislature, especially with the federal government holding all the major foreign policy cards.

The government has already taken measures to restrict the opposition’s ability to challenge Yeltsin. The most significant is the new law that requires opposition candidates to register with the government before they can run for office.

The opposition worries that this law will be used to prevent them from running for office, or to disqualify candidates who are not registered with the government.

The government also has the ability to control the media, which is essential for the opposition to communicate with its supporters.

The opposition has made some gains in recent months, but it is unlikely to gain a majority in the next election. This is because the government has control of the economy, and is able to use this to its advantage.

However, the opposition is not completely powerless. It has been able to organize protests and demonstrations, which have been met with violence by the government.

The opposition also has the support of a significant number of Russian citizens, who are dissatisfied with the government’s policies.

What’s Happening

Until 3 Dec

RECYCLE RECYCLE RECYCLE

Until 3 Dec

RECYCLE II - a show of prints by Stuart J

Bullen, the Greenhouse, The Drill Hall, 18 Chevalies St WC1

11am-630pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun, Mon even women only.

Thurs 9

MANCHESTER Socialist

Outlook Forum on Bosnia 7.30pm Manchester Town Hall with speaker Geoff Ryan.

Sat 18

SOCIALIST Campaign Group

Network WG, Manchester Town Hall, 7-10.30-4.30

Weds 22

End of the Nightmare - BIRMINGHAM Public launch of book in memory of comrade Bob Smith. Speakers include Mary Pearson, Mohammed Irshid (in

vited), 7.30pm at the Tom Pouce Club, Pershore Road.

Sat 25

STOP HOSPITAL Closures forum sponsored by London Health Emergency. Speakers include Wendy Savage, Bert’s Guy’s and Edgware campaigns, 11.30am to 4.00pm ULU, Malet St. London WC1.

DECEMBER

Sun 2 & Sun 3

PAPER making course held by Stuart J Bullen Details The Drill Hall 0171 633 1355

Sun 3

MARCH to stop deportation of Raghib Singh. Assemble 1.00pm at Geraldine Mary Harrowsworth Park, Lambeth, March to rally at Trafalgar Square. Called by NUJ.

CLOSE MANDEL MEMORIAL FUND. Socialist Outlook raises and supports plan to raise £8,000, as part of an international effort. Please make your donation payable to Ernest Mandel Memorial Fund and rush to us at PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU.
How Stalin knifed the Spanish revolution

By Alan Thornett

THERE IS a debate going on about the role in the 1930s of the Spanish Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM). Some critics of Ken Loach’s 'Land and Freedom' argue that the crushing of the POUM, the theme of his film, was a side issue in the war. Others argue that it highlights a sectarian struggle amongst the left. Both these criticisms misunderstand the dynamics of the war and the revolution as well as the key strategic problems from the Republican side which were being fought out at that time.

In fact Loach’s subject matter goes to the heart of the problem: what was the strategic objective of the war from the point of view of the Spanish working class? And why did the POUM, which was already in the vanguard of the POUM, and it was this debate which held the key to the defeat of Franco’s fascist revolt. That revolution was on the agenda in Spain at that time and could hardly be a matter of dispute. The fascist bid for power itself, in July 1936, was a direct response to a revolutionary wave of struggles which embraced the Spanish working class after the elections of the Popular Front government in February of that year.

Mass strikes

The fascist revolt intensified this process, triggering mass strikes and the POUM called a general strike in the Republican zone. The issue was not whether to start a revolution, but whether the POUM could win in a conflict which was already in progress - in the interest of Stalin's policy of promoting cross-class politics from below.

The POUM which had been founded in 1935 was by late 1936 a mass movement of around 350,000 members. It was, however, along with the anarchists, politically compromised by its support for the Popular Front.

The anarchists had entered the Republican government headed by Largo Caballero and Andres Nin, one of the central leaders of the POUM, had been a member of the Catalan coalition government. Despite popular perception, the POUM was not a Trotskyist organisation, though it shared the Trotskyists an analysis of Stalinism. Nin was former Trotskyist and had been the leader of the Spanish section of the International Left Opposition. He left the ILO for the POUM at its formation and was joined by him and the POUM for their support of the Popular Front.

When the POUM was compromised in position in the government, both the anarchists and their trade union federations, along with the POUM (and the left of PSOE in some extent) had a radically different view of the course of the war from the mainstream of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) or the Stalinists.

The Stalinists, from the outset, opposed social revolution and called for a democratic republic - as part of Stalin’s alliance with western capitalist 'democracies' against fascism. They were supported by the mainstream of PSOE, and when Caballero became prime minister in August he argued that the Republic had to adopt a form of government acceptable to Britain and France.

"First we must win the war", he argued, "afterwards we can talk of revolution."

Vaccinating

At the time of the rising, Stalin wrote to Caballero in September addressing on alliance with Azana, the vaccinating President and Republican Party leader, in the following terms: "This is necessary to prevent the enemies of China considering them a communist republic."

Both the anarchists and the POUM, despite their participation in government, took the sharply opportunistic, one bloc and file even more than the leaders.

They saw the way forward through harnessing the revolutionary energy of the working class, by embracing a military strategy linked to key social objectives such as the expropriation and redistribution of land. Nin asked in a speech in September: "How the working class in arms now to defend the democratic republic? Is the working class of Catalonia and Spain sacrificing itself and shedding its blood to return to the Republic of Azapa?"

The anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti put it this way: "We want to save POUM here in Spain, now, and not perhaps tomorrow after the government of Europe". He insisted that it was necessary to carry out the war and the revolution at the same time. These diverse views were directly reflected in the approach of the two sides to the military conduct of the war, which was initiated by mass militia, formed along political lines, confronting what was for Stalin and France.

The columns played an important role in halting the initial fascist advances and in the first defence of Madrid - where Durruti, the most able of the anarchist militia commanders, was killed.

Aid with strings

As the war progressed the prestige and power of the Communist Party was increased by Soviet military aid, with its political strings firmly attached.

They advocated the formation of a Popular Army, called the People’s Army, and the conduct of the war along conventional military lines. The POUM and the anarchist militia were a direct obstacle to this. That is one reason why they were denounced, provoked and smashed by the CP, operating hand in hand with forces of Stalin’s GPU.

The POUM was outlawed on June 15, 1937, and this marked the end of the revolutionary potential of the civil war. Andres Nin was abducted by GPU agents, tortured, and beheaded to death.

By now the Moscow Trials were in full swing, demonstrating Stalin’s thinking towards his political opponents. Kamenev and Zinoviev were executed in August, and Stalinist propaganda now routinely equated Trotskyism with fascists. It is impossible to say whether a war conducted along revolutionary lines would eventually have defeated Franco. But it is clear that Stalin’s line was a disaster. Despite his craven support for a parliamentary republic, the British and French governments persisted in their line of ‘non-intervention’.

Gene genies bid to ’treat’ gay men

By Peter Purton

TWO YEARS ago, a US professor announced that he had discovered the ‘gay gene’ - well, nearly, anyway. According to the scientific ifs and buts, the media went to town. Not everyone was as upbeat as the Daily Mail which said that our ‘other’ hope - that gays could be aborted before birth, in a genetic approach - was conducted in sililoquy by militia columns, formed along political lines, confronting what was for Stalin and France.

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Deficient and — as we now see — ultimately treatable.

For those who don’t want to be treated, because they are quite happy this way, and who argue that although no one knows what causes homo- sexuality or homosexuality there is a reasonable case to be made, founded in a historical study of sexuality in changing social contexts, that the society is socially conditioned.

Despite the claims of the scientists, scientific research — which is funded by rich corporation and individuals — is rarely politically neutral. But when the pioneer of this research ends up denying that there is a ‘gay gene’, what has it all achieved?

Maybe they should have tried to find which gene pre-disposes people to become left-wing gay men or maybe we’ll just have to ‘cure’ them in the course of the struggle.

Peter Purton is an officer of the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

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Lift Nigerian death sentence!

Free Ken Saro-Wiwa!

By Bala Kumar

Ken Saro-Wiwa, writer and activist and eight other Ogonis have been sentenced to death by a military tribunal in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. "I was found guilty before I was even tried," said the 54-year-old leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).

Saro-Wiwa and fourteen others were arrested last year on charges of complicity in the murder of four pro-government traditional chiefs allegedly by militant Ogoni youths.

According to the Lagos based Civil Liberties Organization, "The entire trial was riddled with procedural irregularities in a curiously dis- play of force and intimidation which manifested a clear bias against Saro-Wiwa and others."

An affidavit obtained by Saro-Wiwa's defence lawyer and populist politician Gani Fawehinmi from a key state witness proved that the military authorities with the active support of the Nigerian subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell had intimidated and bribed the latter into framing the accused. Charles Darwi, a musician, said he was promised 30,000 naira and music contracts in return for naming the defendants and threatened with being a co-accused if he refused. However the hand-picked tribunal was uninterested in the truth or justice. It went through the motions of a trial but the final judgement came as little surprise.

The motive behind the victory of the MOSOP activist has been to silence the best known representatives for the Ogoni people and to destroy the movement they built in defence of their human and livelihood rights.

MOSOP was formed in 1990 to campaign for political autonomy for Ogoniland, a region in the Niger Delta and for a fairer sharing of the revenue from the oil-mined tree. Until it was forced to stop its operations in late 1993 through popular resistance, Shell mined half of the country's total oil production in Ogo- niland.

Nigeria relies on oil exports for over 80 per cent of its annual income and the Ogonis have paid a high price for it.

Minority

The 500,000 strong Ogonis are a minority in the oil rich Niger Delta area where they occupy a mere 750 square kilometers of land. Since Shell is in partnership with the national petroleum corporation began exploiting the oil reserves there, environmental problems have multiplied. Pipelines cross-over what was once agricultural land even invading the homes of people. Oil spillages occur frequently because of the age of pipes and lack of maintenance.

One scientific report estimated that between 1982 and 1992 alone 1.62 million gallons of oil were spilled by Shell in twenty-seven separate incidents. The soil is so contaminated that no crop can grow. The rivers and streams are so polluted that fish can't survive in them and the Ogo- nis cannot use the water.

In the mining of oil natural gas is also extracted. What Shell does is to burn it off. Continuously. For twenty four hours in a day, 365 days in a year and for the last thirty seven years. Not only does gas flaring destroy plant and animal life through acid rain, it has also had a devastating toll on peoples health and life expectancies.

A formerly self-sufficient economy has been destroyed. Food now has to be imported and many Ogonis leave their homes and migrate to other areas because jobs created from oil mining have gone to non-locals.

Nigeria enjoys US$10 billion dollars in oil revenues much of it from Ogoniland but the Ogonis have an unem- ployment rate of eighty per cent and a literacy rate of twenty per cent. Schools and health clinics are scarce and the infrastructure developed only to suit the needs of Shell. When the Ogonis led by their youth rose up to protest at their impoverishment by Shell and the indifference of their government Shell called in the military who are nothing more than their mercenaries. With great brutality they have shot thousands killing upwards of 2,000 Ogonis.

They burn homes and rape women, driving the inhabi- tants into the bush and leaving all material possessions. It is only the militarisation of Ogoniland and the destruction of the MOSOP leadership which till now has prevented uprisings against the death sentences.

Even by the standards of its predecessors the military dic- tatorship of General Sani Abacha and the Provisional Ruling Council is a nasty piece of work.

Its casual murder of its opponents, the banning of newspapers, political parties and associations, the continued denial of human rights ac- tivists and trade unionists rank it as the most oppressive re-

gime Nigerians have been burdened with.

Western governments play the duplicitious game of criti- cising its human rights record and frustration of the demo- cratic process while happily trading and arming it. Britain has not stopped the lucrative sale of arms ranging from machine guns to tanks and is un- likely to back calls at the forthcoming Commonwealth summit for Nigeria's expulsion.

At the beginning of Octo- ber Abacha had to allow the commutation of death sentences passed on some of his oppo- nents due to worldwide condemnation and the threat of European Union sanctions in- cluding the freezing of Nige- ria's assets abroad, no visas for the military and trade boycotts.

International solidarity with the MOSOP activists can force concessions from the military. On it hinges nine lives.

Lift the death sentences! Free them now!