

Workers ACTION

No.13

October – November 2001

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Stop the war! Neither imperialism nor fundamentalism

- **Against segregation in education**
- **Can a growth economy be sustained?**
- **Archive – Raskolnikov on Afghanistan**
- **plus Unison, Tory meltdown, reviews and more**

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No.13

Oct – Nov 2001

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Contents

Stop the war!	1
On the bombings	3
Prospects for the second term	4
Fight for disaffiliation or accountability?	5
A dissenter departed	7
Unison NEC talking left	8
Letters	9
Racism in education	10
The Tories choose oblivion	11
Gothenburg diary	12
The limits of 'realism'	13
Growth, scarcity and socialism	15
British imperialism and Afghanistan	19
The war in Afghanistan	20
Imperial holocaust	22

Stop the war!

The suicide attacks in the USA on September 11 were terrible atrocities that all socialists should condemn in the strongest possible terms. While the buildings targeted may represent symbols of capitalist exploitation or military power, the victims are for the most part ordinary working people. Whatever the crimes carried out by the US and its proxies around the world, there can be no justification for such actions. But as thousands of civilians lie dead under the rubble of the World Trade Center, the US and British governments are preparing to kill thousands more in a so-called 'war against terrorism'.

There is widespread hatred for the US because of its economic and cultural domination of the world, and its role in installing and propping up oppressive regimes that advance its interests. But understanding this does not mean that socialists should align themselves in any way whatsoever with those responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center. Those who do not distinguish between the industrial, political and military elite of the USA and ordinary working class Americans are just as much the enemies of socialists and socialism as the ruling class. Anyone serious about challenging US domination throughout the world needs to recognise that absolutely key to this is winning the support and solidarity of the US working class.

There should be no qualms about expressing grief at the deaths of thousands of civilians in the US. What is sickening is that people are brutalised by Western propaganda to be indifferent to similar atrocities elsewhere in the world. The mainstream media and politicians have relentlessly focused on the victims of the attacks, the effect of which has been to whip up a desire for vengeance and make it easier for the government to prepare its retaliation. In contrast to this, in the last Gulf war Western TV networks showed the bombings of Iraq throughout from the perspective of the attackers, often with video footage from an on-board camera to show the accuracy of the alleged 'smart bombs'. Deliberate misinformation was transmitted to minimise the scale of the killings and to use dehumanised, clinical terms such as 'collateral damage' when referring to the killing of innocent civilians. When mass killings are carried out in support of the interests of big business they often go unreported altogether or else are sanitised for public consumption by being presented as little more than a video game. Only a matter of weeks ago the BBC dropped the use of the term 'assassinations' in favour of 'targeted killings' when referring to the murders of Palestinian leaders by the Israeli state.

The countries and individuals presented as villains are, with few exceptions, former allies of imperialism whose real crime is to bite the hand that feeds them. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan the CIA armed, trained and funded the mujaheddin. It was in the US interest to have an armed, anti-communist force built along religious lines. It should come as

no surprise that the Taliban evolved from such a reactionary organisation. Osama bin Laden learned his trade from the CIA. Likewise, Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime were supported by imperialism when they were considered a useful puppet in the war against Iran.

As we go to press, two weeks on from the attacks, no real evidence of the perpetrators has been presented. The US government, loyally followed by Tony Blair, has named Bin Laden as the prime suspect, with Bush making appeals for him to be delivered 'dead or alive'. Whoever carried out the attack, it is clear that the only people to benefit from it will be the right wing and those promoting US interests world-wide. Immediately after the attack Bush's domestic support rocketed to 84 per cent and has steadily risen since. Opinion polls have shown that there is overwhelming support in the US for war, even where that means the deaths of many innocent civilians. Although few other countries have given Bush the *carte blanche* that the British government has, the US has used the opportunity to build an alliance to support its military intervention anywhere it deems fit. Whatever reservations or qualifications other countries have expressed, none is likely to criticise any US actions unless it is facing massive internal pressure to do so. Indeed, the Taliban appears to be the only government that has asked for any evidence that Bin Laden was responsible for the attacks. Senior military officials have already expressed the US's intention to carry out an assassination policy (sanitised as 'extra-judicial killings') without so much as a whimper of opposition.

It still remains unclear exactly who the US will be at war with. The most likely scenario is that there will be a war against Afghanistan on the pretext that the Taliban is sheltering Bin Laden. The US has already presented a 'non-negotiable ultimatum' in the knowledge that the Taliban cannot agree to it. At the same time, many senior US officials have mentioned Iraq as a 'rogue state' that they might also declare war on. But since Iraq has already lost over a million people through Allied bombing, including in the near daily raids carried out by US and British warplanes enforcing the 'no-fly zones', and as a result of Western-imposed economic sanctions, a declaration of war would only formalise a situation that has existed since 1991.

It is absolutely clear that the reactionary 'alliance against terrorism' will simply give governments throughout the world cover to carry out their own wars of national oppression. Tony Blair has adopted the role of chief whip for this alliance in the role that New Labour does best – twisting arms to stop any public dissent. Israel was forced to take a step back after it jumped the gun and escalated its assault on the Palestinian people, but only because this policy was hindering the building of this alliance in the first place. It's only a matter of time before its offensive will be stepped up again in the name of the fight

against terrorism, as will Russia's war on the Chechen people, Turkey's war on the Kurds, and so on. Whereas before the attacks on the US these wars might have faced some criticism within the UN (although the US generally vetoes the UN doing anything about it), now such wars of oppression are much more likely to be carried out with impunity.

Even in terms of domestic British politics, the balance of forces has shifted further to the right as a result of the attacks. There are plans for even more draconian 'anti-terrorist' legislation, which would no doubt be rushed through parliament with little debate like other 'temporary, emergency' measures have been in the past. There is a real danger that compulsory identity cards will be introduced. And there has been an increase in racist attacks. Less obviously, there are moves to try and put the class struggle on hold by the labour movement leadership. On September 11, Tony Blair was about to deliver a speech to the TUC's annual conference in Brighton that promised to increase the tensions between the government and the trade unions on the question of privatisation. But as soon as the extent of the attacks on New York and Washington became clear, he made a short announcement to the conference about the evils of terrorism and returned to London, and the rest of the week's conference was closed down. Since then there have been moves to downplay anti-PFI campaigns from the trade union side, although of course the government has no intention of abandoning its PFI programme 'as a mark of respect'. Alongside this, airlines have jumped at the opportunity to use the attacks as an excuse for sacking thousands of staff, citing the loss of business as their reason. Likewise, the attacks have been blamed for pushing the US into recession, and for increasing the likelihood of world recession, although it should be noted that arms company shares rose by 27 per cent on the day Wall Street re-opened.

It should be absolutely clear from all this that only the forces of reaction are served by the September 11 attacks. It is equally clear that a war, far from putting an end to 'terrorism', can only

serve to fuel it. Where people are placed under the domination of an external power they will always try to resist through whatever means are at their disposal. After 50 years of brutal repression of the Palestinian people, Israel still has been unable to smash resistance to Zionist rule, precisely because the Palestinians don't have the luxury not to fight. Resistance against the Israeli state and its US backers is part of a basic struggle for survival for Palestinians. As Palestinians are driven into a more and more hopeless situation, it is hardly surprising that some look to religious fundamentalism for leadership in the absence of a credible alternative. For a small, backward country like Afghanistan to be placed under the domination of an advanced military power would mean that the opportunities for resistance through political campaigning, or even through military struggle, would become less and less possible. The more that options for open, 'legitimate' struggle are closed down, the more people will resort to terror tactics.

Increasingly, war is being presented as inevitable and just. We should be under no illusions – it is neither. The war can be stopped but only through the actions of a mass, global anti-war movement rooted in the working class and its organisations, but by no means limited to that. There have already been a number of initiatives – meetings, demonstrations and vigils to oppose a war. These must be built upon and spread wherever possible, with a conscious effort to link up with other such movements across the world. There must be a fight to win the trade union movement to an unequivocal position of opposing the war and for it to mobilise opposition at a local, regional and national level. Just as important is to take this opposition inside the Labour Party – while it may not be possible to change the minds of the Labour leadership, the greater the opposition from both inside and outside their party the harder it will be for the leadership to manoeuvre. By building common activities and campaigns between the labour movement and the anti-war movement we can start to turn the tide of chauvinism that is currently supporting the war.

WA

- **Stop the drive to war. Withdraw all Western military forces from the Middle East. Let the people of Afghanistan determine their own future**
- **End sanctions against Iraq. US and UK warplanes out of Iraq**
- **End support for Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. For an immediate settlement which recognises all the demands of the Palestinian people**
- **Open international borders to refugees**
- **No to any attacks on civil rights. No to the introduction of identity cards**
- **No scapegoating of the Islamic community. Defend ethnic minorities against racist attack**
- **No to the methods of individual terror. For international workers' unity**

**Emergency motion to Labour Party
Conference adopted by Islington North
Labour Party, September 18, 2001**

Conference condemns the attacks in the US last Tuesday. The wanton killing of thousands of people is a horrifying act in itself, and such attacks only serve to harden US attitudes to those it sees as its enemies. This has been made evident in Bush's stated intention to hold Osama Bin Laden responsible for the attack and to attack Afghanistan if he is not handed over.

However, the response to such an attack must not be the killing of more innocent people. An attack on Afghanistan, or anywhere else, as a reply to the attacks in the US is completely indefensible. Such an attack will almost certainly fail as those sought will have gone into hiding. The people of Afghanistan, who have had nothing to do with this attack, will be the victims.

We note that there is at present no firm evidence on why last Tuesday's attacks took place, although most assume that it is the work of people opposed to US actions in the Middle East. If this is so, the reason for the attacks can be understood, though not supported. The bombing and sanctions on Iraq – which have directly caused over a million deaths in the last eight years – must cease. British and US support for the actions of Israel against the Palestinians must also cease. To make these demands is not 'giving in to terrorism', but recognition of a massive injustice that our government and that of the US are perpetrating.

Conference calls upon Tony Blair, Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party, to drop his unconditional support for the US and instead work with other world leaders to prevent further pointless killing and to remove the conditions which give rise to the willingness of oppressed peoples to carry out terrorist acts.

Stop press – just called:

**Demonstration
Stop the War
Saturday October 13
London**

**See local posters and leaflets
for further details**

On the bombings

**This text was published by
Noam Chomsky after the
suicide attacks on the US**

The terrorist attacks were major atrocities. In scale they may not reach the level of many others, for example, Clinton's bombing of the Sudan with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people (no one knows, because the US blocked an inquiry at the UN and no one cares to pursue it). Not to speak of much worse cases, which easily come to mind. But that this was a horrendous crime is not in doubt. The primary victims, as usual, were working people: janitors, secretaries, firemen, etc. It is likely to prove to be a crushing blow to Palestinians and other poor and oppressed people. It is also likely to lead to harsh security controls, with many possible ramifications for undermining civil liberties and internal freedom.

The events reveal, dramatically, the foolishness of the project of 'missile defence'. As has been obvious all along, and pointed out repeatedly by strategic analysts, if anyone wants to cause immense damage in the US, including weapons of mass destruction, they are highly unlikely to launch a missile attack, thus guaranteeing their immediate destruction. There are innumerable easier ways that are basically unstoppable. But today's events will, very likely, be exploited to increase the pressure to develop these systems and put them into place. 'Defence' is a thin cover for plans for militarisation of space, and with good PR, even the flimsiest arguments will carry some weight among a frightened public.

In short, the crime is a gift to the hard jingoist right, those who hope to use force to control their domains. That is even putting aside the likely US actions, and what they will trigger – possibly more attacks like this one, or worse. The prospects ahead are even more ominous than they appeared to be before the latest atrocities.

As to how to react, we have a choice. We can express justified horror; we can seek to understand what may have led to the crimes, which means making an effort to enter the minds of the likely perpetrators. If we choose the latter course, we can do no better, I think, than to listen to the words of Robert Fisk, whose direct knowledge and insight into affairs of the region is unmatched after many years of distinguished reporting. Describing 'The wickedness and awesome cruelty of a crushed and humiliated people,' he writes that 'this is not the war of democracy versus terror that the world will be asked to believe in the coming days. It is also about American missiles smashing into Palestinian homes and US helicopters firing missiles into a Lebanese ambulance in 1996 and American shells crashing into a village called Qana and about a Lebanese militia – paid and uniformed by America's Israeli ally – hacking and raping and murdering their way through refugee camps.' And much more. Again, we have a choice: we may try to understand, or refuse to do so, contributing to the likelihood that much worse lies ahead.

<http://www.zmag.org/chomnote.htm>

Labour Party – the tide turns?

Prospects for the second term

Ever since Labour won the general election of 1997, sections of the left have been predicting – or even *seeing* – the beginnings of a fightback by the working class against its policy of authoritarian neo-liberalism. During the government's first term this was more wishful thinking than reality. Despite some valiant and long-term actions, outside of post and rail the number of working days lost to strike action remained at an all-time low. The unions were the dog that failed to bark, not just industrially, but even in putting pressure on the government to implement policies in the interests of their members (or, more accurately, to stop implementing policies which harm their members).

Political action was limited: demonstrations, except those of the Countryside Alliance, were small; revolts in parliament, with one or two exceptions such as the abolition of lone parent benefit, were restricted to 'the usual suspects'. Campaigns existed around many issues, but few had much real impact.

Until the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon altered the political landscape, it looked as if this was about to change quite dramatically from the start of Labour's second term. It is as yet unclear what the effect of the 'war against terrorism' will be, but the signs so far are not good. The GMB, for instance, has stopped its series of advertisements defending public services 'because the time is not right'. It also appears that at least part of the reason why TUC conference was halted after two days was because it was felt 'inappropriate' to have an argument with the government in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the US. Labour Party conference is also to be cut short, although what that will mean in terms of policy debate is difficult to say. Prior to these developments we looked set for an escalation of the fight against the government's plans, even if it was initially restricted to the 'political' rather than the industrial front. Shakespeare was surely correct when he had the

dying King Henry IV counsel his son, the future Henry V, 'to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels' when the domestic situation became difficult.

Nor was Labour's victory in the general election the unmitigated success that the spin-doctors would have us believe. Though the Tories were marginalised, the level of abstention – it was the lowest turn-out since 1918, when voting was very poorly organised due to the demobilisation after the First World War – and particularly abstention among traditional Labour supporters, was an indication of the discontent with the Labour government.

During the election campaign, union leaders maintained a discreet silence over the government's plans for further encroachment of the private sector into public services, despite Blair having said that election victory would mean a mandate for this policy. However, once the result was in the bag they queued up to have a go. An indication of the government's concern at this sudden sign of backbone was that Blair invited several of the key union leaders – Morris (TGWU) and Prentiss (Unison) among them – to Downing Street to discuss the issue.

After much wrangling in the courts and some strike action by rail unions, the 'Public Private Partnership' (aka privatisation) for the London underground is to go ahead, despite clear public opposition. Meanwhile, Roy Hattersley, a not unimportant figure for many mainstream Labour Party members, called for an 'uprising' against Blair, although his proposals for action (a think tank) hardly matched the rhetoric. The Centre Left Grassroots Alliance increased its representation on Labour's NEC despite reports of a loss of disillusioned Labour Party members.

Whether they felt moved by principle or freer to revolt given the fact that Labour had retained its overwhelming majority in the election, Labour backbenchers turned on the government when it removed respected chairs of

select committees, and managed to get them reinstated. Rebellion was also flagged up over the attempt to restrict the payment of Disability Allowance.

The Socialist Alliance's attempt to capitalise on disillusionment in the election failed dismally, with an average vote of only 1.7 per cent in those seats where they stood, despite the high level of abstention. Now they, and the rest of the left, are faced with the question of how to turn the seeds of discontent into a movement that can defeat the government's plans. The election result shows that this cannot be done by presenting an ultimatum along the lines of 'we are the only ones who oppose this or that government policy, join us', yet the Socialist Alliance is slow to realise this, to say the least.

The 'lobby' of Labour Party conference over privatisation on September 30 is a case in point. At a time when most unions were vociferously opposing the government's proposals for further privatisation, did the Socialist Alliance choose the labour movement as its partners in calling this lobby? No. It chose the Green Party and Globalise Resistance, effectively cutting off any support which could have been forthcoming from national unions and sections of the Labour Party. To compound the problem, the basis of the lobby was subsequently amended to cover any government policy which people might oppose. Having cut itself off from engagement with Labour Party members and those in the unions sceptical of the Socialist Alliance, the Alliance cannot find a way back (and to a large extent is not interested in doing so).

Those concerned with the serious task of fighting the government's attacks, rather than simply with the sectarian bolstering of their particular tiny fraction of the labour movement, have to seek ways of drawing all those in the movement opposed to these attacks into a single campaign; this will also have to be done to stop the foreign quarrel. **WA**

Trade unions and the Labour Party

Fight for disaffiliation or accountability?

by Pete Firmin

In the last few months there have been important developments in the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions affiliated to it, both on the level of policy (privatisation in particular) and the link itself. Several union conferences debated resolutions on the link, with a variety of outcomes.

One problem with this discussion is the amount of mis/disinformation circulating on what actually happened at union conferences. Some of the more 'optimistic' in the Socialist Alliances have been putting it about that unions (in particular the Fire Brigades Union, FBU) decided to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. In this they have been ably abetted by articles, such as one in the *Observer*, which say the same thing. To set the record straight, it is necessary to spell out what was (and was not) passed at union conferences and what their implications are.

FBU conference passed the following resolution, moved by its London region:

'Conference notes with concern the continuing attacks on the Fire service by Labour controlled Authorities.

'Therefore, Conference agrees that the Fire Brigades Union Political Fund will in future be used to support candidates and organisations whose policies are supportive of the policies and principles of the union. This may include candidates and organisations who stand in opposition to New Labour so long as they uphold policies and principles in line with those of the Fire Brigades Union.

'When considering any request for assistance the Fire Brigades Union and Regional Committees should carefully examine the policies and record of all such individuals and organisations. Conference instructs the Executive Council to prepare any necessary subsequent rule changes for Annual Conference 2002.'

FBU conference came just before the general election, at the point at which

Sean Woodward had just been selected (although in a rigged ballot) to stand for the Labour Party in St. Helens South and the Socialist Alliance had announced that an FBU activist would be its candidate against him. Three other FBU activists were also standing as Socialist Alliance candidates. Nor had the fiasco around the Labour Party's selection of its London mayoral candidate been forgotten by London region, which had strongly supported Ken Livingstone against Frank Dobson. Even so, the majority for the resolution was far short of the two-thirds which would be necessary for any rule change.

A similar resolution was defeated at CWU conference by a margin of about 2-1, although last year's conference had passed a motion that the union should consider disaffiliation if the government were to privatise the Post Office, a process that is now underway, if by stealth rather than frontal assault.

UNISON conference adopted the following resolution:

'The Labour Government – What do we get for our money?

'This conference notes that despite four years of a New Labour Government UNISON members continue to face cuts in jobs and conditions, that the privatisation of public services has continued apace and that hundreds of thousands of our members continue to earn less than £5 an hour.

'Conference notes that increasingly UNISON members are asking why we hand over millions of pounds of members' money to fund a party which is attacking our jobs, wages and conditions.

'Conference also notes that the New Labour policies have led significant groups of electors in London and elsewhere to vote against New Labour Candidates in favour of Independents or other Candidates who oppose cuts, privatisation and defend public services.

'This Conference does not believe that we are using our funds to defend

UNISON policy and objectives as required to under the rules of the union.

'Conference therefore instructs the NEC to consult the affiliated and general political fund committees, service groups, self-organised groups, regions and branches in order to prepare a report for submission to the annual conference in 2002 on the future of UNISON's political funds with appropriate recommendations accompanied by any necessary amendments to Rule.'

However, on the same day the following point in an amendment to a motion was defeated:

'Request the Affiliated Political Fund (APF) to continue to lobby the government to use direct public sector investment rather than PFI to fund capital projects. If however the Government do not give commitment that they are prepared to stop the use of PFI then the APF be requested to withhold UNISON's considerable funding for the Labour Party.'

Although moved by a Socialist Alliance supporter, the resolution was passed with the support (both speaking and voting) of many UNISON activists who are also Labour Party members. Their motivation for this was, at least in part, concern at the fact that because UNISON's political fund structures are virtually autonomous, the policies which the union pursues in the Labour Party do not reflect those passed by its conference. However, because the resolution only commits the union to a review, the new general secretary, Dave Prentiss, felt able to claim in interviews that nothing had changed.

The RMT AGM passed a resolution from Swansea branch which said that:

'This AGM declares that it cannot and will not continue to support a Labour Government that has deserted its working class roots and jumped into bed with its big business friends. It therefore declares that, unless these disastrous policies are changed, we will no longer support them politically or

financially.'

Whilst the resolution lacked any practical proposals it marks a significant shot across the bows of New Labour and those in the RMT leadership who have played down the differences with the government. Additionally, a resolution from Wolverton branch, attempting to reaffirm the union's support for the Labour Party as 'the only British political party that embodies the realistic hopes and aspirations of the membership', was voted down. In previous years RMT AGM has passed resolutions calling for the union to withdraw sponsorship from MPs who don't support union policy, but the late general secretary, Jimmy Knapp, managed to block any attempt to implement this.

At MSF conference no resolution on the link reached the agenda. At TGWU conference, an amendment questioning the union's political fund was not debated, while a motion calling for a 'reinvigorating and strengthening' of the link with Labour was carried overwhelmingly. At GMB conference a branch resolution calling for funding to the Labour Party to be dependent on support for GMB policies was overwhelmingly defeated (but see below).

While the overall issue of the union-Labour Party link is an intensely political one concerning the whole movement (even those unions not affiliated), within each union the rules governing the political fund are very different and, in some cases, Byzantine in the extreme.

Various statements and actions by union leaders have further highlighted this turmoil around the Party-union link. Bill Morris, general secretary of the TGWU, spoke of possibly working with the Liberal Democrats over the defence of the public sector, although he has yet to point out precisely what this means. John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMB, spoke of the union putting up 'public sector candidates' against the Labour Party in local elections. The most decisive *action* by a union over the link has been the decision of the GMB to divert £250,000 of its annual £650,000 payment to the Labour Party into a campaign in defence of public services. The first fruit of this has been full-page advertisements in the national press.

What motivates this change of attitude among the trade union leaders, given the unstinting support that they have given to the government to date? They know that with the further attack on public services by the government they have to offer opposition if they are to head off growing support for the far left among the membership. In addition, they know that the privatisation of public services generally

leads to a loss of members, and they are concerned to keep their membership base, not least because it finances their over-blown salaries and perks.

All this makes clear that there is undoubted disquiet within the unions over the way the Labour Party uses their funds while carrying out policies diametrically opposed to those agreed by the unions.

Adding further fuel to this situation is the fact that the newly appointed general secretary of the Labour Party, David Triesman, previously general secretary of the Association of University Teachers, plans to appoint his own staff over the heads of existing party staff members. Key among these is Andrew Pakes, the AUT's Head of Communications, who is predicted to become Triesman's chief of staff. He was formerly director of the New Politics Network, which supports the ending of the union link and a merger of Labour with the Liberal Democrats.

But it would be a mistake to believe that these levels of disquiet over the relationship between the unions and the Labour Party are likely to lead to disaffiliation in the short to medium term. We do not have to agree with Prentiss that nothing has changed to recognise that a review of the political funds is more likely to lead to changes in structure and the way the fund is distributed to the Labour Party than disaffiliation. Even in the unlikely event of conferences passing motions to disaffiliate (and rule changes generally require a two-thirds majority), the RMT experience shows that the bureaucracy would probably manage to thwart such a move.

Within the Socialist Alliance there are differences over how to proceed on this issue. The Socialist Party, consistent with its view that the Labour Party is now simply a bosses' party, argues for straightforward disaffiliation (although even here there are cracks, since the motion at FBU conference was moved by an SP supporter). The Socialist Workers Party seems to waver opportunistically between arguing for disaffiliation and for review or 'democratisation'. Others in the Alliance recognise the improbability of disaffiliation and argue for 'democratisation'.

'Democratisation', in the language of the Socialist Alliance, means the decision on disposal of the union's

political funds being opened up to support of non-Labour (as well as Labour) candidates and decisions being taken at branch or regional level.

The flaw in this scheme is that it actually means the fragmentation of the unions' political input. Instead of focussing on the fight to ensure that the unions' delegates to Labour Party bodies (constituency general committees, regional and national conferences, policy forums and regional and national executives) follow union policy, that union-supported MPs are in tune with that policy and that the unions do not fund campaigns in contradiction to union policy, it would mean the unions' effectiveness is muted. It encourages activists to argue for support for left-of-Labour candidates rather than holding representatives to account and standing for election to delegations which could do this.

This kind of 'democratisation' also ignores the fact that once you open up the question of support for other parties to local decision; it is far from inevitable that support would go to the Socialist Alliance. Morris has demonstrated graphically that once you open this particular Pandora's box, anything can fly out. Branches are much more likely to express support for non-socialist parties which are superficially to the left of Labour – Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru – than the Socialist Alliance.

Workers Action argues that socialists should focus the discontent with Labour's policies into a fight to make union delegates accountable rather than dissipate their energies in a way which can only weaken that fight.

WA

Unions Fightback

- For public services
- Reclaim trade union rights
- For a workers' voice in politics

An organising conference for the rank and file and community fightback

Saturday, November 3, 2001

11.30am–5pm

St Mary's Neighbourhood Centre
Upper Street/St Mary's Path, London N1
(tube: Angel or Highbury and Islington
buses: 4, 19, 30, 43, 56, 38, 73, 341)

A dissenter departed

Through the Looking Glass: A dissenter Inside New Labour, by Liz Davies, Verso, 214 pages, £15

Reviewed by Pete Firmin

This book is a bit of a curate's egg – good in parts, but problematic for the issues it doesn't address.

Liz Davies has done Labour Party activists, and the movement in general, a service by documenting the goings-on at the Labour Party's National Executive Committee. Many years ago the Party leadership, in their drive against democracy and accountability in the Party, stopped producing any minutes of what is supposed to be the Party's highest body between conferences. In this way they hoped to keep hidden from the membership what went on at the NEC. To their annoyance, left members of the NEC have continued to produce reports of these meetings. Initially, this was done by the MPs elected by the rank and file, then, when the rules were changed to prevent their election and replace them with non-parliamentarians, by candidates of the Centre Left Grass Roots Alliance. Indeed, it has been a constant element of the platform of the CLGA candidates for the NEC to commit themselves to reporting to Party members what happens at the NEC.

The bulk of the book consists of a collection of these reports, documenting events at the highest level of the party over two years. In this she shows superbly the desperately low level of what passes for 'debate' among the higher levels of the Labour Party and the manoeuvres which go on to prevent and curtail criticism. She shows how on many occasions decisions are made elsewhere and announced to the media with no reference to the NEC at all.

This book is well worth reading for this reportage alone, and the ammunition it provides for activists about how decisions are taken and how subservient their trade union representatives really have been in the presence of Tony.

One of the surprises it contains, which should be committed to memory by those (few) who still believe John Prescott to be the conscience of 'Old Labour' at the heart of government, is the description of how eloquent Prescott really is in defence of government policy, unlike Blair, who

comes across as uninterested in, and incapable of arguing, his case.

The problem with this book is that it hardly goes beyond this reportage, offering no explanation as to how and why the labour movement, particularly the Labour Party, got to this situation. Everything is treated superficially, with no real background, no attempt to relate the quiescence and lack of democracy in the movement to previous defeats.

She would no doubt argue this would be outside the remit she set herself when writing the book: however, it matters when she moves on to her own prescription for what socialists should do. Without some understanding of how we got into this situation it is difficult to see how you can come up with a coherent view of how to change it.

This leaves her prescriptions as essentially 'moral' ones – she could stand it no longer in the Labour Party, so left and 'any further activity in the Labour Party would leave me at best silent and at worst complicit in promoting New Labour's ideology and power'. This charge of complicity is one that she has levelled at those socialists who have not followed her example and have stayed in the Labour Party rather than join the Socialist Alliance.

In levelling the charge of complicity, she is no different to many others over the years who date the degeneration of the Labour Party from the point at which they decided they could take no more. Yet if it had been made of her, say a year before she left, she would no doubt have vigorously denied the charge, pointing out how she was arguing and campaigning against the politics of New Labour. Outside of any more thorough analysis, where she might argue something more fundamental has happened, she has no right to label others complicit.

When explaining why she left the Labour Party, she does not even consider any other course of action (even to reject it). Yet she points, in passing, to the possibilities that exist. She reports having spoken to a packed fringe meeting at Uni-

son conference where she reported on the cavalier attitude of the union's representatives to Unison policy. She also reports having spoken to hundreds of Labour Party meetings around the country. But she fails to draw from this the obvious conclusion of the necessity to organise within the Party and unions

Indeed, shortly after Liz Davies and others were first elected to the NEC on the Centre Left Grass Roots Alliance slate, some on the left argued there should be an attempt to organise those who voted for them. Given the way the balance of the NEC is rigged to ensure that representatives elected by the rank and file are a small minority, this seemed elementary if more were to be done than simply appeal to Party members to elect candidates for the slate once a year. The bulk of organisations making up the CLGA – Liz Davies included – opposed the idea, because, they argued, any such gathering might be swamped by the far left. Thus fear of being unable to control their supporters was placed above political tasks.

This lack of analysis is further shown in her recipe for what socialists need to do now. Since the publication of the book and joining the Socialist Alliance, she has stated that we need to found a new Labour Party. Yet without any understanding of the contradictions which have been present in the Labour Party since its foundation between its working class base and its willingness to administer capitalism, she would repeat the old mistakes. While saying she has no nostalgia for the 'old' Labour Party and pointing out a few of its shortcomings, it is precisely such nostalgia which seems to motivate her. We are left simply with an emotional appeal that socialists need to build anew, with no real concept as to how, and how to avoid the mistakes of the past.

While I have reservations about the political conclusions, this book should be read for the way it lays bare the paucity of argument and lack of any concept of democracy among the Blairites and their hangers-on.

Unison NEC talking left

by Andrew Berry

Unison conference, which took place last July in Brighton, was marked by three political factors – the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and privatisation, the standing of the Socialist Alliance in the general election, and the Unison witch-hunt.

Unison activists in both local government and health have faced attacks through PFI. Chasing the chimera of lower spending and more efficient services, the government is seeking cash injections from the private sector. This policy is fundamentally flawed in that the private sector will only invest in something if there is a profit to be made, and making a profit out of the provision of public services has proved difficult. In fact, private companies generate the profit in a number of ways – through job cuts, lower wages, and in the longer term by accepting the government bribe that they will acquire the land that the service is built upon. The first two methods are direct attacks on the pay and conditions of Unison members; the third is a more general attack on the continuing availability of public services.

The leadership of Unison came out fighting PFI at conference 2001. General Secretary Dave Prentiss pledged support for 'anti-PFI struggles, in particular in hospitals and schools. Such behaviour is very unusual from the leadership of a trade union, and union activists will be trying to understand what's behind it.

The point is that among the working class as a whole privatisation has become a dirty word. Railtrack and London Transport are probably where most workers – and even elements of the ruling class – will be opposed. The total eclipse of Labour in the Wyre Forest constituency in the general election, where the anti-PFI candidate received 28,000 votes, shows the strength of the opposition. Prentiss has realised that his

NEC could face a major problem if local union branches take up local anti-PFI struggles because they will be very popular, so he has moved to claim the issue for himself. This will make it more likely that the NEC can control the struggles and dictate the pace and broadening of any action. Prentiss's method has already been seen in action – he was one of the trade union leaders who met with Blair after the election and his line was 'you have to go easy on PFI because I will not be able to control my members if you don't'. Prentiss – like all union bureaucrats – is trying to work within the confines of government policy

to minimise the effects on his members. Unfortunately for him, his members' interests are diametrically opposed to New Labour's policy, and in that situation what is needed is a refusal to allow the government to implement its policy, not an appeasement discussion.

The danger is that his apparent leftism at conference will confuse the membership into relying on him rather than fighting. The role of the left in this situation has to be to turn the NEC's words into action, to use the left voice from conference to build as rapidly as possible opposition to any and every privatisation threat and to use the

Unison United Left

The founding conference for the new united left organisation within Unison – which we are taking the liberty of calling UUL in the absence of any better name – is likely to be in October. The positions taken at Unison conference are likely to indicate the lines of divide.

The biggest question is likely to be who will be in control. Independent CFDU activists have already expressed concern about the nature of the new formation, and while the coming together of the left is to be welcomed, there will be little incentive for it to remain together unless UUL is clearly seen to have a democratic structure. The signs so far are not good. Proto-UUL meetings so far have been smaller than the CFDU meetings that occurred previously, despite the fact that UUL has a wider catchment area on the left. The conference fringe left meeting was organised by a very small number of lefts, and well-known activists from the left who were not SWP or SP members were not called upon to speak.

There are three basic factors required for UUL to become an effective Unison left. First, it needs a steering committee that reflects the wide range of views on the left. Second, it must not take a position of electoral support for any party. To do so would exclude many activists from membership and would be fundamentally sectarian. This danger is greater from the supporters of the Socialist Alliance; there have already been attempts to bring branches and left formations in other unions into formal support for the Socialist Alliance in elections. The third and most important factor is that UUL must be an activist organisation, not a body for setting up left rallies. Meetings must be about the local and national co-ordination and promotion of political campaigning. UUL will be vital in taking on the NEC over who are the real fighters against privatisation, and it must have as a major priority fighting the witch-hunt.

statements of the NEC to motivate the membership into action. Throughout the trade union movement we have seen time and time again that the best defenders of workers' jobs are the workers themselves, and that rather than pursue a fight through action to victory the union leaderships will look for some compromise. This is the reason that the response of the SWP to the Unison leadership has been so appalling. The SWP are saying 'We need to give the NEC a chance'. The Unison NEC has had numerous chances to fight privatisations and it has taken none of them. In fact, the Unison NEC has gone so far as to suspend Candy Udwin and Dave Carr from the union for organising anti-PFI actions at University College London Hospital. The fact that Candy and Dave are SWP members should help the SWP understand their own folly – for some reason it doesn't.

In total contrast to the SWP, the Socialist Party have analysed Unison conference as a total washout. 'There is nothing here for the left to take back,' said one leading member. We have already pointed out how the NEC's words can be used to promote an anti-PFI fight. The SP seem to be suffering a total collapse of will.

Supporters of the Socialist Alliance's electoral turn have seized upon the acceptance of conference motion 113 as a major victory. They interpret it as meaning that the Unison membership is close to agreeing to break the link with the Labour Party. But at Unison conference a large number of those who would still vote Labour supported this motion because it was a criticism of the undemocratic nature of Unison's political funds and of the non-accountability of Unison APF members on the Labour Party NEC.

The deafening silence at conference was around the Unison witch-hunt, and the SWP seem to think that with Prentiss's conversion to the cause of the hard left the whole thing will be dropped. While it *is* likely that the suspensions of Candy and Dave will be dropped, in order to better promote the leadership's anti-PFI stance, there is no guarantee that further sanctions will not be imposed. Nor is there any guarantee of the dropping of the witch-hunt against branches and activists in Birmingham and Sheffield. The SWP don't seem to understand that when the leadership show weakness in prosecuting their political agenda, that is the time to redouble opposition, because it is the easiest time to win the victory.

WA

Letters

PO Box 7268, London E10 6TX

Dear comrades -

Neil Murray (Beware siren voices - vote Labour, in Workers Action No.12) points out a real problem for the Socialist Alliance: the lack of widespread working class opposition expressed in strikes and demonstrations to Labour's programme, and the resulting temptation to bypass the existing movement and abandon the united front tactic towards its organisations. But these problems do not invalidate the central case for the SA which is the need to build an organisationally distinct political alternative to Labour both within the labour movement and in society at large.

Neil counterposes building this alternative to the task of building the fightback within the labour movement. But there is no need to counterpose the two - it is possible for socialists to do both. In fact SA members are at the forefront of building the resistance in some unions. There is no reason why the SA should not participate in building united front campaigns whilst retaining its political independence. The temptation to bypass the labour movement is only a temptation - it is not an inevitable result of the SA's existence.

He does not adequately address the questions of what socialists should have said in the general election. Elections give us an opportunity to put across a socialist message to a mass audience. How we relate to this is a tactical question. When the priority was to kick out the Tories, and workers expected things to get better under Labour, it was correct to call for a Labour vote whilst demanding socialist policies. But today the dissonance between what the government is doing and what we are calling for means that it is just not credible for socialists to call, however critically, for a Labour vote.

Following Neil's advice would have meant either saying nothing at all or saying something which did not make sense to most people. Furthermore it would have meant restricting our message to the left's existing audience, whereas the Socialist Alliance campaign enabled us to reach a much wider audience.

The frightening vote for the BNP in a number of working class communities abandoned by Labour makes it all the important that our alternative is openly expressed.

Adam Hartman

Brent

Book Bargains *A few copies of the following books are available at bargain prices:*

Year One of the Russian revolution

Victor Serge, 456pp, Pluto Press £6.50

Britain, World War 2 and the Samasamajists: The Secret Files

Ed. W Muthiah and S Wanasinghe, 259pp, Young Socialist Pub £6.00

The early homosexual rights movement (1864-1935)

J Lauritsen & D Thorstad, 121pp, Times Change Press £5.95

Prices include post and packing to mainland UK destinations
Workers Action, PO Box 7268, London E10 6TX

Racism in education: Are black schools the answer?

by Lizzy Ali

The proposal by Lee Jasper, race relations adviser to London mayor Ken Livingstone, that the black community should respond to institutionalised racism in education by establishing its own schools was met with widespread disapproval. But while Jasper's remarks do little to advance the struggle against racism in schools, socialists must not simply condemn Jasper as promoting segregation. Rather, his comments must be seen in the context of the growing feeling among many black parents that the school system is failing their children.

Jasper was speaking in Lewisham on June 19 at a launch meeting of Justice for Jevan Richardson – a campaign in support of the family of a boy who hanged himself in south-east London two months after being excluded from school. Jasper reportedly stated: 'I am going to organise black children, black parents and black teachers to come together in a group to educate black people together in London. We need black schools where our children can study their own culture without fear of bullying.' He went on to accuse the education system of being the slowest of all public services to respond to the findings of the Lawrence Inquiry, and argued that schools with black teachers and governors could deliver a 'culturally relevant curriculum'. Jasper also claimed that such a move could exploit the government's support for religious and community schools, citing as an example a mainly black school run by the Seventh Day Adventist church in north London.

Livingstone appeared to distance himself from Jasper's views the following day, saying: 'I would oppose schools which are exclusively for black children but we should not underestimate the concern of black parents that their children are short-changed by the education system.' The concerns voiced by Jasper and Livingstone are underlined by statistics that show that black pupils – especially boys – are disproportionately likely to be excluded from school, and to leave with poor qualifications. Jasper meanwhile claimed he had been quoted out of context, and that he had not advocated

segregation.

But while Lee Jasper is undoubtedly motivated by a burning sense of injustice, the proposal for independent black schools wouldn't tackle racism in schools, so much as co-exist alongside it. Removing black children from existing schools would leave racist practices unchallenged, and amount to an admission that truly multi-ethnic schools are impossible. It would be trumpeted by the BNP and the rest of the far right as a vindication of their call for racial separatism. And while black schools would protect pupils from discrimination at the hands of white teachers, the likely effect upon society as a whole would be to strengthen racist attitudes.

The most powerful factor in breaking down racism among whites is the experience of living, working and attending schools in multi-ethnic areas. Conversely, racism thrives on ignorance and the lack of such shared experience. It is not accidental that the most racially tolerant areas of Britain tend to be the most mixed, while the most entrenched racist attitudes tend to be found in predominantly white communities which are located close to areas with a high ethnic minority density. The fact that black men, women and teenagers in Britain are more likely to have white partners than in any other western country shows that progress in the battle against racism is possible. Despite all the racist obstacles, the black impact upon British culture and society has been considerable, even if it has been disproportionately expressed through music and the arts.

But while there are some positive signs in the field of race relations, these have not resulted in much progress in the classroom, where black pupils continue to face serious and specific problems. Nor can these be simply put down to racism in general. Black pupils, for instance, fare significantly worse in terms of attainment than their Asian counterparts. The cultural gap between Asian and British culture is arguably much wider than that between Afro-Caribbean and British culture. Sensing this, racists have tended to target Asian communities, which have borne the brunt of racial conflict in the north of England all summer. In terms of institutional racism, however, the situation is reversed,

with black people the object of greater discrimination at the hands of the police, the courts, employers and schools.

The practical objections to Jasper's proposal are numerous. Even if it went ahead, it would be many years before black schools could serve more than a small minority of black students. In the mean time, the problems faced by the majority would remain the same. The idea of basing the curriculum of such schools upon a common black culture is also problematic. While people of Afro-Caribbean and African descent share similar experiences of racism, they do not share a common culture. Nor is it clear how black schools would relate to mixed race children, who do not necessarily see themselves as a sub group of the black community. And while it is possible to imagine black schools in areas with a large ethnic minority population, they wouldn't be practical in areas of low ethnic density, where racism tends to be more acute.

Lee Jasper is also wrong to see a positive side to New Labour's enthusiasm for 'faith schools'. Far from promoting diversity, they set up religious divisions between children, which can all too easily become emblems of racial division. Instead of supporting their expansion, socialists should be for the removal of religion from the classroom, and the ending of the privileged position that churches, and in particular the Church of England, occupy in the education system. There is no reason to revise the traditional socialist position that education should be provided for all by the state on a strictly secular basis, and that religion should become a purely private matter. In terms of the specific problems faced by black pupils, key demands must include:

- the recruitment of many more black teachers;
- the defence of multi-ethnic education;
- the provision of high quality teaching which reflects Britain's growing ethnic and cultural diversity;
- a campaign to expose the stereotype of black pupils being disruptive and aggressive, combined with comprehensive monitoring of the procedure for excluding pupils, in order to combat institutional racism.

The Tories choose oblivion

by Nick Davies

For William Hague, one-time boy wonder of the Tory Party, the future is not what it was. The brilliant political career which he felt was his due after addressing the Tory conference at the age of 16, and entering the Cabinet in his early thirties, has withered before it bloomed. Four years of populist bandwagon jumping produced a net gain of just one seat. When they got the chance, 'real people' told Hague in no uncertain terms just where he could put his 'common sense revolution'. Labour MPs in the leafy suburbs who never expected a second term must be hugging themselves in joy and disbelief.

By any standards the last election was a catastrophic failure for the Tories, and a deserved one. Hague ran a dirty and dishonest campaign, playing the race card for all it was worth and trying to pretend that the 18 years of Tory destruction of public services never happened, or if it did, it was nothing to do with him. His apparent fixation with what to most voters is a tenth-rate issue – entry into the single currency – suggests that Hague hadn't actually learned that much by reading *Hansard* under the bedclothes all those years ago.

After the bloodbath, the vultures began to circle. Like France in 1945, it turned out that everyone had been in the resistance. Tory grandees queued to denounce the campaign, saying that they had never agreed with the xenophobia or the obsession with the pound.

Scarcely had the wheels stopped spinning when the reinvented Portillo formally launched the bid that had been taking shape since he re-entered the Commons. The unelectable Widdecombe's leadership ambitions had been dead in the water since Portillo supporters sabotaged her zero-tolerance drugs policy by confessing to 'experimenting with' (or even enjoying!) the odd spliff when they were at university. At first, Portillo looked dangerous. His strategy was to be to decouple Euroscepticism from the other, far-right policies which many of the Eurosceptics share. In other words, he was saying, you can regard the single currency as a bad idea for British capitalism, but that doesn't mean you have to hate blacks, Asians, single parents or gays as well. The

aim was to steal some of Kenneth Clarke's more liberal supporters and at the same time mobilise the Eurosceptic majority in the parliamentary party and among the activists. Faced with opposition from the backwoods, Portillo no doubt had a beady eye on the Tory demographic, hoping that by the next election, or the next but one, the inexorable laws of biology might have removed many of his grassroots opponents from the equation. Anyway, it didn't work, because of Portillo's ability to make more enemies than friends, or because the Eurosceptics saw him as being too liberal on other questions, the liberals saw him as being too right wing on Europe, and because the *Daily Mail* smeared him.

So, left to slug it out among the membership were Iain Duncan Smith (William Hague without the jokes) and Kenneth Clarke who, although a member of Thatcher and Major's cabinets, has reinvented himself as a 'one-nation' Tory liberal more successfully and with less fanfare than Portillo ever did (or maybe in a mirror-image of Roy Hattersley the Tory Party has moved to the right while he has stood still). What was interesting was the Thatcher factor. Even the Thatcherite Duncan Smith has found her a bit of a millstone round his neck, saying that the party must 'move on', no doubt reflecting on the focus group finding that one voter felt physically sick at the very mention of her. (One of Thatcher's few pre-election outings was a walkabout in Northampton, where the Tories were keen to recapture the highly marginal Northampton South. Labour increased its majority.) Of the two, Clarke was the more dangerous because he was capable of winning an election, although some Tory activists would have preferred to stay out of power altogether than be led by someone whom they see as a pro-Brussels Quisling. Anyway, as it turned out, the Thatcher-factor came back to haunt the Tories, as the troglodytic Thatcher-lovers turned out in droves for Duncan Smith: xenophobic, pro-clause 28, pro-hanging, and, hopefully, unelectable to boot. Although it is often difficult to imagine being more right wing than Straw, Blunkett and Byers, Duncan Smith's first shadow cabinet shows that it is perfectly possible.

The Tories' differences on Europe are well-known and well-documented, and it seems that

in the Tory Party, these differences are more ideological and deeply entrenched than in the Labour Party, where policy on the Euro is based more on pragmatism. Patten and Clarke are as committed to the single currency as the neo-Thatcherites are against it. This suggests that the differences will not be ironed out by a judiciously constructed phrase, such as Gordon Brown's 'pro-Euro realism'. As one Clarkeite commented recently, 'if there were not a real war going on, there'd be civil war in the party'.

The Tory Party is not simply a political party. For over 100 years it has been the principal political expression of ruling class power. It brought together the City, industrial capital, landowners, the military, members of the professions, the Church of England, as well as a proportion of the working class. Being in long-term opposition is not what the Tory Party is for. The last time it was out of office for more than six years was 1906-1922. But the policies pursued first in office and then in opposition over 20-odd years have alienated much of its social base and narrowed its electoral appeal. The Tories have found to their cost that they cannot count on the loyalty of the enlarged and more prosperous middle class created by their policies of the 1980s, which still cares about the NHS, schools and public transport, doesn't regard single mothers as the lowest form of life and isn't kept awake worrying about asylum seekers or the fate of the pound. What is more, by inflicting crushing defeats on the unions in the 1980s, the Tories have deprived themselves of a trump card with which they could frighten their wavering supporters. The middle class can vote against the Tories without having to worry about union power.

As the Tories come to terms with the extent of their crisis – kicked out of Wales, the fourth party in Scotland, confined to the Barbour jacket and lawn-sprinkler belts of England, fewer MPs than Labour in 1983 for *two* elections running – their dislike of each other only seems to grow. New Labour is moving into much of the Tories' political space, taking privatisation into the public sector to an extent Thatcher could only dream of. You can barely get a credit card between the policies of New Labour and Ken Clarke. So, how much does the British ruling class really need the Tory Party, at least in its present form?

WA

Gothenburg diary

The following is an account of the protests at the EU summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, in June, written by a participant who lives in Denmark. The article has been edited to remove no-longer relevant observations relating to the protest in Genoa

The writing had been pretty much on the wall in April when police smashed an anti-EU march in Malmö, arresting many protestors including a Green Euro-MP. Nevertheless, groups involved in the planning of Gothenburg had attempted to reach agreement with the police and had accepted their offer of dialogue – they were to be bitterly disappointed.

I went to Gothenburg with the ATTAC bus from Århus on Thursday evening [June 14] and arrived at about 23.30. We were quite surprised not to be searched on arrival at the port, although I suspected we were being surveyed on the ferry – but maybe that's just paranoia. In any case, we were to learn from our reception committee that the police were busy elsewhere. They were trapping and arresting 400-500 protestors in Hvitfeldska gymnasium – one of the headquarters of the protests, a place where many activists were to sleep and the venue for many of the seminars and happenings for the next few days. The police had started to use ship containers as road-blocks. There had also that evening been a highly successful demonstration against Bush – where 5,000 people, or 10,000 buttocks, had mooned in protest! We took a tram to our accommodation, which was a school way out of town.

After a restful night on a hard classroom floor we awoke the next morning (Friday) for a meeting. I personally take a dim view of holding meetings before morning coffee but there was no bloody coffee at Vättnedalensskolan. We headed for Götapladsen for the Anti-Capitalist demonstration. There were maybe 3,000 people in Götapladsen and about 1,500-2,000 of them joined us for a non-violent protest against the EU summit. Well that was the plan anyway.

Then the shit hit the fan!

As we marched into Berzeliigatan it was obvious that we weren't going to get too footsore on this march; we could already

see that the route was blocked with containers and police. I had been told that the original plan was to hold hands around the EU summit but it didn't look like the police were in a mood for that one. We halted and stood chanting in the road. I was in about the eighth or tenth rank and behind the ATTAC Aalborg banner so I couldn't see much of what was happening in the front, apart from a build-up of mounted police. There was no attempt to break through and no missiles were thrown. After about half an hour I saw a few police starting to clear demonstrators from a car park on our left. I tried to get people to link arms, other people tried to get people to sit down, nothing much happened, just a lot of milling about – then the police attacked.

They came in from our left with dogs and truncheons and our organisation fell apart. I was facing a cop with a snarling Alsatian on one side and was being slowly strangled by a 'comrade' who had her arm round my neck – it was starting to be a really shitty day! On my left I could see the cops attacking the 'Black Bloc' (autonomes), many of whom were masked but who had agreed to respect non-violent principles for the day.

Of course it doesn't take weeks of careful planning to provoke autonomes. Attacking them with dogs and horses in normally quite enough and soon there was a hail of cobblestones and anything else throwable moving through the air. Horses were charging up and down the road and emerging from side-roads. The demonstration had split into two or three bits by then and I was just concerned with trying to keep my bit of it together. A group of autonomes launched a very spectacular and successful counter-attack against the police and I briefly considered joining them on the good grounds that self-defence is politically legitimate and that by now I was extremely pissed-off. However, as quickly as they had attacked they fell back and went off to trash shop windows on Avenyn, which was not so smart.

The 400-500 of us left in Berzeliigatan regrouped around the Rättvisepartiet's (Swedish CWI group) banner and slowly retired to Götapladsen. Throughout the action I saw no arrests taking place; the police concentrated on injuring demonstrators. After a brief sit-down in Götapladsen we were allowed to march back to Schillerska gymnasium for a brief meeting. Other comrades were earlier forced to retreat down the main street which was pretty obviously a police plan to provoke the maximum destruction of property by enraged demonstrators.

Police provocation at Free Forum

A couple of hours later I was back at the Free Forum (a space with tents, stalls and discussions) drinking a cup of coffee, when there was, all of a sudden, a lot of noise outside the gate. When I got there I saw a massive concentration of police arresting people at random. Apparently these people had simply been caught between two groups of police – some had been sitting in the park eating a sandwich. There then followed a tense one and a half hour stand-off between those of us in Free Forum and the cops. No attempt was made to break out and release the prisoners; we just stood our ground – most of us believed the cops were out to smash Free Forum. Few of those arrested were charged, and a few escaped by jumping into boats or swimming.

Massive anti-EU demonstration

Since ATTAC is not an anti-EU organisation we decided not to have our banner on the anti-EU demonstration. We joined the various contingents of the march to our own political tastes (I marched with the SP). The demonstration was peaceful and had about 12-16,000 on it. As I left Götapladsen after the rally I could see

Continued next page

Workers' Action and the election: the limits of 'realism'

Labour Party member **Daniel Morrissey** takes up the lead article from the last issue of *Workers Action*

Neil Murray's article on the general election in *Workers Action* No.12 provided a welcome corrective to the uncritical flag-waving for the Socialist Alliance found in most other far left publications. In a typically cogent piece, Neil deflates the more grandiose claims of the Alliance by putting them into more realistic perspective. He makes particularly telling points when he decries the failure of the Alliance to apply the united front approach to Labour Party members and supporters, and when he exposes the foolhardiness of attempting to break unions from Labour, thus eliminating the possibility of taking union struggles into the Party. In seeking to counterpose his own realism to what he sees as the over-optimism and wrongheadedness of the Alliance, how-

ever, Neil bends the stick too far towards conservatism, substituting for the SA's unwarranted triumphalism a dogged refusal to acknowledge any real change in the political situation. And by exaggerating the continuity of the present with the past, Neil absolves himself from any responsibility to make positive proposals as to how the left should approach the specific situation in which we find ourselves as a consequence of the Blair offensive.

'Those who argue that this is the most right-wing Labour government ever need only look back at the record of the others,' says Neil Murray. 'The Wilson government, for instance, attacked working class living standards and tacitly supported the war in Vietnam, while the great reforming Labour government of 1945-51 used troops

against strikes.' But this is to over-emphasise the continuities with the past. For, while it is true that previous Labour governments have carried out individual policies that have been even more reactionary or repressive than those of the current administration, this is not really the point. A far more significant change has taken place: the Labour Party has adopted, and is acting upon, the basic ideological positions of the New Right. In the past, Labour stood for election with the intention both of maintaining the stability of capitalism and of delivering material gains and/or enhanced social rights to the working class. When elected, the party was sometimes, briefly, able to reconcile these objectives – at least in periods of relative economic stability. More often, however, the tension between these objectives caused Labour governments to shelve – or, at least, enfeeble – any policies that might have benefited working people where these would have encroached on the prerogatives of capital. But the betrayal this represented was so keenly felt because of the original commitments that had been abandoned. The 1974-79 Wilson/Callaghan governments, for example, ended up by attacking working class living standards, but had begun with a programme of extending public ownership, tying companies to compulsory planning agreements and restoring trade union rights.

But the present Labour government is not simply repeating the pattern set by its predecessors, in abandoning, once in office, a set of modestly egalitarian manifesto commitments. Instead, it has started out with an open and premeditated programme of neo-liberal 'reforms', in direct opposition to the interests of the working class as they have previously been conceived by social democracy. New Labour has not merely conceded that the interests of the capitalist class constrain its own policies; it is itself driving forward the bosses' offensive: breaking up the state and allowing private enterprise greater and greater freedom. The party has renounced collec-

Continued next page

Gothenburg diary

Continued from previous page

more ship containers in place and police massing. There was a 'Reclaim Our Streets' party planned but by then I wasn't feeling very party-minded and was frankly nervous about the wisdom of holding a street party in the middle of a war zone. I decided to head back to Free Forum for a couple of beers and something to eat. It was at this party that the shooting incident took place.

When I left Free Forum I discovered that my tram wasn't running and was forced to make a big detour. I then ran into three young Danes from Roskilde who told me that the police had let some Nazis into the party and then 'restored order' in the ensuing confusion. One young man is still in hospital in a critical condition as a result of the police decision. I got a taxi back to the suburbs with the guys from Roskilde and when I turned up there was a meeting going on. We were missing people, although they all turned up eventually – more luck than judgement! I slept very well that night

and awoke at 7.00 for another meeting. We were discussing a press release before morning coffee!

The Gothenburg Action International March

This was very big. I've read 25,000 although I would've said a bit less. The ATTAC contingent from Scandinavia was massive and the SAC (Swedish syndicalist union) probably had 2,000 members. There was also a big contingent from Venstrepartiet. There were very few mainstream trade union flags from Sweden; I only counted three – LO had decided that it wasn't a part of their tradition to demonstrate in the streets! There were however 10 or 12 trade union flags from both Norway and Denmark. In the Danish ATTAC contingent we chanted our defiance of the (absent) police and even sang 'We shall overcome'. I had to confess to my fellow demonstrators that I had two Joan Baez records. We got a very friendly response from the locals who stood out in the rain watching us pass. ■

... the limits of 'realism'

Continued from previous page

tivism, redistribution and universality, in favour of promoting individual initiative and rewarding efficiency. Whereas previous Labour governments advocated timid and unambitious measures to extend public ownership, New Labour is actively cutting back the state, levering private enterprise into areas of public service which Thatcher and Major had been content to leave alone. Whereas Old Labour extended entitlement to benefits, New Labour is reinstating means testing and abolishing rights to free provision (e.g., tuition fees). Whereas previous Labour governments made modest inroads in tackling inequality, by making the tax system more progressive, New Labour has presided over an increasing gap between rich and poor, by leaving in place the regressive tax regime of the Tories. The very edifice of the welfare state is under sustained assault from the party that constructed it. Roy Hattersley is therefore right when he recognises – however belatedly – that Blair has carried out an ideological *coup d'état* which has broken Labour from its historic social democratic heritage.

This, more than the subversion of party democracy, is why it is not possible for Marxists to base ourselves in the Labour Party in the same way as before in order to engage with its actual and potential members and attempt to win them to our politics. In the past, we could enjoin politically conscious workers to elect a Labour government, to become active members of the party and then keep up the pressure on that government to honour its manifesto promises. The reforms promised by the party at every election before 1997, we could argue, were inadequate, but would nevertheless represent a step forward for the working class. If the government attempted to carry out its programme fully, it would most likely meet tough resistance from the capitalist class; the only sure way to overcome that obstacle would be to remove it finally, by taking the levers of economic and political power, calling on the organised working class to mobilise in its defence. While schematic, this represented a coherent way to present the role of the party pedagogically, as helping to create the conditions for an authentic socialist politics.

But the kind of working class activist whom we could conceivably win over today is far less likely to see even critical support for the Labour Party as a means toward a socialist end. Its policies point in the opposite direction; PFI is not an aberration: it is perfectly consistent with the overall direction in which New Labour

wants to take Britain, and anyone who looks at politics critically can see that. This is why it is inadequate for Neil Murray to say 'Workers Action advises workers to vote Labour.' *Voting* Labour is not in itself a positive political contribution at the moment, especially in an election where the party was assured of victory and would treat every additional vote as a further endorsement of its policies. Any worker sufficiently critical of Labour to be reluctant to vote for the party is moving in a positive direction, and telling them that they should, after all, vote Labour is not the best way to engage them in a dialogue about how to fight Blair's policies. A vote for the Socialist Alliance or SSP (or, for that matter, the SNP or Plaid Cymru or the Green Party) is at least one way of registering disaffection in a tangible way.

This is not to say, however, that socialists should abandon the Labour Party as a terrain of struggle, and join the Socialist Alliance, as the latter's supporters insist. Of the majority of people who are (so every opinion poll tells us) opposed to policies like PFI, not only must a greater number have abstained than voted for the Alliance; many more must have voted *Labour* than voted for the Alliance. And despite the steady stream of resignations, there remain substantial numbers of activists in the party who are unhappy with government policy and are potential members of an organised opposition. Moreover, there are active members of affiliated unions who could (and in some cases, do) take their campaigns in defence of their jobs and services into party GMCs and other bodies. To abandon them, as much of the far left seems content to do, is an abdication of responsibility. But it is not tenable to advocate routine attendance at party meetings, acceptance of officers' positions, etc., where no fight is taking place. New Labour is steadily upping the ante – the IPPR Report being the most recent example. To build a credible opposition we have to go on the offensive *now*, to mobilise activists against every element of the 'Blair Revolution'. Labour's rightward trajectory means that we can no longer present ourselves as the critical friends of the party, pushing in the same direction but wanting to go much further. We have to declare openly to our potential allies that we are diametrically opposed to Blair's policies – and to show that we are acting on that opposition. Above all, we should be arguing for a single campaign across the whole labour movement, in defence of public services and in opposition to all forms of privatisation and commodification. And we cannot afford to be too choosy about our allies. While the Campaign Group left will be part of any successful challenge to Blair,

so too must the old-fashioned social-democratic 'right', of which Hattersley has become the self-appointed spokesman. The faultline in the party now runs between the Blairite loyalists who are fully reconciled to neo-liberalism and those who want to restore the party to its historic social-democratic mission.

It must also be recognised, however, that it will be difficult and even undesirable to recruit or retain socialist activists as Labour Party members in constituencies where no fight is taking place or is even a realistic possibility. Activists' efforts will sometimes be better spent within the Socialist Alliance, where one exists – far better an active local Alliance than a moribund CLP. The forces gathered in the Alliance may presently represent only a tiny fraction of the movement that is needed to halt the neo-liberal offensive and begin to put socialism back on the agenda, but they are an obstacle to that movement only when they fail to make the united front their watchword. There is important work to be done in arguing within the Alliance for a healthier, non-sectarian approach to Labour Party members and non-aligned activists in the unions and single-issue campaigns.

Moreover, Neil needs to take more seriously the national differences between England, Scotland and Wales, the divergence in the politics of the three countries which has been reflected and accelerated by the devolution settlement. The symbiotic relationship between national consciousness and class consciousness in Scotland means that the SSP already presents a far more formidable challenge to New Labour than the Socialist Alliance in England and Wales. And it is far too rigid an approach to dismiss support for the SNP or Plaid Cymru because they are not 'workers' parties'. It is necessary to look at the shifting class base and ideological developments within these parties, at where their support is coming from, and what, concretely, this represents in terms of the specific national politics of Scotland and Wales.

Above all, it is vital that Marxists do not approach the politics of the British state today as 'business as usual'. This would be as great a mistake as the Alliance's belief that everything has already changed beyond recognition and that they will be the beneficiaries. The left, collectively, needs to make a sober and balanced assessment of the new challenges that are being thrown up, and to respond to them openly and flexibly. Neil Murray and the comrades of Workers Action can make an invaluable contribution to the discussion that needs to be had, but they will have to cast aside their more conservative inclinations first. ■

Growth, scarcity and socialism

by Nick Davies

'The simple fact is that if we go on using the earth's non-renewable resources (its oil, coal, minerals) at the rate we are now, and misusing the earth's renewable resources (its fertile soil, clear water, forests) at the rate we do now, then at some stage in the future the whole system is going to fall apart.'

P. Bunyan and F. Morgan-Grenfell, *The Green Alternative*

'Let the fragile green breast of Siberia be dressed in the cement armour of cities, armed with the stone muzzle of factory chimneys and girded with iron belts of railways. Let the taiga be burned and felled, let the steppes be trampled.'

V. Zazurbin, Speech to Soviet Writers' Congress 1926

In Workers Action No.1 ('How Should a Red-Green Alliance Work?'), Charli Langford looked critically at the 'unlimited growth' model of economic development subscribed to by most socialists. This model argues that there is no intrinsic reason why present levels of economic growth cannot be maintained, and that what is crucial is the way in which production and distribution are organised. Environmental damage is therefore not a result of economic development in itself, but simply of a system based on the production of commodities and the pursuit of profit. It is of course absolutely true that capitalism has been the cause of catastrophic environmental damage over the past 200 years, but it is one-sided and simplistic to say that destruction of the environment is *reducible* to the existence of capitalism. For a start, it cannot account for the possibly worse ecological damage caused by non-capitalist societies – states controlled by Stalinist bureaucracies – such as the destruction of the Aral Sea and the creation of the 'sulphurous triangle' between Prague, Dresden and Krakow. Nor can it account

for ecological damage in pre-capitalist societies, such as deforestation in ancient Greece, or the salinisation caused by the irrigation schemes of the ancient Mesopotamians. Most importantly, it disarms socialists in the face of the real and present danger caused by rapid, uncontrolled economic growth. Many Greens and environmentalists, by contrast, have adopted a 'zero-growth economy' position, but this is also simplistic and one-sided. Most importantly, it has nothing to say to the millions in Asia, Africa and Latin America who are suffering from the effects of environmental damage and economic under-development. Whatever the problems of the 'unlimited growth' and 'zero-growth' positions, this whole question is something that socialists have to think through if the socialist project is to have any relevance at all.

The Club of Rome

The origins of the 'growth' debate can be traced to the 1974 report *Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome, as the informal association of scientists, economists and ecologists was known. Basically, the Club of Rome identified what it described as 'five areas of global concern': 'accelerating industrialisation, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of non-renewable resources and a deteriorating environment'¹. The Club ran a number of computer models to try to show a future state of affairs based on changes in these variables. These models were admittedly 'imperfect, oversimplified and unfinished'. However, from these it extrapolated that any attempt to deal with any one of these problems individually, in isolation from the others, would not only be unsuccessful in itself, but would make the other problems worse. For example, if business carried on as usual, limits to growth would be reached because of 'non-renewable resource depletion'². If a doubling of economically available resources were assumed, there would be a collapse due to the pollution

caused by the industrialisation resulting from these increased resources. If it were assumed that available resources were doubled and a series of technological strategies were introduced to reduce pollution to one quarter of its pre-1970 level, the resultant increase of the use of arable land for urban-industrial use would result in food shortages. Whatever adjustments were made to the computer models, the eventual conclusion was: 'An end to growth before the year 2100 (2050 in the later 1992 report). In this case, growth is stopped by three simultaneous crises. Overuse of land leads to erosion and food production drops. Resources are severely depleted by a prosperous (though not as prosperous as the US population of 1970) world population. Pollution rises, drops, then rises again, causing a further decrease in food production and a sudden rise in the death rate'³. Crucially, the report continues: 'the application of technical solutions alone has prolonged the period of industrial and population growth, but it has not removed the ultimate limits to that growth'⁴. The 1992 report states: 'This is a society that is using its increased technical capacity to maintain growth, while the growth eventually undermines the effect of these technologies'⁵. A contemporary example of the tendency to adopt partial solutions is the touting of nuclear power as 'clean' energy. It is true that it does not produce greenhouse gases, but it creates massive environmental problems all of its own. Therefore, there is no technological quick fix (refuse incineration, catalytic converters in cars, etc.), an idea central to much of green consumerism, which by itself can make everything alright again.

Exponential growth

Also central to the Club of Rome's conclusions is the notion of exponential growth. According to the report all the five elements of the Club's world model experience exponential growth; in other words, they increase by a constant percentage of the whole in a given time

period. Such growth produces large numbers very quickly. What appears to be a modest rate of use and waste disposal can quickly produce high rates of pollution and resource depletion. In support of this notion, many Greens point to the phenomenal rate of growth in industrial production in the 20th century. It has been estimated that 'Americans . . . have used more minerals and fossil fuels (from 1938-1988) than all the other people of the world throughout human history'⁶, and a '3% [annual] growth rate implies doubling the rate of production and consumption every twenty-five years'⁷. This implies an impossibly unsustainable increase in levels of waste and pollution.

So, in conclusion, technology cannot solve the problem of infinite growth in a finite system; all the problems are interrelated, so that attempts to combat them in isolation are at best inadequate, at worst dangerous, and the catastrophic effects of all this will be upon us sooner than we think.

But were they right? Are there absolute limits to growth? It might be possible to criticise the Club of Rome's methodology, assumptions, conclusions, and the accuracy of its computer models, and some researchers (not just hacks employed by the US oil or auto industries) have shown some of the Club of Rome's predictions to be quite wrong. For example, it predicted that world supplies of tin would be exhausted by 1987. In fact, in the 1980s, the world glut of tin (and its replacement in industry by other metals) was one factor behind the virtual collapse of the tin industry in Bolivia. Predictions about the running out of non-renewables have also proved false. Reserves are plentiful. The problem with two non-renewables, coal and oil, is that long before they run out, their continued, uncontrolled use may make the planet uninhabitable. Global warming (which is an effect of increased methane and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere) due to the burning of fossil fuels is one area where research has vindicated the somewhat apocalyptic predictions of the Limits to Growth thesis, linking increased temperatures (a possible increase of 6°C by the middle of the century) to extreme or disrupting climatic features: an increase in the frequency and ferocity of El Niño, suspected disruption of ocean currents and the shrinking of polar icecaps and glaciers, which reflect the heat of the sun. The other area where the Club of Rome are entitled to feel that they were right all along is the depletion of renewables at an unsustainable rate:

the rapid destruction of the rain forests in South America and South East Asia (vegetation absorbs carbon dioxide in the daylight hours, so the disappearance of these forests means that less carbon dioxide can be absorbed, thus increasing the effects of global warming), deforestation, causing soil erosion and desertification, and the virtual destruction of some fishing grounds, such as the almost total loss of a sustainable cod population in the North Sea and off the coast of Newfoundland.

All this presents socialists with a massive dilemma, or set of dilemmas. It is both easy and necessary for socialists to be involved in 'light green' environmentalism, such as opposing the building of an incinerator, or on a different scale, opposing, say, the activities of oil companies in the Niger delta or Alaska. The 'growth' question demands decisions of quite a different order.

Population explosion

Are there, or will there soon be, 'too many' people, and what view should socialists take on this question? The assumption of Thomas Malthus, the 18th-century clergyman, that population, growing at a geometric rate, would inevitably outstrip available resources which would grow at a much slower arithmetical rate, has long ago been proved utterly wrong. However, there is a right-wing neo-Malthusian agenda at work which, to put it crudely, says that the problem is that there are too many poor people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Socialists, however, would see high birth rates as a sign of the low level of women's liberation in a given society, but would also recognise large families in poor societies as a basic social security system. Campaigns to reduce birth rates cannot be separated from campaigns for basic social security provisions and old age pensions, as well as for free, safe and effective birth control on demand, which puts socialists in conflict with the Vatican and Islamic doctrine. Even if we discount the neo-Malthusians, the world's population is projected to peak at 9 to 11 billion sometime this century. It is a legitimate question to ask whether this is sustainable, given the limited availability of fresh water, cultivatable land, and the implications for energy consumption and pollution.

Equality of consumption?

A basic question which also leaps up at us is whether socialists and environmentalists in Europe, North America, Japan and Australasia, who take for granted

the results of up to 200 years of industrial development, have the right to say to the rest of the world that they cannot aspire to these same creature comforts and the same level of economic development. As Kamal Nath, India's Environment Minister, commented shortly before the Kyoto conference on global warming: 'The West has luxury emissions. Ours are survival emissions.' What do we say to a logger in Brazil, chainsaw in hand, who says 'I've got X number of children at home and the more trees I cut down the more I'll be paid. Last year I cut down so many that I've now got running water in my house'? How many people in, say, San Francisco or Oxford drive two cars, use petroleum-based or PVC-made consumer goods and enjoy air conditioning at home or at work and thus contribute to global warming, a phenomenon which will hurt people in poor countries disproportionately more, but at the same time make themselves feel good with a bit of green consumerism at the Body Shop? How many women in the rich nations have been freed from the bind of hours of housework every day by dishwashers and washing machines, or by disposable nappies? Yet the first two use massive amounts of water and detergents, while millions and millions of the third will be languishing in landfill sites for decades to come. But on the other hand, it has been argued that 'To spread American consumption levels to the rest of the world's expanding numbers would require over 130 times the world output of 1979'⁸. If this projection is anything like true, then its implications are profound, and catastrophic.

The obvious point to be made about 'catching up' is that rich countries are rich because of the exploitation of poor ones. There have been instances of 'catching up', such as Japan and Italy in the early 20th century (and also Australia and New Zealand), and more recently enclaves such as Singapore or the oil-rich Gulf states. The phenomenon of combined and uneven development of capitalism means that there can be high growth rates, pockets of industrial development, and extreme or even relative wealth (i.e., a middle class) even in many 'third world' countries. However, to suggest that Mozambique, for example, can 'catch up' within the present system is fantasy.

An even more fundamental question is also posed, one that goes right to the heart of what socialism is about, or has traditionally been about. The 'deep green' ecology of the Limits to Growth thesis, and of allied political positions, is

based on a commitment to the principle of scarcity. Scarcity is seen as a fact of life, imposed by finite resources and a biosphere which can only take so much punishment. Socialism, by contrast, is an ideology of plenty, made possible by the existence of mass production; with only private ownership of the means of production and production for profit, as opposed to need, preventing us from leaving the kingdom of necessity and entering the kingdom of freedom. Scarcity implies want, and as Marx predicted, when want is generalised, all the 'old crap' of exploitation will start again. So, can we have a perspective of building socialism and at the same time have a serious environmentalist perspective that goes beyond the mere gesture?

Anti-Green arguments

We can try to attack the Green perspective as either a bucolic fantasy, an elitist pulling up of the developmental ladder by pampered, well-to-do Westerners or as the work of scientific charlatans, spreading scare stories to justify their own existence and, often, well-paid jobs. This is frequently the line of attack of one wing of the US and European petroleum-auto complex (such as ExxonMobil) and its allies in governments, universities and research institutes (the strategy of the other wing is just as dangerous but more difficult to fight as we shall see later). Some socialists still cling to this untenable view. However, the oil and roads lobby, for example, also use respectable scientific evidence to justify their view that there is no such thing as global warming, or if there is, it is of marginal effect, or, it is not caused by the burning of fossil fuels. Some scientists say that computer projections, particularly those on which the Kyoto protocol are based, are unable to take into account all the variants in wind, sea currents, temperature, rain, snow and vegetation, the margins of error are too large to make them reliable and the extrapolations in them are exaggerated. The Milankovic model, named after the Yugoslav scientist of the 1920s, shows that natural climatic variations occur as a result of changes in the Earth's orbit and the tilt of its axis. This has been used to explain the warm climate from the 10th to the 13th centuries and the 'little ice age' from the 16th to the 18th centuries. 'Husbandry emission' or, in layperson's language, farting cows, has also been cited as a cause of global warming; methane is, after all, a greenhouse gas. On the other hand, the Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change, on whose 1995 report the Kyoto protocol was based but which was denounced by Bush backers as 'crank science', analysed air bubbles trapped in samples brought up from undersea boreholes in Greenland and the Antarctic. According to IPCC scientists, the amount of carbon dioxide now in the air is the highest it has been for 420,000 years, and the amount is increasing faster than at any time since the last ice age, 20,000 years ago. That suggests that global warming is less likely to be something to do with bovine flatulence than with the 14 million years' accumulation of oil that has gone up in smoke since 1900.

Socialists can cross their fingers and hope that the doom-merchants are wrong, but it doesn't add up to much of a strategy. An alternative might be to believe the positive spin put on global warming in some of the media. This says, basically, 'so what's the problem? Britain gets a Mediterranean climate, Finland gets vineyards, warmer weather will increase crop production.' This cosy scenario leaves out the fact that growing crops in warmer weather requires more fresh water, a precious and finite resource, that while Florida and Holland can build flood defences, the Maldives, Kiribati and parts of Bangladesh will disappear, and that the increase in disease as a result of warmer weather will have a disproportionate effect on the world's poor. The 'optimists' also peddle the idea that things are getting better, not worse. The Thames and the Great Lakes are cleaner now than 50 years ago, in many Western cities the air is cleaner, and since the Montreal protocol of 1987 production of ozone-harming CFCs has plummeted. This is not to be underestimated, but even if the truth on global warming is less bad than we thought, what about the proliferation of chemicals like PCBs, with their possible effects on male fertility? What about the destruction of forest and ocean eco-systems, the consequent disruption of the food chain and the possible mass extinction of species to rival that of 65 million years ago which finished off the dinosaurs?

The other, very unattractive option is for the working class to allow its response to be dictated by George W. Bush. Although his first and last concern is for US corporations, he has been shrewd enough to talk about US jobs as the justification for refusal to ratify Kyoto. One model, actually prepared by the US Department of Energy for the Clinton administration, calculated a 4 per cent reduction in US GDP if its emission

levels were cut by 7 per cent of 1990 levels. Bush, and those like him, can say to workers, 'do you want a recession or reduced carbon emissions?', knowing in advance what the answer will be.

Towards an answer

So, socialists have to work out a strategy to deal with this new, and difficult, reality. One way to start is by challenging the bipolar opposites of 'infinite growth' versus 'zero growth'. The perceived link between environmental concern and 'zero growth' has given ammunition to those, socialists or otherwise, who for whatever reason do not take up those concerns. One problem is a failure to distinguish between different meanings of economic growth. Another is the assumption that because in its present form economic growth is generally damaging to the environment, therefore all growth is damaging. In economic and political discussion, economic growth is expressed as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But an increase in GDP need not necessarily, and often does not, involve an increase in the consumption of natural resources. GDP is simply a measure of income flows around the economy. In itself, it is neither an indicator of pollution nor of the consumption of natural resources. Whether economic activity is environmentally harmful depends purely on the kind of activity it is, not whether it results in economic growth. GDP can increase, yet with fewer resources being consumed and with less pollution, and vice versa. Some environmental economists have used the term 'environmental impact coefficient' (EIC) to describe the environmental effect of any given economic activity. The EIC can fall even if the economy is growing, or it can rise if the economy is contracting. (An example of the former might be, say, the economy of Denmark; an example of the latter might be, say, Ukraine in the 1990s.) The impact on the environment of the economy could be measured by the difference between the rate of change in the EIC and the rate of growth of GNP. The aim is for the EIC to fall at a faster rate than GDP grows. (By the same token, if the EIC per unit of GDP is increasing, then the GDP would have to fall for the environment to improve). The concept of EIC has its problems. It is somewhat schematic. Some forms of environmental impact are difficult or impossible to measure, and simply not increasing some forms of pollution does not prevent their effects becoming cumulatively worse.

The point is, while current patterns of economic growth, under the present economic system, are environmentally harmful, growth and ecological damage can be decoupled. The principal problem is the lack of political will, and that, in turn, is down to capitalism and to production for profit. Technology to generate electricity from hydrogen, or from solar, tide or wind power is available, but hardly utilised in Britain because of the short-termism of successive British governments who won't subsidise it, and because of the influence within the British ruling class of the fossil fuel and nuclear lobbies. Even the hopelessly unambitious targets set by the Kyoto conference on carbon emissions, which allow all sorts of 'wriggle room' such as 'emissions trading' are being effectively sabotaged, most openly by the USA but by other governments as well. Despite small-scale achievements, such as the aim of Iceland to be completely reliant on renewable energy sources in 30 years, this decoupling is not possible, on a scale that really matters, in a system based on production for profit, certainly not in the new 'free trade' regime of the WTO.

Workers' control

How is a decision made on the EIC of a given economic activity? By the growing number of corporate environmental spindoctors or greenwashers? These decisions must be the responsibility of democratic bodies of producers and consumers; in other words, part of a system of democratic workers' control, relying on the expertise of specialists who are strictly accountable. An example might be the British coal industry. By strict environmental standards this industry was a disaster, but until the defeat of the NUM it employed, directly or indirectly, hundreds of thousands. Under the Tories, the destruction of the industry caused mass poverty and destroyed whole communities, although inadvertently the Tories reduced carbon emissions. An alternative would be the gradual switching from coal to other forms of energy under a democratic workers' plan, sharing the available work, without loss of pay or jobs. In the same way, carbon emissions could be reduced without workers being faced with an alternative: help the environment, or keep your job. Even if, due to the existing state of class consciousness, demands for workers' control and work sharing are likely to reach a (very) small audience, at least explaining that it is possible would help break down the

'job or environment' dichotomy.

One way in which growth can be achieved without environmental damage is if that growth is 'sustainable'. In a literal sense 'sustainable' simply means that no more is taken out than is put in, so that fish may be caught, but not so many that the population cannot renew itself, or trees are felled, but new ones planted, so that the forest renews itself. The problem with 'sustainability' is that it has become like motherhood and apple pie. You can't find anyone who disagrees with it. It was endorsed by the leaders (including Thatcher and Reagan) of the G7 at their summit in 1988. When the 1987 'Brundtland Report' of the World Commission on Environment and Development stated that it should be the principal goal of economic policy, the British government's response blandly stated that its own economic policies were already in accordance! Socialists should be suspicious of the way the term is bandied about. It is a godsend to 'eat your cake and have it' green consumerism, but, much more sinister, it is at the heart of the 'greenwashing' strategies of the big corporations. While ExxonMobil represents the hard nosed 'in your face' wing of corporate oil, BP has rebranded itself as an 'energy' company, 'Beyond Petroleum'(!), while Shell has created a division called Shell Renewables, although devoting just 0.6 per cent of its annual investment to renewables. Clearly, there's a big difference between what is sustainable and what greenwashers say is 'sustainable'. We shouldn't leave it up to corporate PR departments to tell us what that difference is.

This article doesn't pretend to have all the answers in the 'growth' debate, it merely seeks to ask some of the questions. To one fundamental question, should socialism still be an ideology of plenty, the answer must be yes, for the sake of those dying of poverty and underdevelopment. But that means freedom from WTO- and IMF-dictated

economic policies, and freedom from concepts of 'growth' and 'development' by which the environment is degraded by, for example, the intensive cultivation of cash crops for export, or by the construction of prestige projects which only benefit Western construction firms and the corrupt local elite. Those in the 'third world' or 'developing' countries are under a triple bind: their environment is degraded by the activities of Western corporations, they are trying to catch up with the rich West, but at the moment they lack the resources (and Bush says he won't help them get those resources) to mitigate the environmental effects of that catching up – Boston is cleaner than Mexico City, Japanese cities are cleaner than Chinese ones. For some, socialism must be an ideology of scarcity. Some are easy targets which loom large: corporate vested interests such as oil, construction and the 'roads lobby', rich people who just want to have more, or those who think they have a right to have cut flowers flown across the planet just because they happen to fancy them. But then it gets more difficult. For example, what about the building of a new airport, terminal or runway? The environmental impact of these projects is catastrophic. They are justified by their supporters because of the demand for air transport, and the jobs and other benefits they will provide. Should socialists be calling the bluff of Balfour Beatty and the rest by saying 'these are jobs we don't need'? Should socialists regard access to fresh fruit out of season as a gain worth holding on to, even if that fruit is an export-oriented cash-crop flown from all over the world? Should socialists be saying to workers who can afford it 'No, you can't go to the Dominican Republic; burning all that polluting jet fuel will add to global warming, a marine ecosystem has been trashed to build your hotel and a forest cut down to build the airport. Go to Great Yarmouth instead, but leave the car at home'?

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Notes:

1. Meadows et al (1974), *The Limits to Growth* (London, Pan Books) cited in Dobson (1995), *Green Political Thought* (London, Routledge), p.73.
2. *Ibid.*, p.74.
3. *Ibid.*, p.74.
4. *Ibid.*, p.75.
5. Meadows et al (1992), *Beyond the Limits: Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future?* (London, Earthscan), p.174.
6. Irvine, S. and Ponton, A. (1988), *A Green Manifesto: Policies for a Green Future* (London, McDonald Optima), pp.24-25.
7. Ekins (1986), *The Living Economy* (London, Routledge), p.9.
8. Irvine and Ponton (1988), p.25.

Introduction to *The War in Afghanistan*

British imperialism and Afghanistan

As we go to press, the war-ravaged and desperately poor country of Afghanistan faces an enormous military assault at the hands of Bush and Blair's coalition. This intervention of the 'civilised world' is only the latest in a long line of military incursions into the affairs of Afghanistan.

In 1839, a British-led army invaded Afghanistan and installed a puppet ruler. 'Not more than a hundred Afghans had arrived to see Shah Shuja's entry into the city,' wrote Soviet historian Khalfin. 'Even among these one could hear grumbling against the infidel invaders. After his coronation . . . the puppet signed an agreement . . . on the permanent presence of British troops in Afghanistan and the establishment of British control over its foreign relations.'¹ Within three years the British were driven out, losing 20,000 men in the process. Between 1855 and 1857, having occupied the Punjab, Britain annexed the neighbouring Pushtun lands. In 1878 a British army numbering 35,000 invaded again, annexing further border regions, which passed subsequently to modern day Pakistan. By dividing the Pushtun areas the British created a permanently smouldering conflict and fought nearly one hundred campaigns against the Pushtuns between 1850 and 1908. Between military engagements, the British systematically corrupted the rulers of the country.

In 1919, Amir Habibullah Khan, who had declined to take advantage of Britain's involvement in the First World War and suppressed supporters of a constitutional monarchy, was himself murdered while out hunting. In the ensuing power struggle Amir Amanullah Khan established himself as king and promptly declared Afghanistan's 'complete independence and autonomy'. The first country to recognise Afghan independence was the Soviet Union. Britain responded by plunging the country into the third British-Afghan War in May 1919, deploying an army fifteen times that of Afghanistan's and bombing Kabul and Jalalabad. Fierce guerrilla warfare ensued, and with problems of their own in India the British concluded an uneasy ceasefire in June.

Amanullah, influenced by events in Turkey, embarked upon a modernising and nationalist course, looking to Turkey and the Soviet Union as a counterweight to the British. In September 1920 the Soviet-sponsored Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku, asked in its *Manifesto*: 'What is Britain doing

to Afghanistan? By bribing the Emir's government it has kept the people in maximum subjection, in the greatest poverty and ignorance, trying to reduce this country to a desert, in order that this desert may guard India, which Britain oppresses, from any incursion from without.'² On February 8, 1921 an Afghan delegation signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union in Moscow, which would be followed by a further Treaty of Non-Interference and Non-Aggression the following year.

Into this unstable situation a Soviet diplomatic mission was despatched to Kabul, headed by former Kronstadt sailors' leader F.F. Raskolnikov, assisted by his then wife, Larissa Reisner³. Their brief was to do everything to neutralise British influence while avoiding at all costs 'the fatal mistake of artificially implanting Communism' in what remained a very undeveloped and tribal land⁴. The unorthodox tasks they faced included Reisner trying to influence the Emir's harem!⁵ Amanullah was not above manoeuvring with the British. However, the success of Raskolnikov's mission, which forms the background to this article, can be measured by the fact that he was decorated by Amanullah, and the British responded by demanding in the 'Curzon Note' of 1923, that he be recalled from Afghanistan because he was acting against British interests in the region⁶.

After returning from a foreign tour in 1928, Amanullah announced a series of liberal reforms designed to undercut tribal practices. Seizing the opportunity to strike back at him, the British backed a petty thief, Bacha Saqao, who galvanised traditionalist opposition to the reforms. Having taken Kabul, Bacha Saqao closed schools and other educational institu-

tions, and only paid religious leaders. Amanullah's supporter, Nadir Khan, went to Peshawar in British-held India and raised an army in the border lands to restore Amanullah, only to renege on this once he had entered Kabul, and proclaim himself ruler.

Thus ended Afghanistan's brief experiment with constitutional monarchy. It was the last representative of Nadir Khan's dynasty who was overthrown by the PDPA in 1978, unleashing a chain of events which would lead to Soviet intervention in December 1979; the subsequent internationalising of the Afghan conflict into a second Cold War; and the disastrous results of that intervention which contributed in no small measure to the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991⁷. Britain maintained its bloody role in Afghan affairs by offering SAS training to the anti-Soviet Mujaheddin guerrillas, while the CIA was developing its proteges, including one Osama bin Laden.

F.F. Raskolnikov (1892-1939) was a prominent leader of the insurgent sailors of Kronstadt in 1917, and during the Civil War played an important role in the fledgling Red Navy. His works include *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917* (New Park, 1982) and *Tales of Sub-Lieutenant Ilyin* (New Park, 1982). Recalled from his diplomatic post in Bulgaria in 1937, at the height of the purges, he delayed and as a result was declared 'an enemy of the people' by the Soviet Supreme Court. He penned a stinging 'Open Letter' to Stalin in August 1939 while in Paris⁸, and died in suspicious circumstances a month later⁹. The article that follows was published in English in *Labour Monthly*, March 1929. **Richard Price**

Notes

1. Quoted in R. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, Verso, 1988, p.10.
2. *Baku: Congress of the Peoples of the East*, New Park, 1977, p.168.
3. Raskolnikov and Reisner's period in Afghanistan is covered in C. Porter, *Larissa Reisner*, Virago, 1988, pp.112-135.
4. *Ibid*, p.114.
5. Reisner's impressions were collected in her short book *Afghanistan*, which remains unpublished in English.
6. F.F. Raskolnikov, *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917*, New Park, 1982, Biographical Note, p.X.
7. See Ed. A. Saikal and W. Maley, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, Cambridge, 1989.
8. Raskolnikov, *op cit*, pp.345-356.
9. Further biographical details can be found in B. Pearce's Biographical Note to Raskolnikov, *op cit*, pp.VII-XII.

The war in Afghanistan

by **F.F. Raskolnikov (Soviet representative in Afghanistan in the early 1920s)**

Afghanistan is a small country with a considerable historical past. Its small connection with the economy of the world, its centuries of artificial isolation, has preserved in Afghanistan quite a number of antiquated forms of feudal rule. The remnants of feudalism which may be found in abundance in China, India, Persia and a number of other Eastern countries have been preserved in Afghanistan in their original undisturbed form. The entire economy of the country is based on agriculture, in which again feudal property is predominant. Enormous masses of the population have not yet settled down to a regular tilling of the soil, but carry on a nomadic pasturage. Every year at the beginning of spring tens and hundreds of thousands of herdsmen wander with their flocks and herds, their families and their entire scanty possessions to the blooming mountain pastures (encountering on the way all sorts of obstacles and not infrequently warring against the settled peasant population), to return in the autumn to the lower-lying winter encampments. In the system of Afghan economy, the few and thinly populated towns play no important role. Despite the wealth of natural treasure concealed in the mountains of the Hindu Kush, mining is insufficiently developed. The industrial output, concentrated in Kabul, is yet in its infancy.

This backwardness in the development of productive forces determines the class structure of the country. The overwhelming majority of the population consists of peasants (engaged in agriculture, pasturage and cattle-breeding). The peasantry lives in the utmost poverty, is subjected to spoliation and coercion on the part of the landowners, suffers under the incompetence of the officials, and has to wrest from nature every hand's breadth of tillable soil.

The political power lies in the hands of the landowners, the so-called 'sirdars'. The ruling class is connected with the mass of peasant population only by means of the individual links in the long feudal-bureaucratic chain.

Under the conditions of this patriarchal manner of living, the heads of the clans and the elders represent the organised authorities.

In contradistinction to China, India and Persia, where there is a pronounced national bourgeoisie, there is practically no middle-class at all in Afghanistan. Not only can there naturally be no question of an industrial bourgeoisie, seeing that the few existing factories are in the hands of the State, but even the commercial bourgeoisie is still at an embryo stage. The entire foreign trade, which is mainly carried on via India, is (with negligible exceptions) in the hands of Indian merchants. At the same time it is possible in Afghanistan to observe the interesting process of a dovetailing of landed property and commercial capital. Many landowners invest their land-revenues in commercial enterprises and employ the profits gained thereby in extending their landed property. While in Persia the voice of the bazaar exercises a considerable influence upon the policy of the Government, the small element of the Afghan commercial bourgeoisie possesses absolutely no political significance. The small number of industrial workers have not yet begun to feel themselves a special class and are thus altogether unorganised. They figure just as little in the political arena as do the artisans who are dispersed all over the country. The Islamic clergy, on the other hand, have long since grown used to exercising an important political influence, amounting in the main to a pronounced support of reaction.

In the past, when the cruel and despotic Abdur Achman or the sensual Habibullah still sat upon the Afghan throne, all proceeded on the lines of a well-ordered feudal State. The great sirdars guided the destinies of the country, the peasants sowed and reaped beneath the sweat of their brows and paid onerous taxes. From time to time the Government sent punitive expeditions to conquer the independent tribes of Kafiristan or of the more distant Badachshan.

Under cover of a control of its foreign relations, British imperialism turned Afghanistan practically into a subject colony.

In 1919 there was a palace revolt in Afghanistan. One February morning

Habibullah, who had been hunting in the surroundings of Jalalabad, was found to have been murdered.

What were the reasons for the overthrow of Habibullah? He had failed to take into consideration the changes and developments which the world war and the October revolution had brought about in the international position of Afghanistan. He continued to bow to the Viceroy of India. In the meantime, however, the war had weakened the authority of Great Britain, and the October revolution changed fundamentally the proportion of power in the countries immediately adjoining Afghanistan. Up to the October revolution Afghanistan was in the toils of the two imperialist allies, Great Britain and Russia, which could at any moment suppress any Afghan attempt at national emancipation. After the October revolution the Soviet Union was practically at war with Great Britain. Habibullah did not understand how to exploit these international differences in favour of the national interests of his country, and for this incompetence he paid with his life. The rise of the revolutionary movement in India which set in in 1919 stimulated the activity of the Young Afghan Nationalists, who brought about a palace revolt. The Young Afghan party then placed upon the throne the third son of the late monarch, Amanullah Khan, who was proclaimed Emir in defiance of the prior claims of his two elder brothers. At the same time, the brother of the murdered Habibullah, Nasrullah Khan, laid claim to the throne. A civil war ensued, but did not last very long, since the troops of Amanullah, supported by the peasant population, soon gained the upper hand; Nasrullah was taken prisoner and shortly afterwards executed.

This civil war created a marked line of demarcation between the adherents of the old feudal conditions and the champions of a reconstruction of Afghanistan. The pious and reactionary pan-Islamic leaders rallied round them all the conservative elements, from the feudal landowners to the Islamic priests. The progressively-minded Amanullah relied on the peasant masses, on the army and on the organised Young Afghans, who were for the greater part descended from the more progressive of the small landowners.

The programme of the Young Afghans contained the claim to the independence of Afghanistan as regards foreign politics, besides radical reforms in the country itself.

The first step of the new government was the declaration of the independence of Afghanistan. But Amanullah was quite aware of the fact that such a declaration alone would not suffice. The country's independence had to be fought for. He, therefore, turned all his arms against the usurper of Afghan independence, against British imperialism. A small but fanatical Afghan army invaded the frontiers of British India in the spring of 1919. Naturally the fight was unequal, since Great Britain was furnished with all up-to-date implements of war. The Afghan troops had to retire across the frontier and for a time even to leave the town of Hosta in British hands. But the internal position of India was very critical, for seventy million Indian Muslims openly sympathised with the Afghans and were inspired with such revolutionary zeal that the British could not profitably make peace and with heavy hearts were obliged formally to recognise the independence of Afghanistan.

Simultaneously with his declaration of war on Great Britain, Amanullah sent Lenin a telegram with the suggestion of an initiation of diplomatic relations. Soviet Russia most readily acceded to this proposal and was thus the first Power to recognise the newly-gained independence of the young State.

The entire activity of Amanullah in regard to foreign politics was neither more nor less than an epoch of 'enlightened absolutism under the specific conditions of a backward Oriental country'.

In the course of the past ten years, the Young Afghans under Amanullah's leadership effected some great reforms, which covered various fields of activity: (1) Creation of a native State industry (arsenals for the supply of the army, cement works, etc.); (2) Enhancement of the cultural level of the country (development of the school system, delegation of teachers to study abroad, institution of female schools, etc.); (3) Reorganisation of the army; and (4) Emancipation of women (abolition of yashmaks, creation of women's organisations, etc).

These reforms were of progressive significance for Afghanistan, guiding the country in the direction of bourgeois development. The tragedy of Amanullah's case lay in the fact that he undertook bourgeois reforms without the existence of any national bourgeoisie in the country.

By his crusade against the feudal system and his exclusion of the clergy from

political power, Amanullah naturally incited these classes against his reforms. The difficulty lay in the fact that he needed a firm class basis for his fight against feudalism and the Islamic clergy.

The organic fault of all the reforms of Amanullah lay in the fact that they were devoid of an economic basis. These reforms, in themselves highly progressive, were extremely superficial and entailed no real advantages to the Afghan peasants.

But at the same time the reforms occasioned a tremendous outlay. The peasants, who had already plenty of taxes to pay, had to part with their last rupees to pay for these expensive reforms. Taxation increased. Thus the tax due on asses rose by 400 per cent in the course of ten years. Amanullah's chief mistake lay in the circumstance that he opposed feudalism without affecting any comprehensive land reform.

Amanullah could easily have had the entire peasant population behind him if he had taken the land from the feudal lords and given it to the peasants or if he had decreased the tax pressure on the peasantry by increasing that on the landowners.

Under the given circumstances the increased tax pressure caused the greatest dissatisfaction among the peasants, a fact the reactionary elements immediately turned to account.

The oppositional tendencies developing by reason of this pauperisation were exploited by the Afghan reactionaries for their own ends. Naturally it was not the entire peasantry that opposed Amanullah. The bulk of the peasant population observed an expectant neutrality, a section thereof rallied round the King. The fact remains, however, that the peasants of Kugistan and the Shinvari tribe rose in arms against Amanullah.

As an Oriental reformer, Amanullah has not infrequently been compared with Kemal Pasha. The latter, however, was in a very much better position, since he effected his reforms in a less backward country. Therefore, based on the Turkish national bourgeoisie, he succeeded in destroying the Caliphate, separating the church from the State, and breaking the back of the clergy.

For lack of a firm social basis, Amanullah was not in a position to attack the clergy and religion with such determination. He went more cautiously to work, restricted himself to half-measures, left the 'shariat' untouched, and merely renovated and cleaned it a bit. Such an ambiguous position could not be without serious dangers.

The complicated national conditions in

Afghanistan added to the complexity of the class struggle. There are in the country numerous tribes which are constantly at variance, thus the tribes of Shinvari and Mangal which have had a feud between them for centuries. Such differences have often been exploited by the Government.

The feeling of State citizenship is not very pronounced in Afghanistan. Each citizen is in the first place a member of a tribe and only in the second place an Afghan. Amanullah's policy of centralisation aroused resistance not only on the part of the feudal landowners but also of entire tribes. His propaganda for national independence was highly comprehensible to the young Afghan officers and students of the Kabul Academy, but failed to awaken an echo in the minds of the nomad tribes.

Finally, the policy of the British imperialists played a great role. The British Government could never get over its failure to subdue Afghanistan, which remained the sore point in British world hegemony. All the intrigues of British diplomats, from Lord Curzon to Sir Francis Humphrys, the Minister at Kabul, were directed towards bringing about a rupture of diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. Threats and promises, secret notes and open ultimata, terrorist attempts and reactionary risings – in a word, the entire arsenal of experienced bourgeois diplomacy was employed to this end.

The British need a dummy in Afghanistan after the pattern of King Fuad of Egypt or of King Feisul of Mesopotamia. Amanullah is naturally not to be used in such a way. Once the British diplomats had recognised this fact, they had already decided to get rid of him.

During Amanullah's visit to Europe last year, the rising was prepared and there can be no doubt but that Bach-i-Saquo, 'famous' as a chief of banditti in the vicinity of Charikar, was in close touch with the British Legion at Kabul.

From the standpoint of war-preparations against the Soviet Union, Afghanistan is a highly important base for the British. An independent Afghanistan represents a danger to the British possession of India, while on the other hand an Afghanistan under British suzerainty would mean a real menace to the Central Asiatic regions of the Soviet Union.

Amanullah has not yet abandoned the fight. If he regains his authority he will be obliged to broaden his social basis, to rely on the peasants, to effect a land reform, to lessen the taxation of the peasants, and to carry on the fight against the feudal lords and the priests with greater determination than hitherto. ■

Imperial holocaust

King Leopold's Ghost by Adam Hochschild, Papermac, 2000, 366 pages, £12.00

Reviewed by Richard Price

This superb book must rank as one of the finest modern narrative histories of colonialism in Africa. Its subject – Congo, the personal colony of Leopold, King of the Belgians – is probably best known in Britain through Joseph Conrad's famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which in turn formed the inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's sprawling Vietnam epic, *Apocalypse Now*.

In 1919, an official Belgian government commission estimated that in the past four decades, the population of Congo had halved. This means that as a result of murder, starvation, forced labour and disease, ten million people had died – a toll of truly Holocaust proportions. Yet for all its appalling barbarity, this legacy remains largely invisible. There are no memorials to the slaughter in Brussels, and for the royal family it's business as usual, in spite of two world wars, a dose of Nazi collaboration and frequent unpopular forays into politics. The Royal Museum of Central Africa in the suburbs continues to host thousands of visitors with its large collection of Africana, yet nowhere are its sinister associations revealed.

Internationally, too, the horrors of the Congo have slipped from memory, and yet for over a decade they were the subject of a mass campaign in Britain, led by journalist E.D. Morel, and supported behind the scenes by colonial diplomat and Irish nationalist, Roger Casement. Apart from the active efforts of the Belgian monarchy and state to cover their tracks, part of the explanation surely lies in Britain and France's defence of 'gallant little Belgium' in 1914. Overnight, Belgium was transformed from an international pariah into a victim of 'Prussian militarism' and symbol of the 'war to defend democracy'. All the more credit to Lenin and the tiny band of internationalists who refused to be swayed by arguments that Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality somehow exonerated its status as a major colonial power.

In charting the formation of the fictionally 'independent' Congo state, Hochschild's account demonstrates a mastery of a huge array of source material. Using an assortment of explorers, adventurers, scientists and freebooters, Leopold stealthily laid the foundations of a vast colony in the Congo basin. Uniquely in the history of European colonialism in Africa, Congo wasn't a colony of the Belgian state as such, but the personal fiefdom of its king. Thus Leopold II, frustrated by his role as the constitutional monarch of a small European state, became the absolute monarch of a vast African one. Leopold massaged international opinion by operating through a range of societies and organisations supposedly dedicated to exploration, development and, ironically, the struggle against 'Arab' slave traders. Cunningly taking advantage of divisions between the Great Powers on the eve of the scramble for Africa, Leopold in turns charmed, corrupted and manoeuvred his way through the diplomatic maze. Fronting his diplomatic initiatives, or working behind the scenes, were figures like famous explorer H.M. Stanley, well placed shyster 'General' Henry Shelton Sanford in the United States, and the banker and close associate of Bismarck, Gerson Bleichröder. Leopold utilised the most contradictory sentiments, from duping anti-slavery campaigners to enlisting southern reactionaries in the US keen on sending freed slaves back to Africa. Lulled by bogus pledges of free trade with the emerging colony, the major European powers were too busy with their own rivalries to contest Leopold's claim to the Congo.

From its beginnings, the colony used the harshest measures of forced labour.

Although the inhabitants weren't *sold*, they were treated in every other respect as slaves. The propaganda against 'Arab' slave traders operating in eastern Africa was the cover for a system that was if anything more brutal, and certainly more efficient in its ruthless approach to exploitation. Indigenous society was atomised, as chiefs signed treaties which handed over vast tracts of land in exchange for worthless gifts, many becoming more or less willing accomplices in handing over their people to the forced unpaid labour regime. Starting with the collection of ivory, and moving on to rubber, Leopold's officials laid down the harshest system of quotas, backed up by the kidnapping of women and children, rape, beatings, mutilation and mass murder. Aside from the occasional mild rebuke to officials for 'excesses' when the regime needed scapegoats, Africans effectively had no rights.

The campaign to expose these crimes was a long and arduous one. Hochschild pays due credit to early black campaigners such as Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, George Washington Williams, and Presbyterian missionary, William H. Sheppard, as well as to revolts within the colony. Leopold's most tenacious opponent was E.D. Morel, who as a young shipping company official in Antwerp had deduced that nothing was being exported back to Congo in return for the vast profits being made from its rubber. Supported by a generous donation from Casement, who as British consul had written a scathing report on colonial rule in the Congo, Morel established the Congo Reform Association, and for a decade sustained a huge international campaign of rallies, lobbying and publications.

Despite his evident admiration for

Notes

1. Quoted in J. Riddell (ed.), *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, Monad, 1986, p.7

Morel, Hochschild isn't blind to his faults or limitations, pointing out that he had something of a blind spot where *British* imperialism was concerned, and held other views that today would appear patronising. Indeed, the politics of the Congo Reform Association weren't socialist, but drew on the Nonconformist humanitarian tradition. But if Morel and Casement were products of their generation, their principles did not endear them to British imperialism. Morel served a term of hard labour for his opposition to the First World War, while Casement was executed for treason in 1916 for his services to Irish nationalism.

However, as the debate on colonial policy at the Stuttgart Congress of the

Second International in 1907 revealed, much of official 'Marxism' was scarcely more advanced than humanitarianism. Take the speech of Belgian delegate Modest Terwagne, for instance: 'I speak for the minority of my party. For us Belgians the question is: Should we leave the Congo in its current state, or do we want better conditions there? . . . Do not close the door to the future! If from one day to the next colonial production were ended, industry would be seriously damaged. It logically follows that men utilise all the riches of the globe, wherever they may be situated.'¹ Rather more honourable appears to have been the role of Emil Vandervelde, the leader of the Belgian socialists and president of the International, who offered his legal

services, and travelled to Congo to defend two prominent opponents of the regime in 1909.

Given the horrifying nature of his subject matter, a lesser writer could have slipped into the mistake of seeing the Congo as a case apart, a brutal aberration of colonialism. One of the book's many strengths is that it warns against such a conclusion, pointing out that the record of the colonial powers in other rubber bearing regions such as French Equatorial Africa, Portuguese Angola and the German Cameroons was just as vicious, while in German South West Africa (modern day Namibia) a war of extermination was not only waged, but openly proclaimed against the Herero people. If there was a distinction to the Congo, it was that 'Leopold simply had far more of the rubber territory than anyone else'. (p.280) Nor does he spare hypocrisy from Britain – guilty of appalling crimes against Aborigines in Australia – or the United States, waging a brutal contemporary war in the Philippines: 'Certainly one reason Britons and Americans focussed on the Congo was that it was a safe target.' (p.282)

Having extorted huge wealth from his private colony – and spent a large slice of it on a woman he had first procured as a 16-year-old prostitute – Leopold got a second bite at the cherry when the Belgian state agreed a financial package to take over Congo as a Belgian colony in 1908. To 'compensate' him, Leopold received a down payment of 45.5 million francs towards his various grandiose building projects, and a further 50 million francs in several instalments in recognition of 'his great sacrifices made in the Congo', while the state assumed 110 million francs of colonial debts, almost of third of which consisted of loans from the Belgian state in the first place! Needless to add, not a franc of compensation was paid to the victims of his reign of terror.

In a final chapter, Hochschild sketches the legacy of colonialism in Congo/Zaire, from the murder of radical nationalist premier Patrice Lumumba by CIA-sponsored forces in 1961, through the long night of Mobutu's western-backed dictatorship from 1965-1997. One of the impulses to write this book happened 40 years ago, when, as a young student visiting Leopoldville, the author heard a drunken CIA agent boasting of how he had helped organise Lumumba's murder. This book will long remain a notable monument to the victims of imperialism.

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