

permanentrevolution

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1968: An excess of history

INSIDE

Britain /

Labour: it can only get worse

Venezuela /

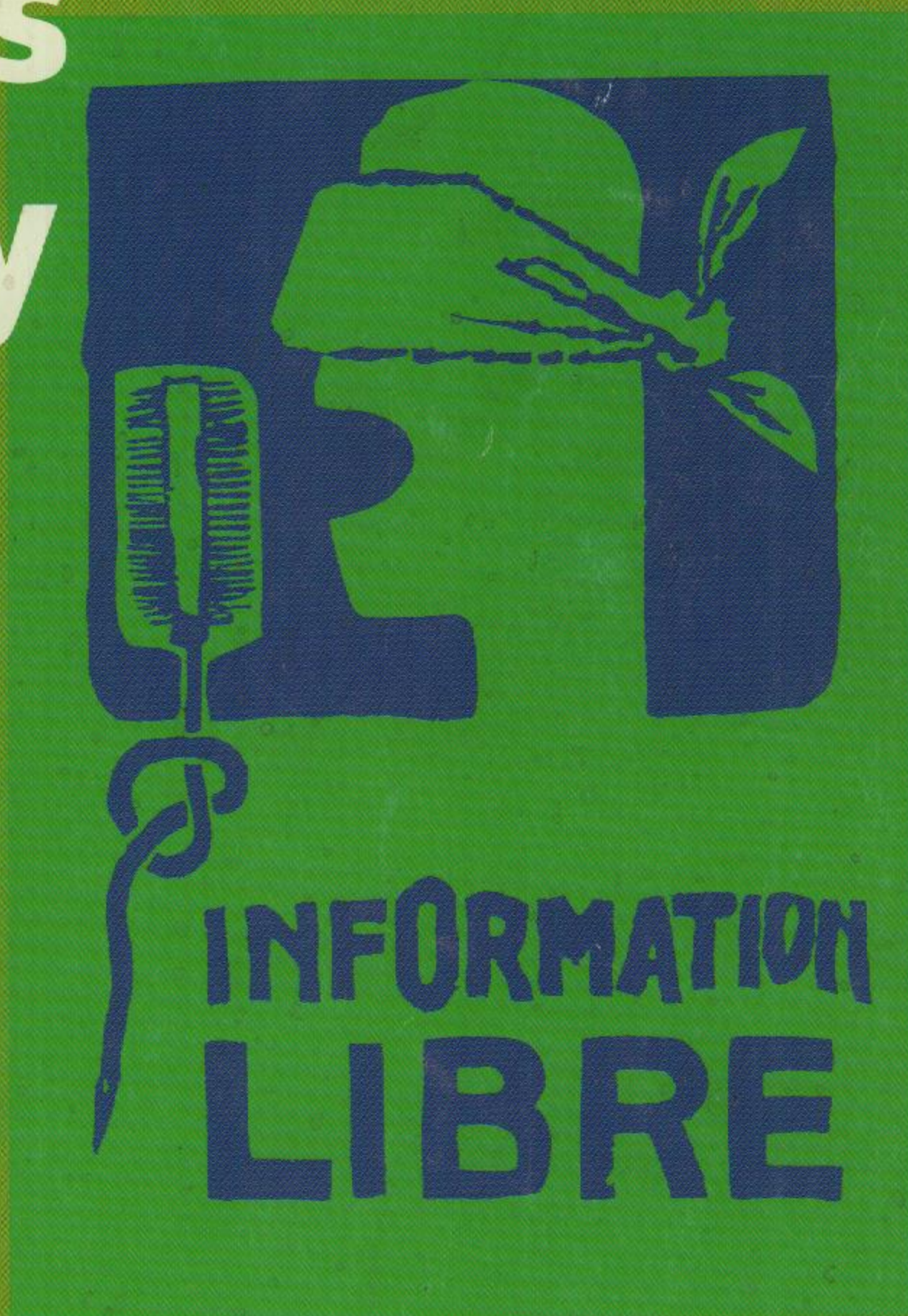
Orlando Chirino interview

World economy /

Is China running out of steam?

France 68 /

When everything was possible



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From the editors

Permanent Revolution 9

Summer 2008

A quarterly review of revolutionary politics and theory

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There is no shortage of self-reverential looking back to 1968 in the media – the generation of “68-ers” who now run a lot of it have made sure of that. For all that, May 68 continues to traumatise our rulers. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, recently fulminated against its “moral and intellectual permissiveness”.

In this issue we neither romanticise nor vilify these events. Rather, in two articles – one on the events in France, the other on the international setting – we examine the forces that took to the streets that year and the legacy it has left us with. Our film review continues the ‘68 theme.

In an exclusive interview with a leading Venezuelan trade unionist we unravel the class dynamics of the Bolivarian revolution and present it alongside a series of impressions from a comrade who visited recently.

Will China fall prey to the fall-out from the global credit crunch? We attempt an answer in this issue when we examine what lies behind its rapid economic growth and the left’s confusion on the matter.

Finally we search among the ruins of Labour’s disastrous spring election results and see if we can detect signs of life for the far left.

On the inside back cover you will find the programme of our weekend discussion event, which explores the many sides of ‘68 alongside many other areas of debate. We hope to see you there – it is at the University of London Union, 27-29 June.

The Editors

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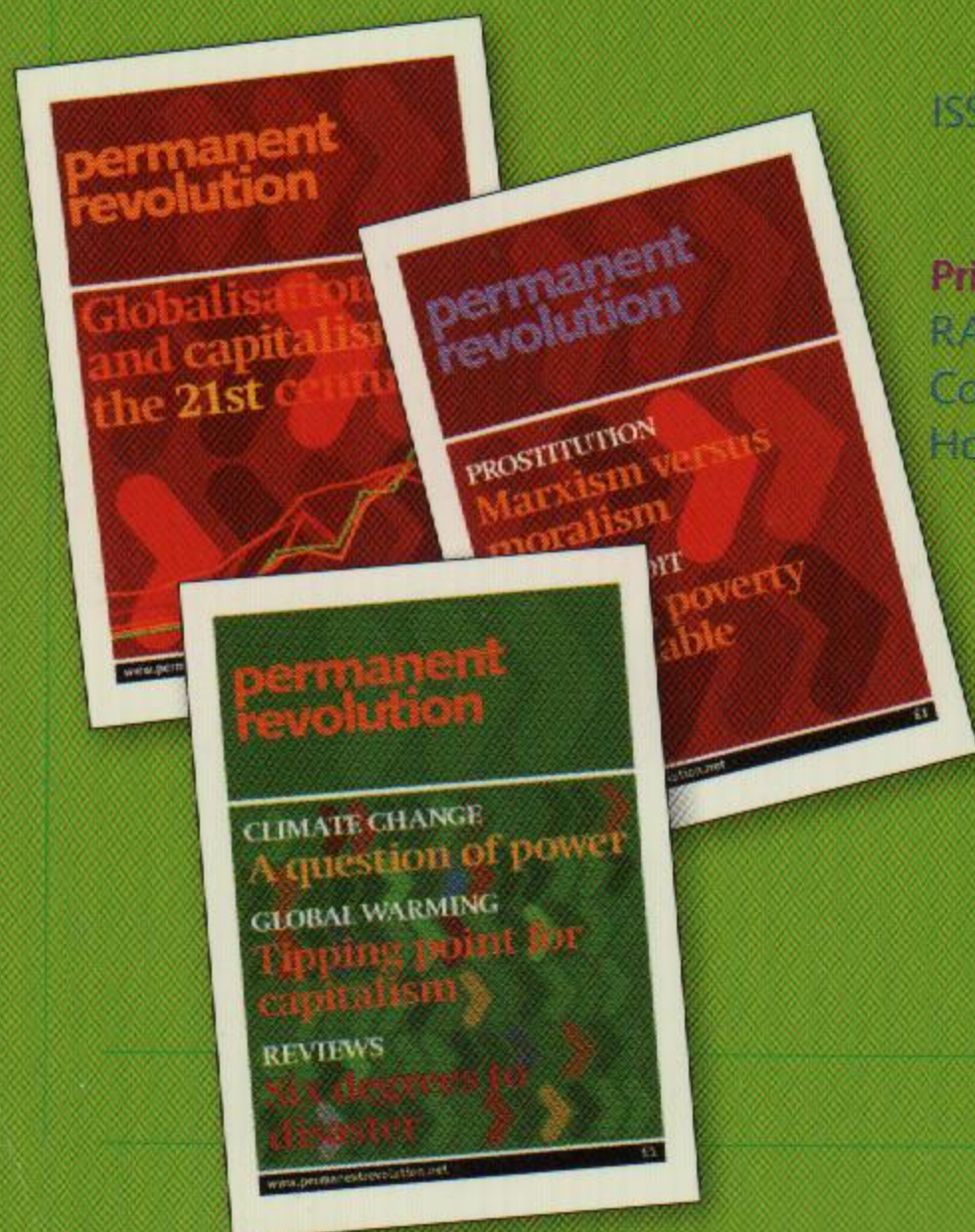
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Issue 9 / Summer 2008 / www.permanentrevolution.net

Contents /

Briefings /

2 / World Review

Food prices: a crime against humanity

4 / Briefings

NUT action / Academy strikes show the way / Abortion vote – only a temporary victory / US dockers against imperialism's wars / Convention of the Left / Italy – right rules the roost / Zimbabwe / Bolivia – right wing elite on offensive / Self-determination for Tibetan people

Backspace /

75 / Feedback

David Walters says the left should say "yes" to nuclear power

77 / Reviews

Revolution and Counter-Revolution by Kevin Murphy / Marxist History-Writing for the 21st Century by Chris Wickham / If I Am Not For Myself by Mike Marqusee / China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation by David Shambaugh / Between Comrades ed. Donal Nevin / High Jinks – the cinema of '68

18 Britain / The fag end of New Labour

The lowest ever share of the vote in the May local elections and the first by-election gain for the Tories against Labour for 30 years. Things can only get better? The class alliances that brought Blair to power and kept him there are fast fragmenting. But why is it the Tories who are benefitting, not the left? Mark Hoskisson explains

28 1968 / An excess of history

International student protests, French general strike, a mass anti-war movement, uprisings against Stalinism. What linked them all? Keith Harvey and Stuart King assess the legacy of a turbulent year.

34 France 68 / Everything was possible

A Friday night in May and French students tear up cobblestones in Paris and build barricades. Within days millions of workers are on general strike. Emile Gallet and Christina Duval examine why France was ripe for an explosion.

46 Venezuela / Interview with Orlando Chirino

Orlando Chirino is a national co-ordinator of the largest Venezuelan trade union federation the UNT. In this extended interview he surveys the current state of the class struggle in Venezuela, in particular the role of trade unions in the "Bolivarian revolution".

66 Economy / China syndrome

The left seems incapable of coming to terms with the magnitude of the rise of Chinese capitalism. Bill Jefferies and Keith Harvey address the arguments of those who see its growth as dependent on the US and just another bubble about to burst

56 Venezuela / Images of the class struggle

This spring Wlodek Flakin spent several weeks in Venezuela going to strike meetings and talking to activists. Here are his impressions.

Visit the website to download back issues, discussion documents and recent statements and leaflets
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A crime against humanity

STEAL FOOD from the hungry in the global south, then use it to create fuel to ferry obese car owners around in gas-guzzlers in the global north. UN food specialist Jean Ziegler proclaimed this "a crime against humanity" in May. It is hard to imagine a more striking example of the madness of the market.

The cost of food sky-rocketed recently, after three decades of low or falling prices. Wheat rose by 77% in 2007, while the cost of rice almost trebled in the six months to April 2008. Not surprisingly there have been food riots in more than 30 countries including Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt and Yemen, as subsidies are withdrawn and shortages bite. Even in the UK steep rises in the price of food staples have hit poorer families hard as wages fail to keep pace with food and energy price inflation.

The cause of the increase is an imbalance of supply and demand. Demand has risen sharply due to a combination of economic growth, population increase and the expansion of biofuels. Feverish capitalist expansion in China and India in particular has led to increased demand for food and a shift towards more meat and dairy products. This new diet consumes far more grain since it is far less efficient: it takes nine or ten kilos of grain to produce one kilo of beef. In China average meat consumption has gone up from 20kg to 50kg a year since the 1980s.

And just as more grain is diverted to feed livestock, so corn and other crops are also being diverted away from human mouths towards petrol tanks. The amount of maize produced world-wide increased by 51 million tons from 2004 to 2007, but at the same time biofuel use in the USA increased by 50 million tons, wiping out most of the rise.

The race to increase biofuel production has been marketed as a "green" initiative to tackle global warming, but nothing could be further from the truth. The real driver behind it has been concerns about fuel security and oil price rises. Recent research into the impact of biofuels suggests that they may be more energy intensive than fossil fuels, are certainly leading to deforestation, and are probably making climate change worse.

And yet still governments aggressively promote them. Suppliers in the UK are now required to include at least 2.5% biofuel in petrol, the European Union wants to raise this to 5.75% by 2010; and in nine provinces in China 10% of petrol must be ethanol from crops. It is estimated that vehicles in the USA already consume enough corn to meet the import needs of the poorest 82 countries in the world.

The other forces behind the price hikes are poor wheat harvests due to drought in Australia, Europe and southern Africa, and crop damage from floods in other areas. According to the UN World Food Programme, 57 countries, including 29 in Africa, 19 in Asia and nine in Latin America, have been hit by catastrophic floods.

Harvests have been affected by drought and heatwaves in south Asia, Europe, China, Sudan, Mozambique and Uruguay.

It should be clear from this that the price rises are not temporary blips, but are here to stay for at least a few years if not longer. Droughts and floods are going to continue and worsen as climate change escalates, biofuel demand is set to rise much further, and fuel costs are unlikely to come down. Rising oil prices add further to the costs of production (through fertiliser and tractor fuel costs) and of distribution.

The market is already responding to price rises by increasing grain production, but this will only benefit the big grain producers who have the capacity to expand and intensify. Small producers will struggle to compete.

The impact is being felt across the globe, but it is the poorest people and countries that are being devastated. Over a billion people live on US\$1 a day or less - "absolute poverty" in World Bank terms - and a further 1.5 billion live on between \$1 and \$2 a day. One of the much trumpeted successes of globalisation and world economic growth has been that these numbers have fallen over the past decade.

However, globalisation has also meant that an increasing proportion of poor people are dependent on wages and trade rather than subsistence. Some poor farmers will benefit as food producers; more and more, including the urban working class and unemployed, will be completely dependent on buying food, and they will be pushed further into poverty. The World Bank estimates that at least 100 million more people will be pushed into absolute poverty.

The poorest already spend a higher proportion of their income on food, and as this rises they will have to cut back on other things such as medical care, school fees for children, meat, vegetables etc. People in high income countries spend an average of 16% of their income on food compared with 55% in low income countries.

And they get less for the money they spend - people in Sierra Leone spend 68% of their income on food to get an average of 1,700 calories per person; compare this with the USA that spends only 12% on food to gobble up 3,732 calories per person. In Afghanistan people now spend 50% of their income on food, up from 10% two years ago, and in El Salvador the poor are only eating half as much food as they were last year.

The radical restructuring of the global economy is the underlying cause of the food crisis; developing countries were forced by the World Bank and IMF to reduce subsidies to food producers, lift import barriers and open up their economies to the international market. The result has been a shift in global food production - many countries that were self-sufficient or even exporters of staple crops became dependent on imports.

Food production has become highly centralised, with six countries producing 80% of wheat exports. Once other countries are dependent on imported food they are vulnerable to changes in world prices and to policies of the big producers.

Global institutions like the World Bank, WTO and IMF are squarely on the side of the rich. Take rice production in Haiti, for example, where it is a staple of the diet. In 1995 the IMF demanded that Haiti cut its tariff on imported rice in return for a loan. Up to that point Haiti produced almost all its own rice without government subsidy. Lowering the tariffs opened the country up to cheap imports, and now 75% of rice in Haiti is produced in the USA.

And don't be conned into thinking this is the beauty of the free market – the USA is the third largest rice exporter, and effectively dumps subsidised rice on other countries. According to Oxfam, the industry received US\$1.3 billion in government subsidies in 2003, and sells its rice at 34% below cost price.

This is but one example of how globalisation, the growth of "free trade" across the world, is in fact the promotion of a system rigged in favour of the rich. Millions of people are now hungry because they cannot afford the "market price" for food but have been forbidden from growing their own. Meanwhile agribusinesses makes billions in profit, joined recently by hedge funds that have moved into food futures – effectively betting on the empty stomachs of children in the global south.

Famine and "food insecurity" is not new. But this time it is clearer than ever that there is nothing natural or inevitable about it. This food crisis is not due to natural disasters or overpopulation. The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation has worked out that plenty of food is produced in the world – enough to provide over 2,800 calories a day to everyone which is more than enough to stay healthy.

The problem, once again, is that under capitalism food is produced first and foremost to make profit. If more profit can be made from feeding cars rather than people, then that is what will happen, however much concern world

leaders show for the poor. There are a lot of people who are horrified by hunger, climate change and inequalities who nonetheless see capitalism as the answer.

But they should think about this. Even the generosity and philanthropy of the capitalists is designed to make profit. The USA has a food aid budget of \$1.2 billion for 2008. George Bush has asked for this to be increased. But a close look at the way that aid is handled shows first that 65% of the money goes in transport and overhead costs, and

The problem is that under capitalism food is produced to make profit. If more profit can be made from feeding cars not people, then that is what will happen

second that US law requires that all the food donations be bought from US producers, once more lining the pockets of the already rich and, no doubt, obese.

It really is time that people woke up to the fact that the market is the problem. Meanwhile socialists and trade unionists need to rebuild the anti-capitalist movement in solidarity with those who are rioting and striking in protest at food prices. Until the huge multinational agribusinesses are expropriated (along with the speculator parasites) and replaced with a rational system of planned food production and distribution under workers' and small farmer control, then the market will continue to wreak havoc on food supplies.

Unions, NGOs and community organisations must demand from the wealthy nations an emergency plan that includes a massive expansion of emergency food aid, without conditionality, investment in local agriculture (free credits to small farmers) and the destruction of organisations like the WTO that perpetuate this crime against humanity.

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NUT: THE BALLOT

After April 24 action NUT leaders dither

▶ THE STRIKE called by the NUT and other public sector unions on 24 April was hugely successful. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, lecturers and civil servants took part in the strike and city centres across the country witnessed large, vibrant demonstrations loudly protesting against the government's attacks on public sector pay.

Whilst 24 April was an inspiring starting point, a strike that successfully demonstrated the anger of NUT members, much more action will be needed if the government's attacks are to be defeated and the pay freeze smashed.

The NUT should have built on the momentum created by 24 April and balloted members for further and extended strike action this term. But such an approach has been rejected by the NUT Executive. At its meeting on 22 May the Executive ruled out a ballot for this term, promising instead to ballot members in the autumn.

This means that strike action could not take place before October – six months after the original strike! It also means that the Executive is squandering the opportunity for NUT members to take strike action alongside Unison in July. So much for its concern for public sector unity! It will be up to rank and file NUT members to show real unity and practical solidarity with Unison strikers by refusing to cross their picket lines.

The Executive's lack of resolve will not surprise NUT militants: there have been many occasions when the leadership of the union has retreated in the face of government attacks, refusing to organise the action that is necessary. Indeed, it took the Executive a year to implement conference policy and organise

April's strike. Even then they decided that the ballot would only be for one day of strike action, rather than a ballot which would have allowed for further strike days or other forms of action. Yet all this is at a time when supposedly the left in the union has finally gained a majority on the Executive. NUT militants must hold to account those "lefts" who voted against action.

NUT: STRIKE TACTICS

Teachers say – picket lines mean don't cross!

▶ PICKET LINES are a basic part of trade unionism. Pickets work to make strikes more effective. On 24 April when thousands of teachers went on strike over pay picket lines, however, became a cause for discussion and some disagreement.

Many schools were closed to pupils but remained open for support and admin staff who were expected to work as normal. The question for NUT members then became – to picket or not to picket?

Some argued that no teaching would be happening and therefore the aims of the strike had been achieved. In addition any non-NUT members who did not cross the picket line would be taking unofficial action and they would be in a more vulnerable position than NUT members on official strike.

Others argued for picket lines on the basis of ensuring the strike was solid, with all NUT members taking the action and also giving the opportunity for other trade

NUT members cannot rely on the Executive or the official apparatus of the union to achieve a victory. Rank and file control is crucial if we are to win. We need to organise strike committees in all workplaces and establish local and regional action committees to maximise the impact of strike action and to maintain constant pressure on the Executive to sanction action.

Such committees would have the potential to organise action independent of the union leadership if it fails to act. They would also seek to build links with other public sector unions with the aim of initiating further joint action.

Dave Gay
Tower Hamlets NUT

unionists to express real solidarity in the fight against low pay which affects all public sector workers.

As the strike day approached, in Hackney we knew that the vast majority of schools were shut to pupils, but three schools were intending to open.

One primary school, Woodbury Down, was picketed. Whilst most NUT members unfortunately did go into work, it soon became clear to the picketers that management was engaged in massive intimidation of union members.

NUT members had been instructed not to speak to the pickets and not even to take our leaflets! The ban even applied to non-teaching staff. We were told by one support assistant:

"I can't take those. The head has told us we will get in trouble if we take them. No one is allowed to take them. Be careful. He is watching from inside the school."

Earlier the headteacher had called the police to "deal" with the picket line which consisted of four

teachers – hardly a massive threat to public order. Rather surprisingly the police turned out to be very sympathetic on this occasion. Perhaps it had something to do with their own pay claim!

Parents also proved to be free of the malign influence of the headteacher. They all took leaflets and many wished us well. When some heard about the situation in the school, they told us as they took their children into class they would make sure that our leaflets were distributed!

A picket line is a very concrete and visible expression of trade union activity. That is why management hates them so much. A picket line creates a feeling of rank and file solidarity, gives strength to the union members, stops the feeling of isolation and provides a real, physical means for workers to seek to influence and build solidarity with other workers. It is a fundamental and essential tool in our armoury which we give up at our peril.

Kate Ford
Hackney NUT

HACKNEY SCHOOLKEEPER

Stop eviction of Ricky Jones and family

RICKY JONES and his family face eviction from their home. They are not victims of the credit crunch, but of management harassment.

Ricky is a schoolkeeper at William Patten School in Stoke Newington, London. He lives in the schoolkeeper's house on the school site with his children and his partner, who is a teacher in a local primary school.

The headteacher at the school, Kathryn Kyle, has told Ricky that the school needs to expand and they wish to build on the site where the schoolkeeper's house currently stands. The school is in the heart of Stoke Newington, one of the most expensive areas to live in north London. Certainly space for schools and other public buildings is at a premium.

However, the tiny compensation which is on offer, of a few thousand pounds, would not be anywhere near enough for the family to find another house in the area and no other house is being offered.

The school governors met to discuss the proposal to make Ricky's post non-residential and evict his family from the school site. The proposal was defeated on an open vote. The head then insisted on a secret ballot and the proposal went through. A key factor in Ricky's case is the fact that he is also a local Unison organiser. He works tirelessly to organise education workers across Hackney. Since he took on the role the number of workplace reps has increased significantly.

A lively campaign has been launched to defend Ricky and his

NUT: BOLTON

Academy strikes show the way

RECENTLY THE NUT strike in Bolton and the NASUWT strike in Derby against academies have shown how to link struggles against privatisation with the pay action. After years of campaigning and being told that strike action was not viable or was in contravention of anti-union laws, these strikes open the way for a series of such actions. They could be the prelude to a national strike against selling off our schools to private bidders.

NUT at Withins School in Bolton voted 94% in favour of strike action. The first day of this rolling programme of strike action, together with a protest rally and a flood of messages of support, have already led to the sponsors delaying their plans for a year. "I

think they thought we might give up after this but it has strengthened our resolve," says the school's NUT rep Phil Roberts. Now Unison members at the Withins school have voted to join the strike with NUT and Unison members at two other schools affected by the academy proposals, asking to be balloted to join the strike action.

NUT and Unison activists across the country should use this to help focus the campaign for a united fightback over pay, workload and privatisation. We should host local meetings of the strikers, push for more ballots on these issues and demand national action from our union leaders. Wherever strike action does take place we should help organise pickets to close down the workplaces. The Bolton action

shows that there is an appetite for action amongst the membership and that by organising at the rank and file level we can begin to organise ourselves.

Jason Travis, Bolton NUT

INFORMATION

For further report on this see:
<http://permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=2099>

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Sign the online petition
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The Withins NUT group has set the next day of action for 18 June 2008.

family. A local demonstration in May was joined by local MP Diane Abbott alongside fellow trade unionists from the NUT, PCS, Unite and UCU.

Residential schoolkeepers used to be the norm and they certainly provide important additional security. However, at this time of creeping privatisation in education, schools are selling off or converting schoolkeepers' accommodation to make money. The next stage will be "selling off" the schoolkeepers

themselves. Under the proposal for Building Schools for the Future in Hackney, schoolkeepers and technicians will be transferred from the schools to a private company.

If the fight to stop the eviction of the Jones family is successful, it will be a blow against the victimisation of union activists, the vindictiveness of management and the privatisation of education.

Kate Ford
Hackney NUT

there are more Tory anti-choice and more Labour pro-choice MPs. But "in general" is all it is. Three cabinet members – Des Browne, the Defence Secretary, Ruth Kelly, the Transport Secretary, and Paul Murphy, the Welsh Secretary – voted to reduce the time limit for abortion to 12 weeks, a move that would condemn thousands of women to unwanted babies or illegal abortions.

The fact that Labour Party policy has been pro-choice for decades has no effect on these "representatives" who have clearly decided that they are actually accountable to God and the Pope rather than the electorate.

Disgracefully, it is not just the Labour Party that betrays women in this way. Three "lefts" from the Labour Representation Committee – David Drew, David Hamilton and Bob Wareing – voted to reduce the time limit from 24 weeks.

And George Galloway, of the allegedly left-leaning Respect Renewal, was not mandated to vote in favour of women's rights and decided to abstain, which can hardly be taken as any kind of statement since he rarely turns up to vote on anything else either. But we know this was not just a lapse.

ABORTION RIGHTS

Abortion vote – only a temporary victory

➤ A CONCERTED attempt to reduce the time limit for legal abortion in the UK was defeated in parliament this May. MPs voted by 304 to 233 to defend the current abortion time limit of 24 weeks. On the day of the vote MPs were reminded of the strong feelings about this issue – several hundred people joined a lively protest outside parliament demanding abortion rights.

This was an important victory for the pro-choice movement against the vicious campaigning of the anti-abortionists, who used all the tools they could to mobilise, from the pulpit to the inbox. MPs were bombarded with misleading propaganda about foetal development, premature survivors and pictures of tiny toes.

The House of Commons currently includes a clear majority in favour of current abortion rights and therefore the outcome wasn't really in doubt, but the experience has been a clear reminder that we must not sit back and assume that these rights are safe in the future.

A relatively small change in the make-up of the Commons, including a Tory majority, could swing the balance the other way and lead to a much more serious threat. The abortion rights

campaign was lively and had the active involvement of a lot of younger women and students, and it is crucial that the momentum does not dissipate. As we argued in the last issue of Permanent Revolution, we need to move forward in an offensive struggle to

We need to move forward in an offensive struggle to secure better abortion rights, increased provision and an end to the medical veto over womens' decisions

secure better abortion rights, including increased provision and an end to the medical veto over womens' decisions. The trades unions, most of whom have pro-choice policies, were far too quiet on the issue and need to be brought into a campaign for free abortion on demand.

Who's conscience?

It is not simply that a Tory majority would reduce the upper time limit – this is called an issue of conscience and therefore MPs are allowed a free vote. But in general

Galloway is clearly opposed to abortion and this is one of the many issues that his socialist supporters have failed to confront him on.

Challenged about this spinelessness, Andy Newman from Socialist Resistance, defended the right of poor old George to take his lead from God rather than his party, saying:

"This issue really is simple. Respect – like all other parties with parliamentary representation – accepts that over matters of religious conscience, that MPs do not have to follow party policy."

He went on to argue:

"I cannot understand why some on the left argue that Respect should mandate our MP to vote against his conscience ..."

Perhaps we should explain to Andy who, presumably, has never needed an abortion. Being able to access safe abortion and contraception is fundamental to all women's rights, since without them women cannot have control over whether and when to have children, which means whether and when to work, which means whether and when to be active in politics, which means whether and when to leave an abusive domestic situation ... and so on.

So women need to be able to

make that choice. Whether any woman chooses to have an abortion is something that is likely to play on her own conscience. But what has that decision has got to do with George Galloway's conscience? Nothing - unless you accept that he (and his God) has a right to tell women they cannot decide their own future.

No-one is asking George Galloway, Bob Wareing or Ruth Kelly to have an abortion, but we should demand that as people claiming to stand for women's rights they vote for free abortion on demand.

Helen Ward

stirring tribute on its marquee in the week leading up to May Day:

"We salute the longshoremen's May Day strike to protest the criminal occupation of Iraq."

A May Day parade and anti-war rally in San Francisco featured speeches from actor and activist Danny Glover, anti-war campaigner Cindy Sheehan and Green Party presidential candidate Cynthia McKinney, as well as local trade unionists. Meanwhile, a number of token work stoppages and moments of silence took place in other US workplaces, from ports in New Jersey to post offices in several states, to coincide with the ILWU action.

But the most dramatic effect of the West Coast dockers' walkout may have been in Iraq itself, as dockworkers at two southern port facilities, Umm Qasr and Khor al-Zubair, stopped work for an hour, citing the ILWU action as their inspiration.

The General Union of Port Workers in Iraq wrote to the ILWU:

"The courageous decision you made to carry out a strike on May Day to protest against the war and

US DOCKERS

Striking a blow against imperialism's wars

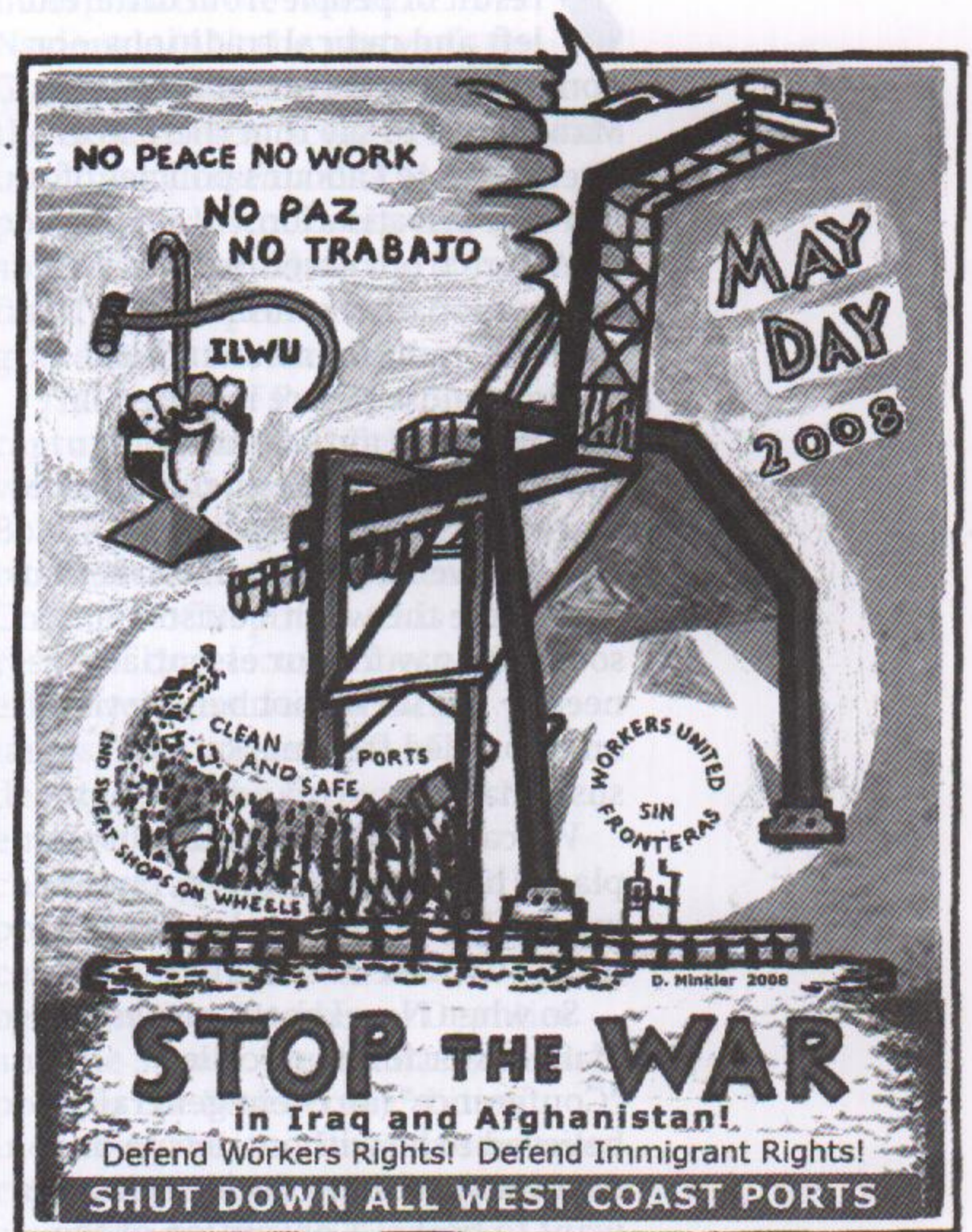
THE DOCKWORKERS of the San Francisco Bay Area have a hard earned reputation for industrial militancy with a political edge that dates back to the city's 1934 general strike. Over the ensuing decades dockers organised in Local 10 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) have embodied something of a working class vanguard, with members blocking shipments to Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s, boycotting trade with apartheid South Africa in the 1980s and mounting solidarity action with the locked-out Liverpool dockers in the mid-1990s.

ILWU Local 10 again proved the driving force behind the most significant action to date by trade unionists in the western world against the ongoing wars and occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq. On May Day 2008 the ports of San Francisco and Oakland, along with virtually all of the 28 other dock facilities from San Diego, California to Seattle, Washington, came to a halt for an eight-hour shift in a dramatic protest by some

25,000 ILWU members to highlight their union's demand for the withdrawal of US troops from both countries.

The push for the May Day action began in earnest when the Longshore Caucus of the ILWU voted 97 to 3 at a February meeting to support a resolution for a work stoppage explicitly opposing the wars and calling for immediate troop withdrawal. The employers' umbrella body, the Pacific Maritime Association, sought to prevent the action and twice obtained arbitrator's rulings that the May Day stoppage breached the collective bargaining agreement on time off to attend union meetings. While the union's full-time officials got increasingly cold feet and issued statements that the action was really to support "our troops" and no longer had official backing, there was no order to abandon the action and thousands of dockers did not report for work.

The ILWU action struck a resonant chord across the Bay Area with a downtown movie theatre, the Grand Lake, featuring this



occupation of Iraq advances our struggle against occupation to bring a better future for us and for the rest of the world as well." In an interview with the US alternative news programme, Democracy Now!, ILWU Local 10 Executive Board member Jack Heyman said:

"This is the first work stoppage ever [in the US] where workers were withholding their labour and demanding an end to the war and the immediate withdrawal of the troops. Not only did we defy the arbitrator, but in a certain sense we defied our own union officials. The union officials did not want to have the actions we organised up and down the coast despite the arbitrator's decision. Simply, we

don't take our orders from the arbitrator - we don't take it from judges. The rank and file goes out and does what it has to do."

Jack Heyman, along with three other ILWU representatives, will be in Britain in late June after receiving an invitation from the National Shop Stewards Network to attend its second conference.

Two of the ILWU members will be available to address union meetings between 25 and 30 June. Permanent Revolution is especially pleased and proud that ILWU reps will be part of our weekend of debate and discussion, joining the session on US labour and politics on Saturday 28 June.

George Binette

our determination to combine our strengths and develop through open and participatory debates the rebuilding of the left today.

The agenda is evolving, because we have been seeking the comments, suggestions and involvement of many more people - and we are going on doing so, between now and then. We don't just want a one-off conference (good though we hope the debates in September will be). We want to encourage everyone to start debating the topics and the possibilities across the pages of the left press and the websites and blogs, all the way from now till then.

So our blog (www.conventionoftheleft.org.uk) has started with a few contributions for debate - on Planet, Peace, People not Profits, Politics: Power and Participation - and hopes to encourage both responses to these and suggestions on many more (including Prejudice and Oppression for example). The topics don't all have to start with "P" - but, for the meanwhile, Give "P"s a Chance... and we look forward to the comments that come in.

Then, as we get closer to the event itself, we hope we will have a body of material already debated widely across the left that can start the Convention off on a sound

CONVENTION OF THE LEFT

Contributions and collaboration welcome

THIS BOLD venture comes as a result of people from different left and radical traditions - or none - getting together in Greater Manchester to say that there IS an alternative to Labour's policies of war and privatisation.

We are from green, left, internationalist, communist, socialist, radical and anarchist backgrounds. We are involved in civil liberties, anti-deportation, trade union, climate change, peace and public service campaigns.

What we have in common is that we believe the wealth exists in society to pay for our essential needs - but we do not believe that an unbridled free market is sustainable.

We cannot have socialism if the planet has been destroyed, but we (probably?) can't save the planet unless we have socialism.

So when New Labour comes to Manchester for its so-called "Conference" (an event generally believed to be without debate or decisions), we have decided that we want to host a "Convention of the

Left". Just a stone's throw (or a balloon's flight) away from the security-surrounded official event we will be holding a day of action, a full day conference, and three days of themed debates and discussions (Saturday 20 September - 24

It will be both a protest at Labour's war, privatisation, racism, authoritarianism and inequality, and a demonstration that there is an alternative

Wednesday September 2008).

Our Convention will be both a protest at Labour's war and privatisation, racism and pollution, authoritarianism and inequality, and a practical demonstration that there is an alternative.

Our Convention will be about an entirely different world - one that can be built by working people for working people.

Our Convention will be united in

footing - and encourage yet more participation and debate in the sessions that follow - all of which may lead to the development of "charters" or even a "manifesto" of the left, on which we can all agree to mobilise our forces in unity so as to campaign more effectively.

The Convention is currently organised by an Organising Group, meeting in Manchester. All meetings have been open to others



to come and make suggestions. As a practical result of this, we have agreed that we must take some action already – anti-fascist work, for example, is not going to wait until September, but is starting now.

Similarly we have been looking for ways to involve the left around the rest of the country, who cannot necessarily make meetings in Manchester (and from our neighbours north and west of the borders – in Scotland and Wales – and hopefully from the European left and beyond). Debate in hyperspace is encouraged, but maybe people can also organise their own meetings in their own localities; to which those of us in Manchester would be pleased to come along and give some information on the progress so far.

Confirmed participants include Tony Benn, John McDonnell, Jeremy Corbyn, Mark Serwotka, Sue Bond, Jeremy Dear, Matt Wrack, Rahila Gupta, Tariq Ali, John Lister, Jonathan Neale, Kate Hudson, Andrew Murray, Bill Greenshields, George Galloway, and Derek Wall. Sponsoring organisations include the Labour Representation Committee – and the Left Women's Network and Left Economics Advisory Panel; Scottish Socialist Party; Respect Renewal; Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils.

So if you want to support actions ranging from stopping the war(s), supporting the anti-nuclear blockades, fighting racist deportations, stopping housing sell-offs, defending the NHS – do feel free to get involved. If you want to hear (or even to organise) debates and discussions on Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan, or the break-up of the UK, climate change, human rights (including the rights of migrants and refugees), reclaiming health and (secular) education, and the struggle for a fairer economic system – do make suggestions and put your own contributions onto the blog.

We want to start defining a new way of working (even to reclaim that word “new”) so that we can work together in practical

campaigns, regardless of the organisations we may belong to, and so that we can stop the war and nuclear proliferation, the cuts and privatisation. Much more than elections and individual campaigns, we want to develop a critique of capitalism as we now know it and an alternative strategy that is environmentally and socially just, inclusive and peaceful, pluralist, tolerant, and doesn't rely on “top-table” speakers but on discussion from us all – in pursuit of a bigger common objective that benefits the many and not the few.

Diverse but not divisive, we want participation in debate and unity in action.

What do you think?

**John Nicholson, Convenor
COTL Organising Committee**

ITALIAN ELECTIONS

The right rules the roost as the Rainbow dissolves

➤ GIVEN THE frequency of national polls in Italy – more than 60 since 1945 – one might be slightly cynical about the outcome of still another exercise in bourgeois democracy Italian style, contested by a colourful collection of more than 30 lists across the country.

The election that took place in April appears, however, to have been a watershed. Shameless media tycoon and holiday host of Tony and Cherie Blair, Silvio Berlusconi, was returned as prime minister for the third time at the age of 71 after an absence of two years. As opinion polls had suggested for weeks in advance, Berlusconi's coalition of the centre and far right holds an absolute majority in both the Italian Senate and the nation's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies.

For the April election, Berlusconi had repackaged and rebranded his previous vehicle, Forza Italia, as the Popolo della Liberta (People of Freedom). This coalition effectively

incorporated the Alleanza Nazionale (AN) the party of Gianfranco Fini, who has dragged the ex-Mussolini acolytes of the MSI into the mainstream of electoral politics. Berlusconi's big tent was able to accommodate the Mussolini family in the person of Il Duce's granddaughter, Alessandra.

The People of Freedom lists captured some 38% of the popular vote, and in alliance with Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord (LN), Berlusconi's bloc controls 340 of 630 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. This is a result of the electoral law which effectively ensures the single largest bloc at least 55% of the total deputies. On the surface the LN emerged as the big winner, chalking up more than 8% of the popular vote overall and commanding some 70 seats between the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The LN has gained posts in the Berlusconi cabinet, including the interior ministry now run by Roberto Moroni. The cabinet also includes the AN's Ignazio

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La Russa as Defence Minister and Mara Carfagna, a former glamour model, turned champion of "family values" as the Minister for Equal Opportunities.

While not a fascist formation, the LN is certainly of the far right. In fact it is far more unabashedly racist than the AN. The campaign it waged had an unrelenting focus on opposition to immigration, and this appears to have been only too attractive to many working class voters. The LN's vote approached 25% in the Veneto as well as in traditionally working class areas of Lombardy and the Piedmont.

The Democratic Party, a marriage of convenience between one-time Euro-communists and the Margherita formation (largely ex-Christian Democrats) under the vacuous leadership of the former mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, came a distant second. La Sinistra Arcobaleno, or Rainbow Left, an alliance of Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) and the Italian Greens, emerged without a single seat in either house of the new parliament. So for the first time in the history of post-war Italy no self-described "communist" will sit in either

house of the legislature.

Further evidence of the electorate's sharp right turn came soon after the general election, as voters in Rome returned AN supporter, Gianni Alemanno, to local office. An agriculture minister in the previous Berlusconi administration, Alemanno joined the fascist MSI and was a co-founder

While not a fascist formation, the Lega Nord is certainly of the far right. The campaign it waged had an unrelenting focus on opposition to immigration

of a hard right faction within the AN. His electoral pledges included the immediate removal from the eternal city of some 20,000 "migrant criminals". In the wake of his victory jubilant supporters were photographed on the steps of the Rome's city hall giving the classic Il Duce right-arm fascist salute.

The April poll also sounded the almost certain death knell for the political career of Fausto Bertinotti,

who had assumed the role of leader in the Chamber of Deputies after the narrow election win in 2006 scored by the centre-left coalition headed by Romano Prodi. For 12 years prior to this role in the Italian lower house, Bertinotti had been the charismatic leader of PRC, a left split that emerged from the post-1989 wreckage of the pioneer of

Euro-communism, the PCI.

Bertinotti, who recently turned 68, cut his teeth in the unions, becoming a leading figure in the CGIL confederation before entering party politics. A silver-tongued orator, Bertinotti oversaw the PRC's entry into the first Prodi-led government in the mid-90s before eventually triggering its fall in 1998. For a time he was a darling of the anti-globalisation circuit at the European Social Forums, while much of the English-speaking far left saw in the PRC a model for a successful broad formation to the left of social democracy. He even appeared at a 2001 London conference organised by the Socialist Alliance at a time when both the SWP and Socialist Party were still in it.

Bertinotti has now fallen on his sword, while the man who succeeded him as party general secretary, Franco Giordano, has been shown the door. An emergency PRC conference is due in July and a split, possibly three ways, looks all but certain.

The past two years in government had wrought considerable harm to the image and reputation of the PRC, which was the leading component of the Rainbow Left, a loose coalition that also embraced the Italian Greens but excluded most if not all of the Trotskyist left. The PRC and its partners gained little more than 3%

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of the popular vote, compared to 5.8% just two years before for the PRC on its own. Its three component parts went from a little over 10% of the 2006 vote to barely more than 3%, in the process losing all of nearly 110 seats they previously held in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

Three organisations laying claim to the Trotskyist tradition had either been expelled from the PRC or left over its behaviour in the Prodi coalition. The largest of these, Sinistra Critica, which aligns itself with the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, stood candidates on a distinct slate for the first time, and captured nearly 167,000 votes (or 0.6% of the total poll). The Communist Workers Party, led by Marco Ferrando and associated with the Morenoite "international", based in Argentina, gained a somewhat higher poll with a more explicit appeal to working class militants as opposed to Sinistra Critica's soft focus stance against capitalist globalisation.

So why did the Rainbow Left fare so badly? While a small proportion of its support presumably went to the various Trotskyist lists, others fled to Veltroni's Democrats in the forlorn hope of stopping the Berlusconi bandwagon. Perhaps of greatest significance, however, was an increase in abstention. While still very high by British standards with around 80% of the electorate participating, the turnout fell by some 4% when compared with 2006. Initial analyses suggest that abstention rates rose particularly among younger voters, where the PRC and Greens had developed a significant base of support in recent years.

The explanation for young voters' abstention lies in the reality of the PRC's performance in the coalition. First Bertinotti and co failed to challenge the neo-liberal trajectory of Prodi's counter-reforms, including an increase in the retirement age. The PRC leadership also capitulated over the question of Italy's continued role in the occupation of Afghanistan. The supposedly principled opponent of imperialist wars insisted that his

elected parliamentarians back the Prodi coalition's commitment to keeping Italian troops in the war-ravaged country. In stark contrast to thousands of its members who demonstrated their opposition, the PRC parliamentarians failed to oppose the extension of the US/NATO air base at Vicenza.

For those leftists in Italy itself and elsewhere in Europe who saw the PRC as a beacon for future developments in their own countries, the party's decisive defeat must give pause for serious reflection. It challenges the strategy of "broad left" formations with their focus on unaccountable "charismatic" leaders, their downplaying of the ideological battle within the working class' base organisations, and the adherence to a parliamentary road to socialism.

Since the election migrant workers have already faced intensified attacks from the Italian state. Further legislation against migration is now a top priority for Berlusconi's administration; meanwhile, large-scale round-ups of alleged "illegals" have begun, with some 400 arrested in mid-May. Of these 53 were summarily deported and a further 65 placed in detention centres. And the government is promising new detention centres, with the prospect of migrants being held in custody for 18 months, a

Since the election migrant workers have already faced intensified attacks from the Italian state. Further legislation against migration is now a top priority

proposal also peddled by French president Nicolas Sarkozy.

The Roma population has already come under physical attack in Naples with a latter-day lynch mob torching a Roma encampment in Ponticelli on the city's impoverished outskirts. It was the culmination of two nights of violence against Roma, sparked by a rumour of a 16-year-old attempting

to abduct a baby. Rioters threw Molotov cocktails into another two Roma camps. Though Naples is outside the Lega Nord's historic sphere of influence, the LN's historic leader, Umberto Bossi, effectively gave his public blessing to the violence in Naples.

On a positive note, thousands took to Verona's streets to protest against the attacks on the Roma, many of them Italian citizens, and on migrants more generally. Naples, however, seems immersed in a bitter "Guerra fra poveri" (war among the poor) associated with a still unresolved crisis over refuse and toxic waste disposal that has benefited the bosses of the city's notorious Camorra.

There are likely to be other attacks on social gains for the most oppressed in Italy. Severely limited abortion rights will be in jeopardy and a homophobic backlash is likely to be another feature of the coming period.

Members of the main CGIL federation and the militants of the alternative COBAS (committees of the base) will need to prepare for a much sharper employers' offensive over the coming weeks and months. There is a real possibility that the Berlusconi regime will press ahead with aggressive moves to restructure Italian capitalism in an attempt to restore a competitive position.

This has declined drastically in the last decade, with Spain's per capita GDP now outstripping that of Italy. Growth was an anaemic 0.6% in 2007 and sections of the working and middle classes have still not recovered from the inflationary impact of the Euro's introduction at the start of the decade.

The head of the main Italian employers' federation, Luca

Briefings

de Montezmolo, has issued a virtual declaration of war against the unions, which he branded as an "unrepresentative caste". Perversely, a restraining influence on Berlusconi may for now at least come from the LN, which has sought to cultivate a working class base in its northern strongholds.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of fight left in the Italian working class, which has yet to suffer a strategic defeat at the hands of the bosses. But the working class enters coming battles disorientated and rudderless. Having just ditched one historic mis-leadership, embodied in Bertinotti, there is no obvious replacement on the horizon. Italian revolutionaries have entered into a period less turbulent than the late 1960 and 70s, but one fraught with

dangers. There is an urgent need to combat racism both ideologically and physically, while at the same time preparing for a sustained wave of resistance to intensified attacks on migrants and the workers' movement.

LINKS

For more on the LN's anti-migrant campaign see:

<http://liammaacuaid.wordpress.com>

For a jaundiced but informative account of the scale of the left's defeat:

<http://forum.stirpes.net/politics/17491-bertinotti-resigns-rainbow-left-reaches-end-line.html>

For an interview in French with one of the leading figures of Sinistra Critica, Lidio Cirillo, see:

http://www.alencontre.org/Italie/ItalieBilanElect04_08.html

ZIMBABWE CRISIS

Workers' action needed to oust Mugabe

NOT FOR the first time, the leaders of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) have squandered the opportunity to have done with Robert Mugabe. Mugabe, who stole the recent election from under their noses, has used the time since to intimidate the opposition and prepare for civil war.

Meanwhile the living standards of workers and poor plummet even further. Inflation has reached the dizzying heights of a million percent according to a new estimate and unemployment is running at 80%. Zimbabwe may now have the lowest life expectancy in the world.

Any opposition genuinely dedicated to saving the nation and ending the nightmare for ordinary Zimbabweans would have declared the current government illegitimate immediately after the election victory, and called the population onto the streets with the clear aim of ending the hated regime of Mugabe once and for all.

It would have called for an indefinite general strike, occupations of the land and the factories, accompanied by street demonstrations. It would have organised self-defence militias, ready to resist the inevitable onslaught of state repression meted out by Mugabe's thugs in the army, secret services and the police, and sought to split an already divided government and security apparatus.

The MDC did none of these things. Instead after the election MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai left for a safe haven in South Africa and an extended tour of southern African states, leaving his supporters to bear the brunt of the Zanu-PF thugs' attacks. Tsvangirai has predictably put his hopes in the region's rulers applying diplomatic pressure to achieve change rather than in the action of the masses.

This is the third time the MDC has used these tactics after elections were stolen, and each time Mugabe has been left in power

and the conditions of the masses have deteriorated.

Each time the rulers of the surrounding states have backed Mugabe, leaving Tsvangirai to go home empty handed. It shows how far Tsvangirai has distanced himself from his trade union roots that he has shown little interest in rallying the only force in southern Africa that could have delivered real aid to his movement, the workers and trade unions.

The power of the South African unions was shown when dockworkers in Durban refused to unload a shipload of arms (which included three million rounds of ammunition for AK47 guns and 1,500 rocket propelled grenades) being sent to Mugabe by his friends, the Chinese government.

Even before the election the MDC leadership was more interested in negotiating with those within the regime who believed Mugabe's time was up. Tsvangirai was busy handing out guarantees of impunity to the military high command - reassuring them they would not face prosecution for their crimes of repression and corruption should they help usher Mugabe from office. Now there is talk of a "national unity government" with the very forces - ZANU-PF - that have attacked the masses and led the country to ruin.

As a result of his international journeying, it is Morgan Tsvangirai who has bowed to the pressure of the South Africa government and others; he has reversed his boycott position on a second round of presidential elections and agreed to take part in the presidential election run-off on 27 June.

There is talk that the South African Development Community will discuss the possible deployment of "trusted" peacekeepers and election monitors from outside the region, possibly Canada included. The problem is that by the time election day comes around the violence and intimidation may have taken its toll on MDC supporters; the polling could be declared roughly "free and fair" on the day but tens of thousands of MDC voters could

justifiably be just too scared to turn up, having been the target of brutality for voting against Mugabe last time.

The second round of elections is a fraudulent exercise. It will either end in a fixed election, putting Mugabe back in power, or a deal brokered by the southern African heads of state, to allow him and his criminal gang to escape responsibility for their years of

Even before the election the MDC leadership was more interested in negotiating with those within the regime who believed Mugabe's time was up

brutality and for a section of them to remain in power.

The workers should give no credence to such an election and should call for a boycott. The MDC should have been using the majority in parliament they won in March to rally the working class and poor to a campaign of mass opposition to Mugabe on the streets. The failure to do this has given Mugabe a green light to intimidate the voters and try to fix the upcoming second round.

The crisis in Zimbabwe is sharp indeed and the people need answers and action now. Years of scarcity, hyper-inflation and violence have wreaked havoc on the working class and urban and rural poor. Some of the latter have been bought off by Mugabe's land seizures and handouts; many are used to intimidate the opposition. The workers' movement (the unions and the political left) has been battered, with many jailed or in exile. Some 20% of the whole population have been forced to survive outside the country's border, leading to social tension and recently inter-communal violence in South Africa against migrants from Zimbabwe and other African countries.

Scarcity and inflation means hunger and deprivation for the majority. Despite the weakness of its organisations, the working class

must assist the poor peasants and farmers to organise genuine and democratic land seizures rather than the fraudulent and corrupt seizures for show orchestrated by Mugabe. This is absolutely necessary to restore agricultural production that will be used to feed the population. This is something the MDC, in hock to the white farmers and imperialists, has refused to do. Only a workers' and peasants'

government would nationalise the land and legally endorse and defend the land seizures. Fighting for such a policy would help undermine Zanu-PF's influence over the rural workers who fear the MDC will hand back land to the big farmers.

Workers' organisations need to present an alternative emergency plan to the MDC's politics of compromise with imperialism and big agribusiness. It should be aimed

at relieving the immediate suffering of Zimbabwe's people. At its heart must be the struggle to put the town and rural workers in control of the economy.

With rampant inflation, the distribution of goods, especially essentials such as foodstuffs and heating oil, must come under the direct control of democratic emergency distribution committees controlled by the working class and the peasantry. These committees would ensure that ordinary people received an essential and equitable amount of the goods they need to live.

But this conflicts with the very idea of private property. These emergency committees would have to confiscate goods in order to meet the needs of the people and would need organised and armed squads to physically intervene against speculators hoarding food, intent on making money out of the misery of others. Such squads would also be vital to defend the workers' organisations against Mugabe's thugs.

To control inflation there need to be price controls and control of the flow of money. Again this demonstrates the need for a workers' and peasants'

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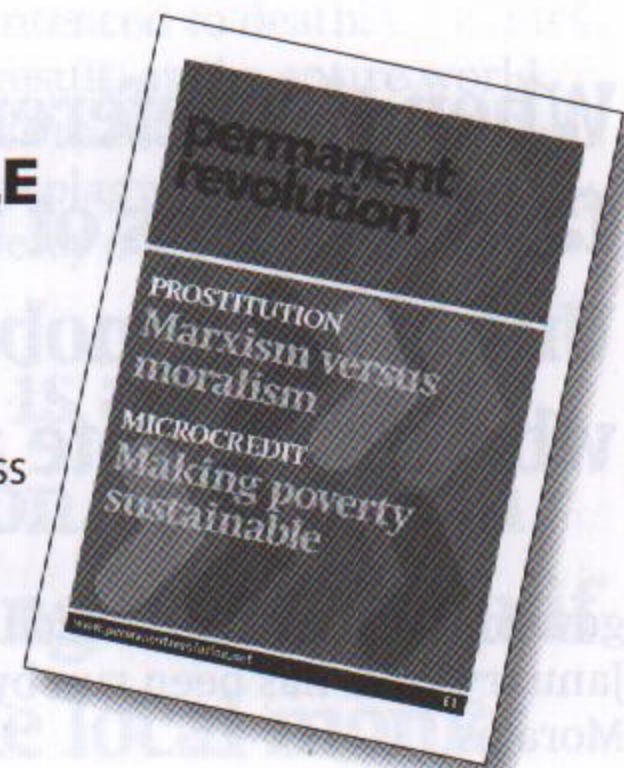
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government that will nationalise the banks and act against financial speculators.

In the struggle for democracy the workers and poor will need to defend themselves against the regime's violence. They will not only need their own defence squads but must set out to win the rank and file soldiers over to their struggles.

- › For mass opposition on the streets to overthrow Mugabe's regime!
 - › No deals with Mugabe or his cronies; no impunity for murder and corruption!
 - › For an emergency plan to feed the people!
 - › For a workers' and peasants' government!
- Jason Travis**

BOLIVIA REFERENDUM

Right wing elite goes on the offensive

IN EARLY May the rich "clan of 100 families" that dominate the eastern regions of Bolivia (known as the half moon) organised a referendum on whether or not these provinces should be given autonomy. Some 85% of those who voted (40% did not vote) – about 500,000 people – backed the plan.

But this was not a matter of extending local democracy in the regions. Rather it was the latest ploy of a racist elite who are determined to keep control of Bolivia's wealth and free themselves from the authority of the national

resources of the country. They also demanded better wages, health care and pensions and a redistribution of the land, indeed a refounding of the state based on a new constitution breaking the power of the old oligarchy.

Morales promised to carry through this programme on gaining power but, despite some important reforms, he has conciliated with the reactionary opposition in the resource rich regions of the country. Encouraged, they are now using the threat of secession from the state to prevent

When the referendum took place the fascist gangs of the Santa Cruz Youth Union were mobilised to intimidate those who might vote against their proposal

government in La Paz, which since January 2006 has been run by Evo Morales.

Morales' victory in the Presidential elections of 2005 came on the back of two years of fierce struggles in which workers and peasants had gone on strike, mounted road blockades and paralysed previous governments, as they demanded the nationalisation of oil, gas and other mineral

reforms of the constitution.

Much of the natural resources of the country are to be found in the east of Bolivia in provinces like Santa Cruz, including the highly lucrative gas and oil. In addition, the overwhelming majority of the land is owned by a tiny minority of families (latifundistas) who make tremendous profits from agriculture. They own 25 million hectares of the most fertile land in

the country – five times more than the land owned by two million poor peasants.

The racist elite does not care about democracy or the welfare of the people of Bolivia. Indigenous people, many of whom are migrants from the west of the country, are treated as second class citizens. Landless peasants who organise occupations of land are met with violence from the wealthy landowners and their thugs. And when the referendum took place the fascist gangs of the Santa Cruz Youth Union were mobilised to intimidate those who might vote against their proposal. There were reports of many violent clashes on the day and even the death of one person.

Meanwhile, Morales did little to prevent the right wing organising. The referendum itself had no legal or constitutional standing, but he refused to mobilise his supporters and others opposed to the elite to stop them in their tracks.

Morales had declared that he would convene a constituent assembly that would irreversibly change the country and put the natural resources of the country and power into the hands of the majority of the population.

The same constitution was to give the indigenous people new rights. But the right wing in La Paz parliament has stalled the process of convening a constituent assembly at every step.

Emboldened by their referendum win, the Santa Cruz oligarchy announced the formation of a new governor's office and parallel administration which clearly aims to thwart the plans of the Morales government and seeks to control tax revenues from the exploration of the oil and minerals of the region. Morales has imposed a ban on nearly all the private oil companies selling their oil abroad at higher prices than they get by selling it in Bolivia to state-owned agencies. The oligarchy would like that overturned so that they can get a slice of the \$200m extra profits that could line the pockets of the oil exploration firms. For now they dare not advocate open refusal to

comply with Morales' directive. But for how long?

Dual power is developing with each day that passes. Already six of the ten largest cities in the country are effectively in the hands of the oligarchy. In a move aimed at consolidating their social base, the Santa Cruz "governor" announced an increase in the minimum wage to 1,000 Bolivianos (US\$136), nearly twice the national minimum of 577 Bolivianos (\$77). The right wing leaders of the unions in Santa Cruz have been rewarded for their support for the referendum.

Evo Morales' reaction to these developments has been to announce a referendum of his own on 10 August in which he will seek a yes vote to confirm his presidential mandate. If he loses he will have to call another election three to six months later. By this measure Morales is merely seeking to strengthen his side of the duality of power, when in reality he needs to end it by launching a full scale class war against the reactionary elite.

The working class and popular organisations have responded defiantly to the Santa Cruz action and expressed dismay and impatience with the conciliatory attitude of Morales. They want to defeat the elite once and for all. The Workers' Central of Oruro met in late April and called for "the immediate expropriation of the latifundistas' lands and the creation of armed militias for self-defence..."

At a general assembly of the miners' union, the FSTMB, on 4 April 2008, a declaration was agreed which called the referendum a fraud and illegal. It continued, saying that the rich oligarchy, made up of the large landowners and the transnational companies - and with the backing of the US - had launched a great offensive to regain all the political power they had lost in the bloody struggles of 2003 and 2005.

The assembly agreed that the national government of the MAS was also responsible for the current situation and that it had allowed this rich minority to "reorganise itself and raise its head again." It declared that if the government did

not take hold of all natural resources then these "vampires would continue to be powerful and that unemployment, poverty and misery will continue..." and demanded the government give them all necessary measures and resources to destroy the elite opposition.

The COB has now issued a call for an indefinite general strike, to start on 5 June with the aim of securing the expropriation of the great landowners of the eastern regions, the nationalisation of the agribusinesses that traffic in the hunger of the people, the complete

nationalisation of the mines, oil and petrol companies, as well as an increase in the wages of the workers. Already battle plans are being drawn up, road blockades prepared.

Bolivia is set once more to be convulsed by revolutionary storms.

Dave Esterson

LINKS

If you can read Spanish read the full statement of the FSTMB in early April: <http://es.geocities.com/fstmb2003/novedades.htm>

For more information go to: www.econoticiasbolivia.com

TIBET AND CHINA

Self-determination for the Tibetan people

"To quell the protests... in Lhasa and Sangchu County, Chinese security forces responded by beating protesters, firing live ammunition, surrounding Ganden, Drepung and Sera monasteries, and cutting phone lines into the monasteries"

Human Rights Watch 15 May 2008

THE TIBETAN protests started on 10 March, National Uprising Day, commemorating the revolt against Chinese repression in 1959. Finally subdued after several

involved in violent disturbances have taken place. According to Human Rights Watch, they were tried on secret evidence... behind closed doors and without the benefit of a meaningful defence by lawyers they had chosen. If you were picked up on the streets, whatever you were doing, your fate was sealed. Two protestors have been sentenced to death.

The result, as the entire world knows, is that China's Olympic Year has been plagued with renewed controversy over its human rights

The recent unrest in Tibet is a struggle against national oppression. It draws in the poor and urban working class, even if the leadership of it was the local monks

weeks, approximately 50,000 Tibetans fled to India along with the Dalai Llama. Dozens or hundreds were killed.

Following the Chinese clampdown this March the trials of 30 Tibetans accused of being

record in Tibet. The Olympic torch procession has been disrupted, campaigners (although not the Dalai Llama) have called for a boycott of the games. While not going as far, leaders of the world's democracies have used the occasion

to lecture the Chinese government on its poor human rights record (while staying silent on the equally appalling record of numerous Middle East and Zionist allies).

The recent unrest in Tibet, particularly in the towns and cities, is a struggle against national oppression. It draws in the poor and urban working class, even if the leadership of it was the local monks. However, the Dalai Llama and his government in exile sought to separate themselves from the protestors.

Undeniably, the uprising included violent actions against Han Chinese living in Tibet, partly a reaction to the deliberate policy of the Chinese government to colonise Tibet, ensuring that sections of the Han population enjoy considerable material and political privileges.

Search the net and you can quickly find a wide variety of views on Tibetan nationalism, with even nominally leftist commentators extolling the virtues of the Chinese Communist Party's developmental model for Tibet and China's territorial integrity, to the point where some even come close to arguing that Tibetan nationalism and indeed Tibet itself, doesn't exist in any meaningful sense.

Those that argue the Tibetans

lags behind China in many ways. For example, literacy in 1990 was 56% compared to China's 74% and per capita GDP is about half that of China.

But does the undoubted development of Tibet in some areas mean that socialists should bow down before the Chinese Stalinists? Does this progress justify the denial of self-determination of Tibet? After all, in a previous time, another set of colonialists, the British, similarly built thousands of miles of railways in India, developed a national bureaucracy, and an educational system. But none of this justified an idea that India was better off being ruled from London.

Other commentators point out the feudal nature of the pre-Chinese Tibetan social order. The current Dalai Llama himself (Tenzin Gyatso) was conveniently reincarnated into a wealthy landowning family whose estate was farmed by serfs. Tibetan serfdom was akin to the conditions of medieval European peasants. They worked the land on behalf of the lord of the manor, paid him tithes and handed over the bulk of the produce.

They could marry only with the lord's permission and, with their children, were regularly forced into

manner, relying on the People's Liberation Army and Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy to carry out the reforms, preventing any self-organised actions by peasants and town workers.

Laying bare the reality of life in old Tibet is a necessary counter to the idealised notion of Tibet as an unsullied and spiritually pure Shangri La, an idea lapped up by western liberals. But it is wholly unnecessary to slip over into reverence for the new Tibet, ruled by the Chinese and there is certainly no excuse for refusing to stand against the national oppression of Tibetans.

Another supposedly left wing argument against self-determination is that the leadership of the Tibetans, especially the Dalai Llama, is thoroughly reactionary and in league with the imperialists. As with all religions, Tibetan Buddhism protected private property to the maximum and promoted its theology using notions of traditional culture that sanctified its wealth and power.

Dissent was taken as proof of satanic influence, landlords were rich because they were righteous whereas the lowly poor clearly deserved their lot (wrapped up in karmic mystifications about vice and virtue accruing from past lives).

While there is support for the Dalai Llama both within Tibet and in exiled communities in Asia and beyond, few Tibetans would want a return to the social order of the 1950s. The Dalai Llama himself has been forced to move with the times and pays lip service to the idea of a Tibet with democratic structures, embracing some of the infrastructure of a modern state - roads, schools - with no return to the religious serfdom that marked the old Tibet.

But these promises ring hollow given the rampant nepotism and lack of transparency in the Tibetan government in exile; three of the six cabinet members are members of the Dalai Llama's own family.

Throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s the government in exile secretly received around \$17 million dollars a year from the CIA,

Search the net and you can find even nominally leftist commentators extolling the virtues of the Chinese Communist Party's developmental model

have never had it so good since the invasion of Tibet by the People's Liberation Army in 1951 point to certain facts. According to the UN, the mortality rate in Tibet declined sharply after the Chinese take over, from 28 per 1,000 in the 1950s to 6.6 per 1,000 in 2000. Life expectancy, which had been around 35 years in 1951, was up to 59.64 by 1990.

However, official Chinese figures demonstrate that Tibet, despite some advances in the last 50 years,

domestic slavery with all the sexual and physical abuse this habitually entailed. Other peasant children would be snatched or bought for service by the rich, powerful and competing monasteries to be monks or nuns for life or used as servants.

The Chinese government ripped apart the old feudal system (the so-called Democratic Reform) in the 1960s. While the results viewed in isolation and in retrospect may be labelled progressive, it was done in a dictatorial and reactionary



much of which was used to fund guerrilla operations against the Chinese occupation, orchestrated by the Dalai Llama, now of course a Nobel Peace Prize winner. The Dalai Llama received a handsome salary of around \$180,000 a year that was used to fund offices in New York and Geneva. Funds are still channelled to the Tibetan exiles via

a national liberation movement. And it would have meant that in the past socialists never supported the struggle of the oppressed against their colonial masters.

The argument continues: "Tibet ... can only exist as either part of China or as a bankrupt client state of western imperialism."² These are old arguments that occurred in the

guarantee those new states would be economically viable.

He insisted that socialists supported the right of self-determination. This included the right for those nations to form independent states if that is what the majority of the population wanted to do, provided that in so doing they did not oppress others or claim privileges over another part of the population.

Tibet's working class has grown, along with an indigenous intelligentsia, and is able to express its anger at its poverty and national oppression. Socialists should support Tibetan self-determination now. Only by doing so will we help the working class gain the confidence to move beyond pure nationalism, based on idealised notions of the past, and begin to organise as a class against the state capitalist Chinese bureaucracy.

It's important to remember that the last significant wave of protests in Tibet was in 1989 just before the Tiananmen Square massacre of mostly Han Chinese.

Tibetans currently suffer racism from Han settlers and the wider Chinese population but at root their problems have the same cause. Only when the Tibetans feel they can fight as equals with the Chinese masses will there be true unity in the struggle against the Chinese dictatorship.

Alison Higgins

ENDNOTES

1. China and the Riddle of Tibet, Socialist Unity, 19 March 2008 <http://www.socialistunity.com/?p=1934>
2. Ibid

Socialists should support Tibetan self-determination now. Only by doing so will we help the working class gain the confidence to begin to organise as a class

the Tibet Fund of the US State department - around \$2 million dollars a year - and George Soros is a major private donor.

The fact that the leaders of the Tibetan nationalists are members of a ruling class linked by a thousand threads to the imperialist powers, does not excuse those socialists who would use this as a get-out clause to deny the Tibetans their right to self-determination.

Struggles for national liberation have regularly drawn their support from the exploiting classes. Wasn't this the case in India where the struggle for independence from the British Empire was led by the bourgeois nationalist Indian National Congress?

Some socialists argue that there is no real basis for Tibetan self-determination as it is not really a nation and, in any case, Tibet could not really survive as a viable independent state.

One typical left commentator's argument goes: Tibet's tangled history proves there is no progressive nationalism in the country and therefore the Tibetan people do not have a valid claim to self-determination.¹

In reality this just saying that unless and until nationalist movements are led by internationalists and socialists then they cannot be supported against oppressors. This means that socialists could never support

Socialist International before and during the First World War. Lenin was scathing about those that made them, saying that they wanted to drop the political question of national self-determination. He dubbed them imperialist economists.

Of course as socialists we are not in favour of dividing up the world into ever greater numbers of countries. We want the working class to unite across nations, but we know that this cannot happen as long as there is national oppression. Lenin didn't say socialists can only support national liberation struggles if led by progressive leaders, or if these nations have a valid claim to be a nation because of their history according to socialists. Nor did he say that nations could only have independence if there was a

LABOUR, THE LEFT AND THE LOCAL ELECTIONS

Waking the dead

Labour were routed in the May elections as swathes of the country turned blue; support for the fragmented left dwindled while the BNP advanced. Mark Hoskisson wonders at Labour's ability to revive the failing Tory Party, and argues that the left needs a serious rethink

"THE RESULTS are not great," said Labour's Chief Whip, Geoff Hoon, after the May local elections. Don't you just love British understatement?

Labour was hammered in the elections. The Tories now have overall control of 65 councils – Labour holds office in 18. It lost 12 councils to the Tories on a day that has been dubbed Labour's "Mayday Massacre".

In terms of the popular vote the story is one of catastrophic Labour collapse. It received just 24% of the total vote. Even the Liberal Democrats, a party no one believes can ever form a government, scored higher with 25%. Labour's electoral support, as well as its active membership base, is shrivelling fast. It makes the humiliation suffered under Michael Foot in the 1983 general election look like a respectable showing.

Even where Labour had a (relatively) good chance of winning – in the London Mayoral election – they managed to blow it. Ken Livingstone, the come-back kid of London politics, lost to Boris Johnson. This Tory buffoon and TV personality with a penchant for racist remarks, is a class warrior determined to attack working class Londoners, ravage their services and carry on making the City the home of choice for every corrupt and lazy billionaire on the planet. Yet this man beat Ken Livingstone.

A week after the elections the Observer ran an on-line opinion poll to assess the scale of Brown's unpopularity. Less than a quarter of the 5,000 people surveyed thought Brown was fit to lead the government. Only one in five felt he was doing a good job and 43% felt the Tories' David Cameron should be Prime Minister.

In a symbolic but revealing denouement to this saga of self-destruction, the incoming General Secretary of the Labour Party, City-slicker David Pitt-Watson, announced he would not be taking the job. In March 2008 he was "thrilled" to have been chosen for the post by the National



Executive. On 2 May 2008, the day after the election debacle, he said he wasn't taking it.

The symbolism of this about-turn is that it suggests Brown's Labour has lost the confidence of the British ruling class. David Pitt-Watson was Brown's preferred candidate for the General Secretaryship, touted by the New Labour clique as the man to sort out the party's troubled finances, and won the post at the expense of Mike Griffiths of Unite. Brown had chosen a City high financier, the Chair of Hermes Equity Ownership Services, a major share handling firm, over a trade unionist. This was a clear statement by Brown of where New Labour's loyalty lies – with capital not the unions.

Now that Labour is in trouble its fickle support amongst the bosses is draining away. Mr Pitt-Watson will go on to live a happy and fulfilling life dealing shares in the City's casino economy. Brown, in the meantime, is sinking faster than a weighted corpse. Which brings us back to Hoon's "the results were not great" comment. The results were utterly disastrous for Labour. Eric Pickles, the Tory Local Government Shadow Secretary with a name to savour, was much nearer to the truth when he said, "the ship of state is heading towards the rocks." Pickles is spot on, Labour is heading for a hiding and the Tories, once a party considering political euthanasia under Iain Duncan Smith, is now happily planning to form the next government.

Explanations

The explanation offered by most commentators in the media is that Brown committed a series of errors, starting with the parlour dance over whether or not there would be an early election last autumn and ending with his misjudged and mistimed abolition of the 10p starting tax rate.

Brown and his closest allies counter this by arguing that voters are feeling the pinch as the economic situation has worsened, the local elections were an expression of discontent at the economic situation and, despite mistakes, the ship of state can get back on course. Hazel Blears, Labour's Local Government Secretary said: "What we hear tonight we will, of course, take extremely seriously... But I do think the economy is difficult for people, they are feeling the pinch – mortgages, fuel prices, all of that – and inevitably, who are you going to blame, you are going to blame the government." Or to put it another way, what we hear tonight is a load of moaning by an ungrateful electorate and we will ignore it and hope that the economy bucks up.

Of course Brown's mistakes since taking over from Blair and the downturn in the economy have cost Labour support. But both the pundits and the Brown loyalists are ignoring the underlying factors eroding Labour's voting base, factors that had come into play before Brown had even become Prime Minister.

Brown succeeded Blair on Blair's terms. That's why he got in unopposed. The party leadership did not intend to break from New Labour, as some in the labour movement thought, when Blair left. It meant to carry on as New Labour with the primary architect of that project from the early 1990s, Gordon Brown, at last at the helm.

Brown is a continuation of Blair and the New Labour

project was well tarnished before he took over. By the time he left office, thanks to the Iraq war, his relentless pursuit of neoliberal economic policies, the privatisation mania and a whole raft of policies ranging from the demonisation and criminalisation of youth through to his determined maintenance of the Tory anti-trade union laws, Blair was one of the most unpopular Labour leaders in history. The fact that over 200,000 members have left the party since 1997 underlines this fact.

At the last election the decline of the Labour vote – largely expressed through mass abstentions rather than through a switch to the Tories – was already under way. The May results were a continuation of this trend with Labour's working class base expressing its disgust at the party's betrayal. Indeed the all-out attack on public sector pay that Brown launched almost as soon as he took office probably hastened this process amongst a section of Labour's most loyal supporters.

In London Livingstone could not escape the consequences of disaffection with New Labour. Since being taken back into the Blair fold he has combined acceptable reform projects with making London a city that welcomes the mega-rich. He was content to oversee the part-privatisation of the underground, urge the crossing of RMT picket lines, support Sir Ian Blair's cover up of the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes and generally present himself as a big fan of the City of London's brand of ruthless finance capitalism.

Livingstone's "left of New Labour" image and the threat of Tory rightist Johnson did buck the trend. The mayoral race led to an increase in the Labour vote in a number of Greater London Assembly constituencies both in absolute and percentage terms (45% compared to 36% in 2004). Brent and Harrow actually went back to Labour, while in

Blair was one of the most unpopular Labour leaders in history. The fact that over 200,000 members have left the party since 1997 underlines this fact

London North East the Labour majority doubled to 28,000. But these gains were swamped by the Tory turn-out in the outer boroughs.

Brown can take little solace from this phenomenon. Outside London Labour's defeats can be further explained by their attacks on both the low paid and public sector workforce. This section of the New Labour coalition had, to an extent, held up during the last two general elections because it benefited from reforms like working family tax credits for low income families and the minimum wage, and had enjoyed an improvement in its standard of living. Under the impact of rising prices, the 10p tax fiasco and the public sector pay cuts, these groups decided that if Brown was prepared to abandon them then they would abandon Brown.

Labour's electoral crisis is not just the product of the combination of short term mistakes by Brown and the



economic pinch. These factors merely illuminated the decline that was already taking place. The decline stems from Labour's 10 year long commitment to neoliberal capitalism and from the eventual realisation by many loyalists that Brown was a dull version of Blair not an alternative to him.

After 10 years in the political wilderness, the Tory Party now looks a better bet for the ruling class and could win the next election. Thanks Tony. Thanks Gordon. We are

After 10 years in the political wilderness, the Tory Party now looks a better bet for the ruling class and could win the next election. Thanks Tony. Thanks Gordon

the ones who will pay the price of your decision to shaft your supporters and thereby give the kiss of life to the Tory cadaver.

New Labour has revived a party stuffed to the brim with smooth-talking toffs who are wetting themselves at the thought of getting into office. Once their feet are under the Whitehall desks they will unleash further attacks on the workers and poor, on asylum seekers and migrant workers and on black and Asian communities.

Their policies will be a continuation of Blair and Brown's neo-liberalism, but with an even greater commitment to tax cuts that will inevitably roll back some of the tax credits and other reforms of the past 10 years. The real possibility of a Tory victory, and popularity among sections of traditional Labour support, means Brown will hold back from calling an election until the very last minute. He will try to rebuild Labour's standing and hope that he can ride out the economic storm.

Brown's mini "Queen's speech" following the elections demonstrates that he will offer some reforms to try and shore up his failing support: to the unions (rights for agency workers); to the poor (re-looking at taxes); and to the better off sections of the working class (help for first time home buyers). He hopes this will be enough to keep the union leaders on board so that they will bankroll the election campaign that few bosses will now be willing to fund.

But none of this signals a radical change. Brown will pursue the fundamental programme of New Labourism: imposing a wage cut on public sector workers, extending privatisation in the NHS, education and public services, offering bosses low taxes and legislation to keep the British workforce cheap and flexible, and continuing to act as US imperialism's side-kick in the Middle East.

Union fightback

This does present activists, especially in the public sector unions, with an opportunity to build on the anger that exists over pay. On 24 April teachers, lecturers, civil servants and some sections of the local government workforce

went on strike. A ballot of local government workers has now been called by Unison. Teachers in the NUT and college lecturers in UCU are discussing further action.

It's a good time to build a determined and united public sector campaign over pay. If the union leaders were to issue the go-ahead for creating public sector alliances in every town and city in preparation for a series of strikes over pay there would, on the evidence of the response to 24 April, be a massive take-up. And if the unions in dispute started to step up their action from limited strikes to all out, then Labour's pay freeze could be broken.

Building such resistance should be the number one priority for activists. And it should take place not just in the public sector, but across the unions which are facing attacks as a result of the economic downturn. The rank and file should take the lead so we can begin to turn the tables on the bosses and New Labour, regardless of the impact this may have on Labour's standing in the opinion polls.

This resistance should also be built in the campaigns to defend asylum seekers and migrant workers, in the fight against the fascist threat and in the movements to block attacks on civil liberties through the "anti-terrorist" laws and ID cards.

But between now and the next election the leaders of the major unions, in particular those of the giants in the movement, Unite and Unison, will work flat out to stop any such revolt developing. They will use the threat of a possible Tory government as their ace kicker, as we say in poker circles, as an argument against rocking the boat and doing anything to weaken the Labour government any further.

Flying in the face of the central fact - that Labour deserves its unpopularity thanks to its relentless attacks on the working class - the union leaders will bully thousands of workers into accepting that they have the prime responsibility for saving Brown's skin. And their strategy for rescuing Brown will be to stop us from fighting him.

Unison under Dave Prentis is ferociously pro-Labour. It is cleansing its ranks of opposition activists via a series of witch hunts. It is blocking any action to defend the NHS which it feels may embarrass the Labour government. And it only allows industrial action to take place when it is under the tight control of the bureaucracy. All of these negative aspects of the union will be intensified in the run-up to an election, to keep members in check and guarantee that Brown is saved from a fight over the pay freeze.

Unite, led by Tony Woodley and Derek Simpson, was recently formed by the merger of Amicus and the TGWU. Its leadership may try and wrap up its policies in more radical tin foil, but the result will be exactly the same. There will be a huge campaign to deter action and defend Brown. The Tory bogeyman will be wheeled out to frighten anyone thinking of going into an all-out conflict with Brown.

We already have the template for the way these "left wingers" will operate. In Liverpool Tony Woodley promised the workers of the threatened Rolls Royce plant full support in their campaign to save their jobs at a big demo on the issue in the city. He even told everyone that Gordon

Brown was going to help. Within three days of the demo and within two of meeting with Brown to discuss the issue, the Unite leadership told the Rolls Royce workers that nothing could be done to save jobs and that the union was no longer backing the campaign. The plant will close and the workers will be thrown on the dole. Even limited action to stop the closure was blocked by the union "on legal advice".

Unite activists received a bulletin one week telling them to support the campaign to save Rolls Royce jobs. The next they received one calling on activists to help Rolls Royce workers find new jobs somewhere else. And in that week New Labour lost the support of several hundred more working class voters. This all happened before the election meltdown. Now that meltdown has happened, the campaign to keep members in line until after the next election "to keep the Tories out" will go into overdrive. Yet every lost job and every disillusioned union member is another lost vote. This truth escapes the bureaucrats.

So how will they sell this line? They kept things in check under Blair by promising everyone the earth once Brown got in. Now they will promise the same "once the Tories have been defeated". They will extract enough promises from Brown to make this line credible amongst members and then dress these promises up into a manifesto for socialism come the next election. This is a re-run of what the union leaders did with the "Warwick agreement" - the promises made by Labour to the unions before the last election. In the months ahead we will get Warwick Two, with the promise that, like Godfather Two, the sequel will be better than the original. Except in this instance it will be more a case of Free Willy Two - a beached whale rather than Al Pacino.

A recent bulletin to activists in Unite analysing the local elections put it like this:

"The Labour Party is still the best option for working people... Labour and Gordon Brown made mistakes over the 10p tax rate. But they listened and they acted. Now millions of working people across the country will benefit. Our challenge now is to ensure they do more to reconnect with Labour voters, because that is the way to reconnect with the electorate."

Actually our challenge is to beat back the attacks - like the pay freeze - that Brown is waging against us. Defeat for Brown on this will help the labour movement go forward far more than a policy parlour dance and a peace pact up to the general election.

The more radical leaders of the smaller unions, especially the rail union, the RMT, and Civil Service union, the PCS, won't toe this line. But nor will they risk an all out confrontation with the bureaucratic overlords in Unison and Unite. The left union leaders stick fast to the belief that whatever their differences with the other union leaders they cannot go it alone. They sell this to their members by pointing out that back in the 1980s not even the miners were able to win on their own. How much less of a chance do they stand over twenty years - and several defeats - later?

They insist that they cannot alter this situation because they cannot "interfere" in the affairs of the other unions. The message becomes: apply what limited pressure we

can but wait for changes to happen in the other unions rather than risk a rupture with them now.

Of course the lefts like Crow in the RMT and Serwotka in the PCS will do things on their own, including waging limited local and even national strikes. But they will not risk the wrath of the TUC by embarking on an all out struggle and posing the need for the TUC to back them. Still less will they consider openly criticising the mainstream bureaucrats and mobilising their own rank and file to win over the rank and file of other unions to a militant counter-strategy. As such the left leaders will remain peripheral in the run up to the election, as the major unions shape the agenda and ensure that Labour's electoral boat is not rocked by mass action.

A very serious shift in the economy could disrupt the plans of the bureaucrats to keep us all in the cattle pen until after the election and it could summon sufficient rank and file pressure on the radical leaders to risk launching an all out struggle in defence of pay or jobs. Without such an external shock the current balance of forces in the labour movement favours the big guns of conservative and timid officialdom. It will help them maintain control under the slogan, "Hold back to keep the Tories out". The level of rank and file organisation needed to successfully challenge this simply does not exist in any of the major unions.

Labour's left

Nor is the Labour left in any position to offer a challenge to Brown that could rally mass support in the unions and really shake things up in the way that Benn's deputy leadership challenge did in the early 1980s. John McDonnell could not get enough support from MPs to mount a leadership challenge to Brown last year. With so many MPs looking anxiously at their slender majorities he would probably get even less support for a challenge now. More importantly, he does not have a significant base amongst the activists - in the party or the unions - to be able to shake things up. The membership of the Labour Party is in sharp decline. So too is that of its left. The Labour Representation Committee (LRC), which McDonnell heads, has rightly opened itself up to non-party members (though

The left leaders will remain peripheral in the run up to the election, as the major unions shape the agenda and ensure that Labour's electoral boat is not rocked

wrongly, as long as they don't stand against Labour) to try and build up wider support for its renewal project. But there are no signs that this is transforming the LRC into a significant player.

John McDonnell's own response to the local elections was relatively muted. He said:

"After the serious rejection of New Labour at the polls

last week assurances that the Government is listening are simply not going to be enough to restore any sense of belief in the Labour Party. What is needed is a radical change of political direction. We have to demonstrate that change by introducing a new policy programme that specifically and very concretely addresses peoples' concerns raised on the doorstep. This May manifesto petition is launched so that all our supporters can have a say in pressing for the changes we need. We believe that Labour can win back the support of our people by adopting a new 2008 May Manifesto."

He outlined the manifesto which included a series of worthy reforms. But will issuing a manifesto really change much? No. It will not be read or taken up by more than a handful of dutiful supporters. McDonnell did not issue a call to arms. He did not say: "Brown is following

on from Blair. He is leading us to disaster and I intend to call a national meeting of all activists to discuss waging a fight to the finish with these traitors in our midst who have single-handedly saved the Tories and restored their electoral credibility. I will ask every union conference to back my challenge to the leadership of Brown in the next few months. I declare war on New Labour" . . . or words to that effect!

That is, he did not outline a course of action that could rally people to a fight now. He posed it all as a "policy" change - and this misses the point. Brown will change policies as and when it suits. What he will not do is change New Labour's fundamental line.

This brings us to the question of what course of action the far left should take to build an alternative to New Labour and prevent the return of the Tory undead.

The ballot box and the soft-soap box!

LABOUR MAY have done badly in the local elections but the far left's performance doesn't put them in any position to gloat. After 11 years of New Labour attacks on the working class the question should be - how far have we got in building an alternative to New Labour? Unfortunately the question posed is - why is the far left further away from building such an alternative than ever? If the far left cannot own up to being in a crisis now, its self-delusion is in danger of leading it directly towards self-destruction.

In London the Left List, or the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as it should properly be called, belly-flopped. The race for mayor saw SWP leader Lindsey German win just 16,796 first preference votes - a mere 0.68% of the vote. In the London Assembly elections the Left List won 22,583

votes, a 0.92% share of the vote. Respect Renewal, the George Galloway-led coalition that the SWP recently split from, did a little better. It won an additional councillor in Birmingham, shored up its vote in its inner East London bastion and in the Assembly list it won 59,721 votes (2.43%).

Of the other leftists that stood, the Socialist Party, which stands as "Socialist Alternative" and campaigns (episodically) as the Campaign for a New Workers' Party, preserved their council seat in Coventry, where former Labour MP Dave Nellist has a solid base. But elsewhere they too had a poor showing. In London they only contested one constituency in the Assembly election (Greenwich and Lewisham) where they secured 1,587 votes (1.1%). The Communist Party of Britain stood across London and their list won a paltry 6,394 (0.26%) votes.

Taken altogether, this was a desperately poor showing for the left of Labour. It should have been cause for some serious re-assessment.

The salient fact of the elections is that the Tory Party is back in business. Of course, outside of a major class upheaval you would expect the mainstream parties to enjoy revivals at each other's expense. But the fact that this Tory revival is accompanied by a derisory vote for the far left, after so many opportunities over the last ten years, exposes the extent of the far left's decade of failure.

Worse, measured against a rival much nearer in size than the Tories – the fascist BNP – the left also failed. The BNP's mayoral candidate, Richard Barnbrook, got 69,000 votes, well ahead of Lindsey German. In the Assembly vote they took 5.3% of the vote, getting Barnbrook elected as an Assembly member. Across the country they won ten extra council seats to the far left's one, fascism did a lot better than socialism at the polls.

Another fact that puts the recent results into context is that eight years ago the London Socialist Alliance (LSA) fought the first Assembly elections. It did not contest the mayoral election, which was then being fought by Ken Livingstone as an independent left winger outside the Labour Party. The LSA got 27,073 votes (1.63%), which was not great but not disastrous for an organisation that was less than a year old and was fighting an election where the list system had only just been introduced.

The Socialist Alliance was destroyed by the Socialist Workers Party in 2003/04 to make way for Respect. This was done, quite explicitly at the time, in order to "win more votes". Did they succeed? Respect Renewal, thanks largely to the standing of its MP George Galloway in East London, bettered the LSA result, though not by much at all. The SWP got fewer votes and a smaller percentage share. If you are remotely objective and truthful – which socialists should be – you can only draw one conclusion from the facts of the Mayday poll results. Eight years after the LSA gave the elections its best shot, the far left have failed to make any serious advance in developing a united, coherent and working class based opposition to New Labour.

As the ranks become more depleted, the divisions sharper and more acrimonious, and as the schemas fail to yield the promised "breakthroughs", the far left is entering a period of crisis every bit as serious as the one gripping Labour. The post-election analyses of the contending forces demonstrate this.

The SWP and Respect Renewal do not start from what their results mean for the class. They are chewing over what they mean for themselves. They are peppering their analyses with digs at each other in a bid to prove that one side or another has finally "won" after the recent split between them.

Their relatively strong showing in a few areas with large Muslim communities is a comfort blanket for Respect Renewal and it stops them accepting that it is very cold everywhere else. Their support is derived largely from the presence of Galloway in East London and Salma Yaqoob in Birmingham. Elsewhere it is tenuous or insufficient to make any real difference to the political map. Moreover, because the support is highly localised and based on a coalition of class forces including small businesses,

religious networks and a few leftists, it is not the case that their few victories represent clear cut advances for working class interests and socialism.

Nick Wrack and Alan Thornett, two of Respect Renewal's (socialist) leaders, point to the good results as proof that hard work and local campaigning bring success. In Socialist Resistance they explain the overall failure of Respect Renewal to achieve a breakthrough in London in the following terms:

"This was not a bad result in the circumstances. There

The SWP and Respect Renewal do not start from what their results mean for the class. They are chewing over what they mean for themselves

was a massive polarisation in London around the Mayoral election which no doubt squeezed smaller parties. Perhaps more importantly, the war no longer featured to anything like the same degree as in 2004. Although Respect has a broad array of policies covering the breadth of the issues facing the electorate it is probable that most people still see Respect as the anti-war party. This needs to be addressed. What exactly is Respect and what does it stand for?"

They add that the split no doubt caused people to view them as "damaged goods".

Not a bad result? With a sitting MP, with four years of work behind it, with councillors and a solid base in East London – this is an awful result. It cannot be explained by the squeeze because that leaves the BNP victories out of the equation. Why were the BNP not squeezed while the left was? It sounds like an excuse not a reason. They failed to get an Assembly member yet the BNP succeeded. Not a bad result?

And after four years of existence, after having won an MP and a significant number of councillors in East London, why are leaders posing the question: "What exactly is Respect and what does it stand for?" Surely people who have just stood in an election asking people to vote for them as an alternative to Labour, people who have played a leading role over four years in building and shaping Respect, should have an answer by now to such a basic question as this? If not, why not? What's the problem?

This problem isn't addressed in the article. Instead there is a re-statement of the belief that "nothing has fundamentally changed and the results show that nothing in the general political situation has fundamentally changed since the launching of Respect in 2004". If nothing has changed why was there a decline in Respect's vote from 87,533 in 2004 (when it was united) to 82,304 (Respect Renewal and Left List combined) in 2008? Surely the first question is, why are we going backwards? Not confronting this does nobody any favours. It discredits the left because it makes us look like the bosses' parties who twist every result to produce a positive spin.

The SWP Left List follows a similar method, but they also add a whole series of digs at their former allies. Nick Wrack and Alan Thornett point out that the Left List's good votes (in Sheffield and Preston) were won despite the SWP leadership not because of it. The SWP, for their part, gloat:

"The Left List vote was more evenly distributed across London, while Galloway's vote was an East London centric vote. Although even here the constituency vote for Hanif Abdulmuhit (the only Galloway constituency candidate) was down slightly from 15% to 14.5%. And Galloway's own Assembly list vote fell to 11%."

And all the while they dodge the question of how and why they failed while the fascists won a seat and the Tories won the mayoralty. Alex Callinicos, an SWP leader, wrote: "Reading Ken Livingstone in the Guardian on Friday of last week, I almost convinced myself that 1 May had been a bad dream and that Boris Johnson hadn't been elected mayor of London."

Reading the Left List's report after the elections you could be forgiven for thinking they were in the same dream world as Livingstone. Amidst a deal of tub thumping about how they were at the centre of everything, had turned everything left in the elections and made a big impact in the press they argue:

"But it is worth noting that in 2004 we gained 61,000 first preferences and about the same number of second preferences giving a total of 120,000 first and second preferences. This year the second preferences were much higher than the 16,000 first preferences, giving a total of 51,000."

Fewer second preferences than last time, but more than the number of first preferences this time? Why is that worth noting?

It is sand in the eyes of the luckless footsoldiers the SWP used for their campaign, to blind them to the most important fact of all – after ten years of diluting socialism in the search for an electoral breakthrough the SWP leadership have ended up with a smaller alliance than the Socialist Alliance, fewer votes than the London Socialist Alliance in an equivalent election and an SWP that has

When there should be a radical re-appraisal of where the left is and where it is going, the main forces prefer to turn defiantly away from reality

shrunk considerably in both numbers and influence since the beginning of the decade.

Like a football manager who has seen his side relegated, the SWP at least concedes that its results in London were "disappointing", but then bigs up its better players – the respectable results in Sheffield and Preston. And it prepares for life in a lower division by promising to play a more direct game than it has been doing:

"This will not necessarily be a primarily electoral struggle. It will be an industrial struggle, an anti-war struggle,

an anti-fascist struggle and a struggle on many other fronts that we cannot foresee. This is especially true at a time when the extra-electoral struggle is not declining, as it was in the late 1970s, but rising. But there will still be an electoral dimension."

Watch out for the disappearance of the Left List and the re-emergence of the SWP as "The Socialists". No lessons learnt, no accounting for the errors and, in all probability, continued decline.

Finally, the Socialist Party explain their victory in Coventry as a product of the tireless campaigning for socialism that Dave Nellist undertakes. Dave is a tremendous local leader, a skilled campaigner, and deserves the support he gets. But you cannot build a Socialist Alternative in one ward, let alone one city. The Socialist Party downplay their failure to make headway anywhere else and instead point us towards their next conference of the Campaign for a New Workers' Party (CNWP). This is a campaign that hardly exists beyond the Socialist Party. It has no mass character. It is as much a party front as the Left List. And it follows the same line as its two main rivals in the electoral arena – elections require you to tone down your socialism.

When there should be a radical re-appraisal of where the left is and where it is going, the main forces prefer to turn defiantly away from the reality that the election results exposed. They are all set to pursue their schemas at the expense of rebuilding the workers' movement and instead of recreating the conditions in which revolutionary ideas and organisation can make a real comeback. They call to mind the words of Shakespeare's Henry VI to the quarrelling factionalists in his court: "what madness rules in brainsick men".

Where do we go from here?

Many on the left can see this. But equally many are wary of advancing solutions, either because of past failure or because of fear of re-assessing their own part in past failure. Fragmentation and defeat naturally breed such wariness, but we cannot and must not let it paralyse us. We must look for, develop and test out new alternatives if we are to take things forward.

Let's start by explaining what we don't think should happen. We don't think revolutionaries should persist in arguing that if we dilute the revolutionary programme yet more we will somehow find a route to mass influence. We don't think that we should set about building a new version of either the Scottish Socialist Party or Respect on the model of the broad coalition electoral party.

We don't claim that if the left had stood on a revolutionary programme everything would have been alright. Very few people support such a programme at the moment and we acknowledge that the great majority of workers in Britain today regard the policies of revolutionary socialism as a kind of exotic eccentricity. The reason for this is not because those policies are mad, but because they have suffered serious defeats in the last decades from which the working class and its organisations have yet to recover. The defeats took three forms.

Under Thatcher in the 1980s, the great defensive struggles

of the miners and other workers were lost. The defeats paved the way, not just for the destruction of jobs in industries where militancy and the ideas of socialism (revolutionary and left reformist) were understood and sometimes acted on, but to the physical removal from the class struggle of a generation of militants. Defeat does that. When an army is routed its troops flee. The labour movement lost countless militant and class conscious fighters from its ranks with each defeat it suffered. The material basis of revolutionary (and left reformist) ideology in the class suffered the equivalent of massive soil erosion.

Following on from domestic victories the capitalists won the cold war on a global level. The Soviet Union, built and shaped by bureaucratic Stalinism, was not socialism. But in the eyes of millions of people across the globe it did represent an alternative to capitalism. It was seen as a system outside of the market madness of the West, and as some kind of oppositional force to US imperialism. This was an illusion. Stalinism was a terrible crime against socialism. But this doesn't alter the fact that it was viewed by far too many people on the planet as socialism. And as a result its miserable collapse became identified in the minds of many with the collapse of socialism.

Capitalism's long upward growth following the collapse of the Stalinist states intensified the view that socialism was no longer a viable alternative. In the western countries individualism and populism grew on the back of the boom and socialist organisations shrank. Some significant ones that did survive reinvented themselves by bolting on a host of populist and individualist ideas and policies to a tame version of socialism. The net result was the further discrediting of socialism in general and revolutionary socialism in particular, in circumstances where the natural audience for such policies had shrunk thanks to the defeats suffered in the major class battles.

Thirdly, on the back of these two defeats an ideological offensive by capitalism across the globe led to the triumph of a range of ideologies that, however radical, fundamentally accepted the existence of capitalism. Postmodernism was a clear manifestation of this in the universities of Europe and the US, as was the idea of the "end of history". The renewed philanthropy of the mega-rich and the development gloss of the global institutions, mirrored in the burgeoning popularity of radical charities, claims to soften the impact of vicious market forces. Even "progressives" now trumpet ideologies based on individual rather than collective solutions.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the revolutionary socialist programme is not top of the list for most workers. We do not acclaim this, but the situation begs an important question – do we try to rebuild support for the revolutionary programme, including using elections to try and explain it to a wider audience, or do we say it is no longer relevant as a programme of action for the transformation of society?

The point of our argument, in both the Socialist Alliance and at the outset of the Respect project, was that ditching the revolutionary programme in pursuit of illusory electoral gains would set back the effort to rebuild socialism and class consciousness in the working class. It would weaken the movement in the longer term and

not win you any more votes. If the choice in elections is between two brands of left reformism – that of the SWP posing as the Socialist Alliance, Respect or Left List, and that of John McDonnell and the Labour Left – then the latter, by virtue of its sitting MPs and its influence in the unions will generally emerge victorious.

This raises the question for everyone who says they are a revolutionary socialist: why bother standing on anything other than the revolutionary programme? What advan-

We are not saying that elections are irrelevant. We are saying that they are not the primary means through which the workers' movement will be rebuilt

tage does such an abandonment of clear and unequivocal anti-capitalist policies give you? The recent election results prove that no advantage has been gained by the far left spending the last ten years rebranding itself as the "not so far left". It has merely deepened its crisis and it will make it even more difficult to convince ever broader numbers of people that the revolutionary solution to the attacks they face is the right one.

We would also question why there has been such an emphasis on elections and electoral front parties anyway. We are not saying that elections are irrelevant. We are saying (and did say while we were active in the Socialist Alliance) that they are not the primary means through which the socialist and workers' movement will be rebuilt to face the tasks set for it by a new century of global capitalism. Elections can be an adjunct to wider socialist struggle. And for a strong socialist organisation they will increase in importance. But building a strong socialist organisation will not come about through electoral activity.

In the normal course of events elections are relatively passive. They have become even more passive over the last 15 years because they are dominated by advertising machines geared towards media coverage rather than parties trying to convince the electorate through meetings, street activity and door-to-door canvassing. They have always been constructed in favour of the ruling parties of the rich. They involve minimal action. And for the army of vote gatherers the imperative to deliver leaflets always eclipses constructive engagement with working class voters. The class struggle is only ever reflected in elections, they are the looking glass not the reality.

Two recent electoral triumphs for the left reveal this. First, the short-lived rise of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in the Scottish Parliament, second the victory of George Galloway in East London. Neither of these was a result of the electoral process, however effectively the parliamentary campaigns were conducted. The electoral victories were the product of mass movement.

The SSP's parliamentary advance was a direct consequence of the tremendous struggle against the Poll Tax in Scotland led by Militant and its Scottish leader Tommy



Sheridan. As time moved on the scale of the mass movement dwindled and as it dwindled the SSP was converted more and more into a parliamentary vote gathering machine. In that new situation it split on the most ridiculous basis (Tommy Sheridan's private life). The Scottish socialist movement was plunged into chaos, creating a new constellation of factions. The advances of the preceding years were transformed into a major setback.

George Galloway and Respect have followed a similar

The talent, resources and ingenuity that exist on the left are considerable but too rarely harnessed for the developing of a powerful socialist movement

path. Galloway was elected because of his role in the mass anti-war movement. His electoral victory was a reflection of the scale of that movement. But that movement has ebbed. In real terms it no longer exists as a mass movement. The distance of the MP from the days of the mass mobilisations caused both Respect's and Galloway's disintegration. Galloway's Big Brother appearance was symbolic of the distance between him and the movement that was responsible for his triumph. The split in Respect came when it was clear to the two factions in the organisation that they no longer represented any sort of mass movement.

Both examples illustrate that the decisive arena of struggle is not on the electoral front but on the streets, in the workplaces, in the working class communities – the places where people live and work. This is where the major emphasis of socialist activity should be and in these places there is no need to hide your identity behind a front or dilute your politics in order to get votes. If you do you will soon be found out and all chance of trust will disappear. What is needed to answer the question on all of these fronts of struggle is clear answers that can point the way to success. These are the very best places to be in order to prove in practice that revolutionary socialist policies are relevant, practicable and can gain widespread influence.

If we thought the main task was to contest elections we would, as many people say to us, put our money where our mouths are and devote all our resources to standing in them on the basis of a full revolutionary programme. But they aren't. When we have got the strength and resources we will stand in them but not as an end in itself, merely as one other means of strengthening the fight for revolutionary policies and ideas.

Way forward

So what is the way forward? What we argue here is not meant to be a dogmatic compendium of all-encompassing solutions which we demand all socialists accept. It is the germ of an idea that we believe can take things forward. To what? To a set of circumstances in which we believe

the building of a revolutionary socialist working class party can once again become a real possibility.

We believe that there are three tasks facing revolutionaries at the moment and that the extent to which we can fulfill them, along with many other comrades on the left far beyond our ranks, will begin to change things.

First, we believe that it is vital to revive the workers' movement. It is no good simply cheering on this or that struggle in the hope that it will change everything. It is necessary to see every local and national struggle as a means not only of achieving this or that demand but as a way of re-creating well-rooted and permanent organisations of rank and file activists who can begin to shift the balance of power in the unions away from the bureaucrats.

We need to ensure that on an every day basis we are rebuilding stewards' committees, re-establishing networks of stewards, through the National Shop Stewards Network for example, mobilising members through the production of rank and file workplace bulletins, building solidarity movements around strikes.

We need to dedicate resources to organising drives to bring in new, younger workers to the unions, organising broad caucuses that actively seek to draw in new activists, promoting united solidarity campaigns with workers in struggle, building rank and file campaigns against the bureaucrats, consolidating the new layers drawn in through a range of cultural and social activities, raising money to finance alternate resource and learning centres to provide effective training and education to new activists, developing rank and file newspapers that are genuinely democratic.

All of this can complement and build real support for the efforts we engage in to get left resolutions through branches and conferences. It can begin to garner forces to enable us to start turning such resolutions into action by strengthening our hand in any fights with the bureaucracy.

Second, we believe that it is vital that the socialist movement – and we stress movement, not this or that party – needs to enter into a period of both dialogue and joint action. Dialogue so that it can discuss what's gone wrong and what can be put right. Joint action, especially in the tasks outlined above, together with a range of other campaigns in working class communities to defend asylum seekers, combat fascism, mobilise communities against the attacks on services, schools, hospitals and housing so that real victories can be achieved in the class struggle through our combined efforts. Unity in action can replenish the ranks of the left with a new generation of fighters.

We stand for a revival of a fighting labour and socialist movement. We could begin this process by agreeing, at the Convention of the Left in Manchester later this year, to a series of campaigns around key issues that we could begin to work together around.

The talent, resources and ingenuity that exist on the left are considerable but too rarely harnessed for the purpose of developing a powerful socialist movement. We have a range of openings, through the establishment of social clubs, through the use of existing local media outlets, through the use of community resource centres and through the establishment of new media outlets, to spread

support for campaigns and to generate a lively culture of socialist activity, debate and creativity.

We can and should use our networks – both union and socialist – to build and promote national and international events. We could build national campaigns in a coherent and effective way and link up with socialists across the world to promote international solidarity. Our long term aim should be to create a vibrant unity between unions and community organisations – imbued with a class conscious socialist spirit.

Such a movement would also have a genuinely democratic spirit from the start. It would break from all the bureaucratic, elitist and shoddy practices that we all know. It would place a premium on fostering united action while defending diverse socialist opinion. It would not be a party laying claim to the truth or a coalition party offering a range of different truths on a take your pick basis.

Thirdly, within both a rebuilt labour movement and a vibrant mass socialist movement we would continue to make the case for what we believe is necessary not just to change the movement but to change the world – a revolutionary working class party and international.

We do not think the future lies in a rerun of sect building nor the creation of broad-based parties geared towards elections and united only by a commitment to dilute the revolutionary socialist message. A revived workers' and socialist movement is a prerequisite for the creation of a revolutionary party. Only if revolutionaries can demonstrate that their loyalty lies with the advance of the whole class will they be able to win the argument within that movement for revolution rather than reform. This will place the creation of a revolutionary party on the agenda. Its programme, far from seeming exotic and far-fetched, can become a reference point for every class fighter.

The Centre of the Storm

It is a common mistake to think of the 1960s as a decade of social and political change. In fact, it was a period of relative stability, with the major social and political changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1960s were a time of social and political conservatism, with the major social and political changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1960s were a time of social and political conservatism, with the major social and political changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s.

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An excess of history

The revolt of youth in 1968 was an international phenomenon. It was focused around the Vietnam War but fought on many fronts. Stuart King and Keith Hassell look at the politics of the movement and how it related to the working class and socialism

LATE AUGUST 1968 – Czech students are hurling Molotov cocktails at Russian tanks on the streets of Prague as they vainly seek to repel a Soviet invasion of their country. Thousands of miles away in Chicago young demonstrators are engaged in equally fierce street battles with the city's police as they try to protest against the Vietnam War outside the Democratic Party Convention in the city.

“Revolution”, Leon Trotsky once memorably said, “is an excess of history”. Forty years ago history indeed seemed to come rushing in through every available window and door as 1968 played host to a series of tumultuous events, most notably the student protest and workers’ general strike that rocked France in May.

But 1968 did not come out of the blue. The movements that exploded across the world’s, then novel, TV news media, were rooted in struggles earlier in the decade: the black civil rights movement in the US and the struggle for Algerian independence in the early 1960s; student protests in Holland, Italy and West Germany from the mid-1960s.

But these events coalesced and reached a deafening crescendo in 1968, which acted in turn as catalyst, speeding up history and opening up a whole pre-revolutionary period in the next decade. 1968 was indeed a year full of revolutionary potential, which is why today’s world leaders and their media look back at the year in fascination and horror. Have they learned the lessons? Have we?

The centre of the storm

The Vietnam War had been the galvanising factor for a worldwide protest of youth. Virtually every night on TV screens across the world people watched the blanket bombing of North Vietnam, the napalming of villages in the South, the public executions, and even Bhuddist monks burning themselves to death in peace protests.

President Lyndon Johnson, elected President in 1964 as the “peace candidate” against the Republican hawk

Barry Goldwater, had proceeded to escalate the war. In 1964 the US had 23,000 "military advisors" supporting the corrupt and dictatorial South Vietnamese regime. By early 1965 Johnson had authorised the mass bombing of North Vietnam, and by the end of the year had 185,000 troops fighting the NLF (National Liberation Front – what the US called the "Vietcong") in the South.

By the end of 1968 nearly half a million US troops were fighting in Vietnam and more than 48,000 US servicemen had been killed. The average age of a US infantryman in Vietnam was 19 years, with a disproportionate number being black and latino – and of course working class. This was a war fought – and opposed – by young people.

The US had seen many big demonstrations against the war in 1967 and several were violent and subjected to police attack. Anti-war activists were already questioning the tactics of non-violent direct action taken over from the civil rights movement of the early 1960s and this was to lead to more militant self-defence tactics in 1968.

Yet until 1968 the protests had little effect on the self-confidence of the US administration and military that it could win the war. A firm bi-partisan consensus existed behind President Johnson who had been elected in a landslide victory. Then in February the NLF launched its Tet offensive against the South – an onslaught that stunned the US military and the American public. The guerrillas even penetrated the US Embassy and pictures of dead US Embassy guards flashed around the world. Despite being a military disaster for the NLF, which took enormous casualties, it was a body blow to the US administration's propaganda of a "war being won". Public opinion turned and it was increasingly seen as an unwinnable war during 1968.

The repercussions in the US were immense. The anti-war movement had been growing through 1967 especially on the campuses. American students were being drafted as cannon fodder. Some 45,000 young people a month were being called up in early 1968 and in July President Johnson abolished the graduate deferment programme to call up 150,000 students hoping to do graduate studies over the next year.

All this took the anti-war movement onto a new level in 1968, occupying campuses across the country and targeting defence industry contractors. Thirty colleges or high schools a month on average were erupting into boycotts of classes, campus occupations and vigils. The SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) became a leading force on campus and in the "New Left". From a small organisation founded in 1960 it grew to 30,000 in 1967 and almost doubled again in the next year. It worked as part of what was often called the "New Left" – by 1968 this included the "Yippies", an anarcho, direct-actionist organisation whose radical spokespersons were Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin – they proclaimed "make revolution for the hell of it". It also included a growing, separatist, Black Power movement, and a fledgling women's liberation movement. This uneasy coalition was itself part of a broader and less militant anti-war movement coalition that extended into the Democratic Party itself.

The fact that 1968 was a presidential election year added special intensity and focus to the anti-war movement.

Sections put their hopes in the Democratic senator Eugene McCarthy who declared his intention to stand on an anti-war platform against Johnson for the Democratic nomination. McCarthy ran Johnson a close second in New Hampshire primary in March and by the end of the month Johnson (who in 1964 secured the largest popular vote in modern times) decided he was unelectable due to the war and withdrew.

By the time of the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago and with Bobby Kennedy assassinated, McCarthy and the anti-war delegates had no hope against the Democratic Party machine that was backing Johnson's Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey. Richard J Daley, Mayor of Chicago, would ensure that the anti-war demonstrators who targeted the convention were "dealt with". Viewers across the US and the world were able to watch on live TV as Daley's police thugs and National Guardsmen laid into protesters and bystanders with clubs and mace gas outside the Hilton Hotel, where delegates were staying.

Later a national commission into the violence blamed the day's bloody mayhem on a "police riot" which hospitalised more than 100 and resulted in at least 500 street casualties. But at the time most Americans supported the "get tough" line against the students. When an anti-war convention senator, Abraham Ribicoff, protested at the police "Gestapo tactics", Daley responded in his usual robust way, shouting from the floor "Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy motherfucker go home"! Not surprisingly Hubert Humphrey emerged from the disastrous convention 12 points behind the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, who went on to win the presidency.

The average age of a US infantryman in Vietnam was 19 years, with a disproportionate number being black and latino – and of course working class

Despite the repression at Chicago, it did not dent the growth of the student and anti-war movement. Mayor Daley had given the anti-war movement a taste of the violence routinely handed out to the black civil rights movement during the previous few years. Indeed, in Chicago in April 1968 the police repression of the riots after Martin Luther King's assassination in Memphis was more brutal.

Indeed, the convergence and overlapping of the anti-war movement and the black civil rights movement was a feature of 1968. Martin Luther King had until that year kept his distance from the anti-Vietnam War movement but started to espouse its cause in the Spring of 1967. His assassination in April not only sparked violent riots and protests across the country but accelerated the move away from the non-violent resistance strategy and strengthened those who preached armed self-defence against the racist state, like the Black Panthers.

But it was the anti-war movement that remained centre stage on the campuses. Nixon's 1970 extension of the

war to Cambodia saw the biggest protests ever and the shooting dead of four student protesters at Kent State University, Ohio. It was only after this, and Nixon's moves to negotiations with the North Vietnamese (which resulted in US withdrawal in 1973) that led to a decline in the movement.

Western Europe

"London, Paris, Rome, Berlin - we shall fight we shall win!" went the popular slogan of 1968 student demonstrations. Again it was the Vietnam War that was the catalyst for the internationalisation of student grievances across Europe in 1968. On 17 February 1968, in the middle of the Tet Offensive, the German SDS (German Socialist Students) hosted the International Vietnam Congress with delegates from across Europe and from North America.

In 1968 the German student movement SDS (steeped in years of working to unearth Nazis in post-war German society) represented more than 300,000 students across West Germany in a 108 universities and had organised regular protests against the war. One of its main leaders was Rudi Dutschke - in April he was shot three times and grievously wounded in an assassination attempt.

Thousands participated in the Congress sessions in Berlin under a huge NLF flag and a picture of Che Guevara with the slogan "the duty of a revolutionary is to make revolution". While there was a noticeable political division between the Europeans' defeatism (i.e. "victory to the NLF") and the North American "bring the troops home" line, the event was a huge spur to the rest of the European anti-war movement, which learned valuable lessons from the German movement about organisation and demonstration tactics. The Congress was followed by the biggest ever post-war anti-US rally seen in Berlin.

Protests escalated across the world. In February 1968 students from several US colleges went on four day hunger strike against the war. In the middle of this strike tens of thousands of French protesters, mainly students, marched

As the movements spread they also deepened, in the sense that the political issues that were taken up went far beyond the war in Vietnam

in Paris in solidarity with the NLF. And in Japan, home to the US fleet that was used to wage war in Vietnam, the militant student organisation - the Zengakuren - turned out thousands to block a US aircraft carrier from docking to carry out repairs.

In Britain the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) organised its second demonstration on 17 March - it was much bigger and more militant than anyone expected with contingents from Europe including the German SDS. The 30,000 strong march ended in a riot in Grosvenor Square as demonstrators burst through police lines and tried to

storm the US Embassy - they were met with police horses and baton charges.

Such violent clashes with police had not been seen on the streets of London since the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s. A second demonstration of up to 60,000 people was held in October. It was covered live on BBC, presented by David Dimbleby, largely because of press speculation that the nation would wake up to find government buildings occupied and a revolutionary coup underway!

Occupations there certainly were in 1968, but of colleges not government offices. With students radicalised by Vietnam and used to demonstrating on the streets, the militancy spilled over to protests about university issues; student representation, discipline, sex segregation in halls, secret files on students, connections with racist Rhodesia, concerns about the curriculum - were all causes of occupations. They took place at Hornsey, Croydon and Guildford Schools of Art, at Essex, Birmingham, London School of Economics (LSE) to name but a few. At the LSE an ongoing dispute over a Director coming from Rhodesia led to several occupations and the tearing down of security gates, which led to the expulsion of students and the sacking of Robin Blackburn, a lecturer.

New left papers appeared like Black Dwarf; New Left Review had a new lease of life and was sold on every campus. A Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation (RSSF) linking together University Socialist Societies, often hundreds strong, was formed. The older far left groups like Tony Cliff's International Socialists grew, alongside new ones like Tariq Ali's International Marxist Group (IMG) linked to the Fourth International. Exotic Maoist groups also sprang up, but never in the same strength as in German student movement.

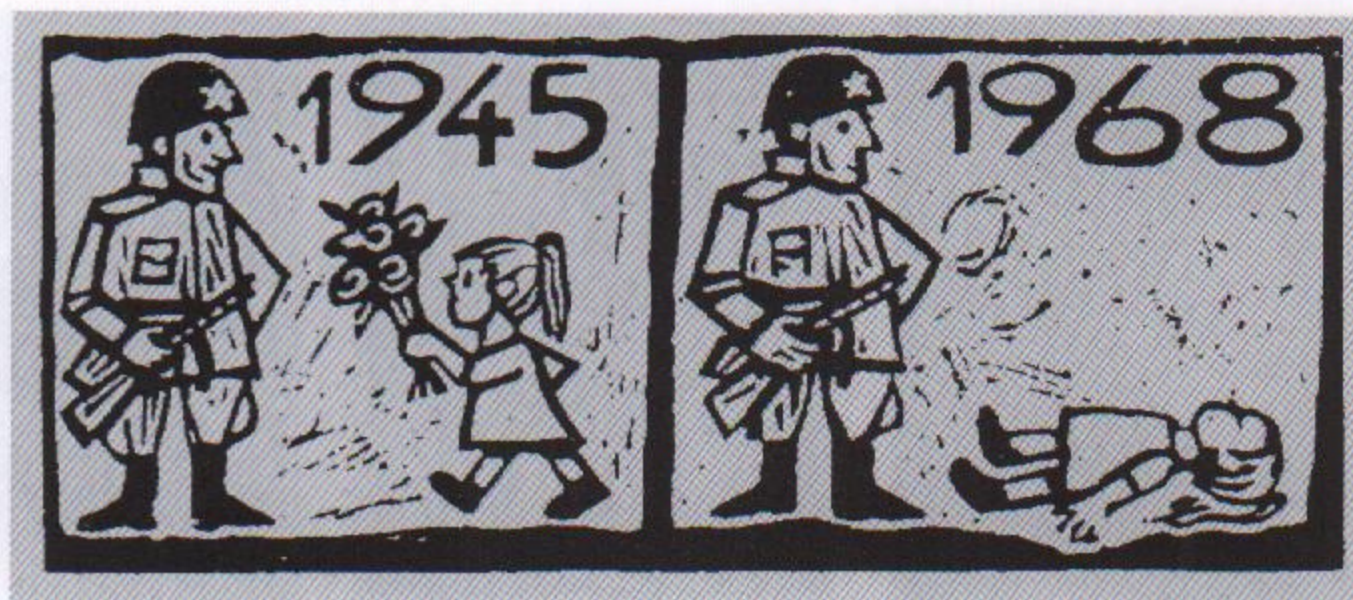
As the movements spread they also deepened, in the sense that the political issues that were taken up went far beyond the war in Vietnam. Spanish students ended a generation of passivity in 1968 by protesting against the fascist Franco regime in April when the government organised a mass in commemoration of Hitler.

This forced the authorities to close Madrid campus for more than a month. In Italy, in March, Rome campus was closed for two weeks after regular clashes between students and police as the former protested against inadequate facilities and antiquated disciplinary controls. In May and June another wave of occupations took place following the Paris events - universities in Rome, Turin and Milan were occupied and a frightened government quickly promised reforms.

Eastern Europe: cracks in the monolith

Events in Eastern Europe during 1968 moved on a separate but parallel track to those in the west. Not surprisingly, as the Soviet bloc supported North Vietnam and denounced the US intervention in the country, there was no large anti-Vietnam War movement in Poland or Czechoslovakia and little by way of contact between the student movements of east and west.

An exception was the Ninth World Youth Festival held in the Bulgarian capital in July 1968. Normally a staid, monolithic Stalinist affair, this one was different. The New



Left turned up in force – the SDS from Germany, anti-war protesters from the USA, Guevarists from Latin America. The festival soon became a battle of wills between the left and the Stalinist organisers, with the left organising counter-seminars and even unofficial anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, which were quickly closed down by burly Bulgarian militiamen.

These events reflected the turmoil in Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia had a new reforming CP leadership under Alexander Dubcek who had come to power at the start of the year. By March he was under heavy pressure from Moscow to place restrictions on the explosion of criticism and freedom in the Czech press – the beginning of the famous “Prague Spring”. Worse, as far as the Kremlin was concerned, trouble had spread to the Polish students.

Student protests in Poland had started at the beginning of the year with the closing of a production by a famous 19th century nationalist Polish playwright. In March a few hundred Warsaw students held a protest under the slogan “No studies without freedom”. Five hundred plainclothes militia arrived wanting to “talk to the students”. They were armed with clubs and beat every student they could find. Within a few days thousands of students were on the streets of Warsaw chanting “Freedom” and “Czechoslovakia”. Students demonstrated as well in Gdansk, Cracow, Poznan, and Lodz and were similarly attacked. The students, inspired by the US movement, launched boycotts and sit-ins.

Many of the students were children of party officials and they tried to take their case to the workers. One remembered how the student slogan “there is no bread without freedom” was ridiculed by the workers who pointed out to the contrary “there was no freedom without bread”.

The Polish CP managed to keep the two groups separated, launching an anti-Semitic campaign (under the guise of anti-Zionism) against some of the Jewish leaders of the students and within the party itself. By the end of March 1,200 students were imprisoned and tens of thousands of Jews, party members and intellectuals, had been forced to emigrate to Israel.

The Prague Spring was the next revolt to be crushed, with Russian tanks pouring into the capital in August 1968 and students and young workers taking the lead in a doomed resistance movement. Throughout Europe the New Left denounced the invasion – in London thousands of protesters marched to the Russian Embassy having shouted down George Brown, deputy leader of the Labour Party, as a hypocrite at the Labour organised rally (he was a well known supporter of the US in Vietnam). The August events were to give the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism as a dictatorship over the workers and students a new and growing audience.

The student struggle spread well beyond Europe and the US. In Brazil students regularly took to the streets to protest against the four year old military dictatorship. In Mexico, in the most violent student repression of 1968, at least 300 students protesting military occupation of Mexico City were killed when the police and army opened up with machine guns on demonstrators for two hours. Student leaders were rounded up and “disappeared”.

The Olympics nevertheless went ahead in Mexico City, providing the iconic image of two American medal winners giving the black power salute.

The repression of the Latin American dictatorships, facilitated by the CIA and US army trainers, re-enforced the guerrillaist turn of the Latin American left encouraged by the Cuban revolution and Che Guevara’s adven-

Like the anti-capitalist movement just over three decades later, the '68 anti-capitalism embedded a critique of alienation, of capitalist consumerism

ture in Bolivia in 1967. Tens of thousands of students were to take to the mountains and jungles in the continent throughout the 1960s.

Anti-capitalist politics

Politically the student movements of 1968 were incredibly diverse and eclectic. While they drew inspiration from each other, attempts at conscious international co-ordination were few and largely unsuccessful outside of the anti-war movement. Many of the (older) student leaders in the USA and France were not political virgins. SDS leaders like Tom Hayden had learned skills working in black voter registration campaigns in the US south earlier in the decade; others in France had been active in solidarity movements for the Algerian independence movement. They brought these organisational skills to the anti-war movement and the campuses.

The grievances the student movement took up varied widely; for freedom and against dictatorship in Latin America and Eastern Europe, against paternalism and censorship in Europe and America, for freedom of thought and curriculum reform, against racism, imperialism and war. These student movements were above all consciously anti-imperialist and to an important extent (especially in Europe) anti-capitalist. Like the anti-capitalist movement of the post-Seattle generation just over three decades later, the '68 anti-capitalism embedded a critique of alienation, of capitalist consumerism, of the workings of the big corporations and the anti-democratic political institutions that worked to promote big business.

Herbert Marcuse’s “One Dimensional Man” was devoured on European and US campuses alike after it appeared in 1965. In the USA, the influential Yippies very much pre-figured the pink bloc activists of the 21st century anti-capitalist movement in that their chosen weapons were mockery and mischief rather than the militia and the molotov cocktail.

Apart from the small – and in 1968 (outside France) largely marginal – far left Trotskyists, the student movements of 1968 had no clear conception of how or whether to put the working class at the centre of events, nor what form of state should replace capitalist democracy. The

student struggles were motivated by the barbarity of capitalism's oppression of Third World peasants symbolised by Vietnam, and they did not at first relate to the workers of their own industrialised countries.

Indeed many of the European and US Maoists argued that the workers of the imperialist countries were "bought off", that the real agents of revolution were the peasants or the super exploited blacks. Such ideas gained a foothold especially in the USA and Germany, where the workers' movements remained passive, if not hostile, to the New Left. These were countries where capitalism was economically still expanding relatively rapidly, however unevenly the fruits of this growth may have been distributed.

In many ways the social earthquakes experienced in France and elsewhere occurred along a social historical fault line where backward cultural and political structures (Republican and "Dixiecrat" conservatism in the USA, the Fifth Republic's rigid bonapartism in France, clerical-fascist dictatorships in Portugal and Spain) collided against the cultural and political expression of modern capitalism: universal civil rights for youth, blacks and women, freedom of expression, autonomy of education etc.

In themselves none of these demands was incompatible with capitalism as an economic system of exploitation. Yet for all this 1968 did see, if not revolutions, a pre-revolutionary crisis in France and the opening up of a deeply unstable and pre-revolutionary period in Europe.

The class dynamics of 1968

Students were the common denominator in many of the events of 1968. Whether in the US and British anti-war movement, May 68 in Paris, the Polish and Czech protests, students were the main social actors. This is not to say that the working class were complete by-standers - and in France for ten days they pushed to the fore of the action in their millions, revealing the class that had real power in society.

But the working class did not instigate the disparate actions. In France they followed the students; in the USA

The mushrooming of higher education provision brought hundreds of thousands of young people together in a festival of intellectual questioning and engagement

the working class was largely unresponsive to the campus based anti-war movement. In Poland the workers were manipulated by the Stalinist regime to oppose the student protests. In Mexico the grip of the PRI government on the labour unions meant the students' heroic actions were not emulated by the workers. In Germany, perhaps the most politically and organisationally tight and advanced student movement anywhere in 1968, found little public sympathy amongst the West German working class - even its younger layers.

What brought students centre stage in the 1960s? In the first place there was a massive expansion of student numbers in higher education, welding together for the first time in western Europe, North America and in countries like Mexico, a large social strata, drawn not from privileged elites alone, but from middle class (and to a much lesser extent working class) backgrounds. This growth was a result of the huge expansion of capitalism after the Second World War, with its concomitant growth in professional classes and state bureaucracy and need for graduates and highly skilled technical workers.

This mushrooming of higher education provision brought hundreds of thousands of young people together in a festival of intellectual questioning and engagement, interrogating the accepted cultural and political beliefs of their parents and teachers, largely drawn from war time experience. The glories of the fight to rid Europe of fascism mattered less than the blatant suppression of national independence by the same US, French and British armies in Algeria, Vietnam and Malaysia. If the US could help bring democracy to dark corners of Axis Europe why did its rulers deny democratic rights to its own black population?

Yet this questioning and agitation was taking place against a background of an underfunded expansion of higher education, poor, crowded facilities and, above all, an authoritarian educational hierarchy on campuses across Europe and the US. Attempts to organise politically on campuses in the US were banned in many parts of the country in the 1960s. Italian students organised large protests against inadequate facilities in 1968, and saw their campuses closed down for weeks on end. In Paris, Nanterre's overcrowded campus in the suburbs was the site of growing demands for a reform of the campus administration with its petty rules and oppressions.

So rapid was this explosion in student numbers that its dynamic could not be channelled into existing political institutions and parties, which were either unfit or antagonistic to their aspirations. In Mexico the students were the one stratum that existed and organised outside the framework of the ruling PRI state-run institutions. In Poland the student movement was not a creature of the ruling Stalinist party.

Of course, the grievances that pushed the students of various countries into mass action depended upon the national terrain. The anti-war and civil rights movement in the US, the authoritarian structures of de Gaulle's Fifth Republic in France or the PRI's equally suffocating regime in Mexico, the blanket cultural censorship of the Stalinists in Poland and the attempt at freedom of expression in Czechoslovakia. Yet binding these together at a deeper level, certainly in the west, was solidarity with the struggle of the NLF in Vietnam.

The legacy of 1968

1968 is rightly seen as a watershed moment in world history. The long period of stifling political reaction and social conservatism that accompanied the cold war was shattered for good. Youth would never be the same again, with students conquering political, social and sexual liberty



that would have been unthinkable to the previous generation. Out of the 1968 movement came the movement for women's liberation, gay and lesbian rights, and black consciousness and civil rights. Moral censorship in theatre, film and print was virtually swept away. For a year or two it really did seem as though "imagination was seizing power". Of course this was not the case in Eastern Europe where the defeat in Czechoslovakia ushered in a period of deep bureaucratic conservatism and repression.

The political trajectories of the US and Europe were quite different after 1968. In the US, despite the mass movement against the war, the radicalism of the students and the militant black power movement, the working class as a whole remained largely unmoved, and un-radicalised – indeed, before the Tet Offensive, and even after it, sections of it were violently hostile to the anti-war movement.

North America in the 1960s was booming. When Johnson was elected in 1964 a poll asked whether Americans were "satisfied or dissatisfied with family income": 64% of white respondents answered "satisfied" (compared to only 30% of black respondents). The economy had grown by 25% since 1961 and unemployment was heading below 4%. As a result the trade unions, the AFL-CIO, remained wedded to the Democratic Party and the status quo and faced few challenges from the rank and file.

Johnson's "Great Society" welfare reforms and civil rights measures, left largely untouched by Nixon, were enough to satisfy the more reformist sections of the black protest movement, led by Democrats like Jesse Jackson. The militant black power wing, the Black Panthers, were ruthlessly suppressed by the FBI, its leaders slaughtered in armed raids or forced into exile. The students were placated by some liberal reforms on campus and the anti-war movement lost impetus once peace negotiations started in Paris in the early 1970s – the SDS quickly fell apart in warring factions after 1968.

But 1968 opened up a whole pre-revolutionary period in parts of Europe. Its economic background was the beginning of the end of the long post-war boom and the onset of a new period of economic downturn and sharp recessions. Britain and Italy, as two of the weaker economies in Europe, felt this most dramatically, having to go on the offensive against workers living standards. France had to seek to win back concessions it made in 1968, while Germany, the strongest economy in Europe, managed to avoid any serious economic or political conflict in the decade following 1968.

Despite the sell out of the '68 general strike, in early 1969 the French workers were forced into action to defend themselves against austerity measures, dictated by de Gaulle's attempt to defend the Franc through budget cuts. The French far left, especially those claiming to stand in the tradition of Trotsky, developed as sizeable far left organisations in the aftermath of 1968, recruiting tens of thousands of youth who would previously have been

attracted to Stalinism. The PCF, like other Communist Parties in Europe, went into a decline after 1968.

In the autumn of 1969 Italy was racked by workers' struggles to defend their living standards and again a large far left outside of CP control developed both in the student movement and amongst young workers. In Britain there was a rising crescendo of workers' struggles first against Labour attempts to legally hobble the

The far left organisations that grew in the post-1968 period in Britain were the ones that oriented to the working class, in particular to the militant shop stewards

trade unions (Barbara Castle's "In Place of Strife") and then under the Tory government of 1970-74, culminating in the downfall of Prime Minister Heath through a mass miners' strike.

The far left organisations that grew in the post-1968 period in Britain, primarily the IS/SWP, were the ones that oriented to the working class, in particular to the burgeoning and militant shop stewards who played a vital role in beating off the attacks on trade unions in the 1969-79 period. The IMG/Fourth International that had built itself on a "student vanguard theory" (the idea that the students would continue to lead and "detonate" workers struggles) went into decline in this period.

In Spain and Portugal the student protests of 1968 were but a dress rehearsal for the mass working class protests against Franco and Salazar that brought an end to the dictatorships and restored parliamentary democracy in both countries in the mid-1970s. In Spain the ruling class managed a relatively smooth transition from Franco's regime. In Portugal the radical Armed Forces Movement that ousted Salazar opened up a serious revolutionary situation in the country, one which was only brought to an end in November 1975.

The militancy of the working class in these mass struggles post-1968 meant that many thousands of the student radicals of 1968 were attracted to socialist and revolutionary organisations in the 1970s. The far left grew manifold in the following decade and not just in Europe – perhaps as many as 100,000 were to be found in subjectively revolutionary organisations internationally. In contrast the bureaucratic and reformist Stalinist parties shrivelled. 1968 had breathed new life into Marxism and revolution after a long period of defeat and cold war when its adherents had shrivelled to almost nothing. Despite retreats and defeats in the following decades that legacy is still with us.



FRANCE

Barricades streets but the way

It started as a row over female access to male student bedrooms. Within a month student unrest led to barricades in Paris and 10 million workers on strike. The posters claimed 'everything is possible' but what was actually achieved? Christine Duval and Emile Gallet recall the momentous events of May 68 and the left's role

THE POPULAR image of the events of May 68 in France is one of a libertarian, anti-authoritarian student struggle against all forms of power, symbolised by the famous "night of the barricades" of 10 May. This account presents May 68 as a confused and apolitical struggle against the old rigidities of French society, based on idealistic and surrealist slogans that encapsulated an unfocused rejection of all that was valued by post-war France.

This conveniently one-sided account of the crisis that shook French society 40 years ago is currently promoted by some of those who themselves took part in the student revolt, such as Bernard Kouchner, currently Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign secretary, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the fiery student leader who has since turned his back on the "anachronistic" events of May 68.

However, the real history of May 68 is one of an explosive convergence of student protest with workplace unrest. That month France experienced the biggest ever general strike in European history. At its height 10 million French workers were on strike, accompanied by widespread occupations of factories and other workplaces. Two million workers stayed out for a whole month; it is estimated that in total 150 million working days were lost.

close

show

Student organisations, which bore the brunt of the fighting with the police and CRS, made common cause with the strikers, despite hostility from the French Communist Party (PCF) and the trade union federation they led – the CGT. As the country entered into a state of paralysis, when two-thirds of the workforce withdrew its labour, President de Gaulle flew to Germany to consult with top military advisors. The strike threatened to bring down the government and France exhibited many of the characteristics of a revolutionary situation, save the existence of a revolutionary party.

It was a time when “everything was possible”; the energy and creativity of workers and youth offered a glimpse of an alternative society. However, the full potential and promise of May 68 did not come to fruition, due in no small part to the role played by the PCF. Unlike the other great general strike of 1936, the general strike of May 68 did not lead to a left government, let alone a revolution. The failure of the movement to develop into a struggle for power presents vital lessons for the revolutionary left, particularly with regards to the role of reformism in undermining the revolutionary potential of the working class.

A movement in the making

May 68 was in many respects the culmination of a period of unrest amongst workers and students during the preceding years. Millions were disaffected with the institutions of the Fifth Republic – established in 1958 by President Charles de Gaulle, following a constitutional crisis brought about by the Algerian war of independence.

For youth – both students and young workers – the undemocratic and highly centralised Fifth Republic was particularly oppressive. All those under 21 were denied the right to vote. Culture was dominated by a state-controlled radio and television service that was increasingly at odds with a new generation eager to establish its own identity.

The conformity and rigidity of French society – personified by its ageing President – coexisted alongside the significant changes within French society. The explosion of the student numbers, in particular, was key to the student revolt. The student population had tripled since 1960 to more than half a million by 1968. Modern capitalism required a layer of skilled workers as well as increasing numbers of technological experts to manage the burgeoning technology-intensive workplaces.

However, the French bourgeoisie wanted this on the cheap and therefore failed to adequately invest in the infrastructure needed to support the growing number of students. Poor accommodation and the dire lack of campus facilities was one of the key grievances of students. Nanterre, a new modern university campus located amongst the bleak western suburbs of Paris, was bursting to capacity; built to accommodate 7,000 students, it had a student population of 12,000.

Just as this explosion in student numbers was taking place, France was beginning to experience a rise in unemployment. Students were losing confidence in the future that university education was supposed to offer them.

Unemployment first and foremost affected the French working class. Workers were also beginning to feel the effects of the looming economic crisis. French workers already had the lowest salary levels and longest working week out of all the countries that made up the CEE (the precursor to the EU). Salaries for blue-collar workers had been falling since the 1963 “stabilisation plan”, whilst working hours were increasing; in some sectors French workers were working a 52-hour week. Now the government was intent on making workers pay even more for capitalism’s problems by introducing a series of austerity attacks.

In particular, it was the proposed reform of the social security and health systems which provided a focus for workers’ anger, in addition to the numerous ongoing localised struggles around pay and working conditions. Students too had found a focus for their struggles. The Minister for Education, Fouchet, had introduced a package of reforms designed to ensure that university education was stringently controlled to meet the needs of the economy, by limiting the range of subjects to be studied and by establishing a more selective and stratified higher education system. This flew in the face of the rhetoric of equality around which the Republic was based.

Two years earlier the two key French unions, the CGT and the CFDT, took part in a united day of action to press for higher wages and shorter working hours. University and school students joined the workers' demonstrations, bringing with them not only their educational grievances but also their opposition to US imperialism's war against the North Vietnamese.

In spring 1967 the struggle intensified; students at Nanterre occupied the women's dormitories in protest against strict visiting regulations. Other struggles broke out in Rennes, Besançon and Saint-Etienne. The first serious fight-back against the Fouchet reforms erupted in autumn.

In February 1967, at the Rhodiaceta chemical factory in Besançon, 3,200 workers walked out against threatened job cuts. The strike quickly spread to other Rhodia factories. The CGT pressed the strikers to reach an agreement with the bosses. However, the majority of the strikers, organised by the CFDT, stayed out. The government responded by sending in crack squads of police to enforce an agreement with the bosses.

Strikes continued to break out throughout the autumn;

for example, workers in Le Mans and Mulhouse protested against the social security legislation and against unemployment, leading to violent confrontations with the CRS riot police.

One of the most important struggles in the run up to May 68 took place in Caen in January of that year, when 4,800 workers of the Saviem vehicle plant went on strike for better wages. Very quickly the strike developed into a factory occupation, propelled mainly by young workers who had recently left rural areas to join the growing urban working class.

These workers, unfettered by the political weight of the union bureaucrats, were more than willing to take on the forces of the Gaullist state; armed with batons and catapults, they had numerous violent confrontations with the CRS.

The unions, anxious to both control the various struggles and to pressurise the government into backing down from its social security reforms – reforms which would greatly reduce the influence of unions within the committees which co-managed these funds – organised a demonstration

THE COMMUNIST PARTY

At the service of the bourgeoisie

A WORKERS' revolution was of course the last thing that the PCF wanted. Calls on workers to intensify their confrontation against capital were met with, at best, derision, at worst, violent denunciations of ultra-leftism.

So was the situation in France ripe for revolution? Was the PCF correct in promoting the idea (late in the day it must be said) that a popular government was the best workers could hope for?

Waldeck-Rochet, secretary general of the PCF, summed up the strategy of his party:

"In reality, the choice we were faced with in May was the following: Agitate to make sure that the strike satisfied the basic demands of the workers, and at the same time work towards the necessary democratic changes, within the framework of legality. That was the position of our party.

"Or to throw ourselves into a trial of strength, in other words go towards the insurrection, including the armed struggle in order to overthrow the government by force. This was the adventurist position of certain ultra-left groups.

"But since the military and repressive forces were on the side of the established power and the vast majority of people were hostile to such an adventure, it was evident that to pursue this road would have led to the massacre of workers and the crushing of the working class and its vanguard: the Communist Party.

"So, no, we did not fall into this trap. Since this was the real aim of the Gaullist government."¹

So the working class was taking part in the biggest general strike in history in order to satisfy their "basic demands", which for the PCF amounted to paltry salary increases as the Grenelle negotiations showed. On the contrary, the events of May demonstrated that the working class was not only interested in economic issues; the workers were pushing the boundaries of their struggle to questions of power and control in the workplace and in society.

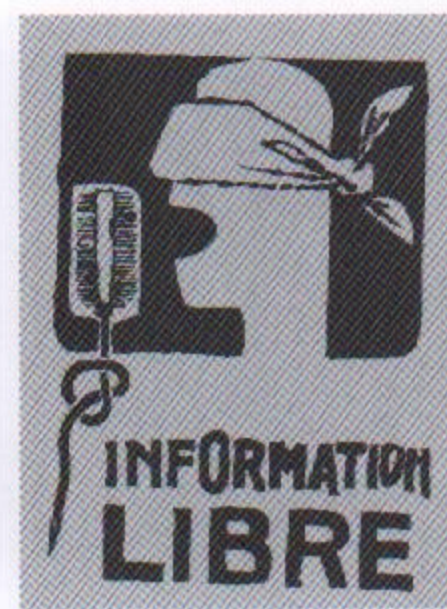
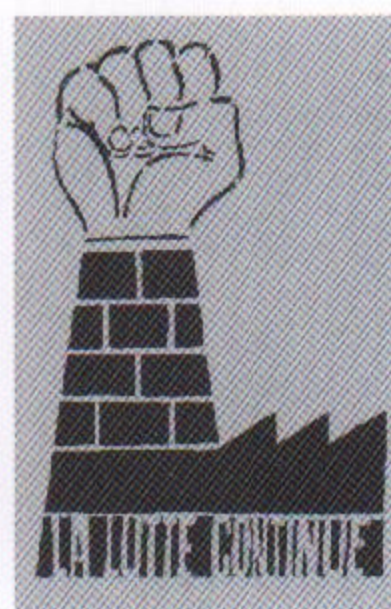
Of course, revolution was not a certainty. Whilst there were elements of dual power, where bosses and managers were

hounded out of their factories, and workers' control was established, these examples were far and few between.² Most of the factory occupations failed to put democratic strike committees in place; those committees that did exist tended to be made up of local union leaders.

The PCF, whilst in some cases playing lip service to the idea of local strike committees, was well aware that vibrant, democratic accountable strike committees, bringing together unionised and non-unionised workers, would present a fundamental challenge to their CGT activists. The lack of strike committees meant that there was no systematic challenge to the traditional union bureaucracies.

ENDNOTES

1. Cited in *Pouvoir Ouvrier* 23 1993.
2. The strike committees in Nantes and at the nuclear plant in Saclay, where nearly 2,000 workers formed the Saclay Soviet, are the best known examples. In the CSF plant and Brest, electronic workers fabricated walky-talkies to be used as a means of communication for strikers.



in December 1967. Millions of workers responded to the call, indicating their willingness to resist government plans. However, rather than link up the various localised conflicts with the national issues, the unions proposed a further day of action – for 13 May 1968.

From bedrooms to barricades

The immediate spark which ignited the May events began in the Paris region. The student population in Paris was a hotbed of radicalism – unsurprising given that of 550,000 students nationally, 200,000 were based in the Paris region. Parisian universities were also increasingly identified with left wing agitation, students being particularly active in organising solidarity with the Algerian struggle for independence.

Another key factor to take into account in order to understand the events of May 68 was the challenge left students posed to the Parti Communiste Française (PCF). The PCF, steeped in Stalinist orthodoxy, was unable to relate to the changes that young people in French society were experiencing. The party was particularly backward when it came to changes in sexual attitudes brought about by the availability of the contraceptive pill as well as the increasing numbers of women in the workforce and at university.

Whilst students were demanding the right to freely visit other students of the opposite sex in their dorms, including the right to stay overnight, the PCF had separate youth organisations for young men and young women. Its prudishness came across like a left wing version of de Gaulle's patronising and protective paternalism, which many students rejected.

Two far left organisations had effectively split the PCF's student organisation, the Union des Etudiants Communistes (UEC), in 1966: the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR – youth section of the Trotskyist USEC group in France) and the Union des Jeunesses Communistes marxistes-léninistes (UJC-ml – a Maoist organisation). Additionally, the UEC had lost control of the student union, UNEF, to another Trotskyist organisation, the Comité de Liaison des Etudiants Révolutionnaires (CLER – a front for the Lambertist OCI, which shortly after became the Fédération des Etudiants Révolutionnaires).

These organisations, along with semi-anarchist networks, were in the forefront of organising students around the key issues: political freedom on the campus, the Vietnam War and the Fouchet reforms. The Nanterre campus, where the JCR had a large presence, was at the heart of these struggles. It was a few hundred student activists from Nanterre who carried out an attack on American Express offices in Paris, which ended with the arrest of a member of the JCR. In response, the students set up a solidarity organisation with the aim of getting him released. The "mouvement 22 mars" (22 March Movement) soon became a focal point for a range of student demands and was to play a major role in the student struggles in May.

One of the first actions by the "22 mars" was to organise an anti-imperialist day of action at Nanterre. The vice-chancellor closed the campus on the pretext that he feared a confrontation between students and fascists. L'Occident, a

violent and well-organised fascist group, which had links to members of the government and a history of carrying out attacks on left organisations, had publicly threatened to attack the day of action.

In response to the vice-chancellor's action, the "22 mars" called a demonstration at the Sorbonne in the Latin Quarter for 3 May. The atmosphere on the day was tense with the police out in force. Four hundred stewards were present to protect the demonstrators from fascist attacks. However, it was the police who repelled the fascists from the Sorbonne, but only in order to give themselves a clear run to attack the students.

The police waded in with batons. The students responded by using whatever missiles they could find to hurl at the police, cobblestones being easily to hand. The situation rapidly turned into a running battle with the police, who by the end of the evening had control of the Sorbonne after carting off 600 students to the cells.

In one account of the events of 3 May a participant said:

"The vast majority of those who stepped into the street to fight back on that day were not closely involved in any political organisations, nor did they share the political beliefs of those arrested. Their reaction was simply an angry outburst of 'we've had enough!', a spontaneous show of solidarity with other young people who they saw as victims of a brutal repression. Their anger was borne of every time an older person had treated them like children, every time a teacher had bullied them, every time a petty official had been rude to them, every time a bartender or shopkeeper had refused to serve them because of long hair or scruffy jeans, every time a flic had pushed them around, born of the thousands and one repressive ways of a society all too given to humiliating its youth."¹

A week of daily demonstrations followed, drawing in more and more students and frequently ending in clashes with the police. University lecturers called for strike action against the brutality of the police, going against the advice of their Maoist union leader who claimed strike action without notice was "illegal"!

The turning point

The 10 May proved the turning point. Some 30,000 students defied a ban on student demonstrations. Both Nanterre and the Sorbonne were still closed. The students marched on the Sorbonne with the aim of reclaiming their universities from the state. The state, for its part, was determined to make it clear who was in charge. Again, the students faced repeated baton charges. The violence unleashed on them surpassed previous clashes, but the students stood their ground, this time erecting barricades out of cars and anything else to hand.

The news of the events in the Sorbonne quickly spread. Public opinion had already been sympathetic to students, but now the brutality of the police galvanised opinion even more. The government was on the verge of a crisis that it was unprepared for. On 11 May, the Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou, gave in to all the key student demands. The Fouchet reform was abandoned and Nanterre and the Sorbonne were reopened. The students had won!

The workers take centre stage

The CGT-CFDT day of action planned for 13 May turned into a victory celebration. The students had shown that, by taking militant action and refusing to back down in the face of state repression, it was possible to defeat the government. Nearly one million people gathered in what was then the biggest ever demonstration seen in Paris. All over the country, millions of workers went on strike. The Paris anti-Gaullist student resistance was transformed into a nationwide working class movement.

For the union leaders, the 13 May demonstration was meant to press their case against the social security reforms. Whilst the workers were looking to emulate the militancy of the students, the union leaders were putting together a petition against the government's plans!

The workers followed their instincts. At Sud-Aviation in Nantes, the workers decided that there was now only one way to put an end to their long-running struggle with their bosses over wages – by following the example

of the students. On 14 May, they occupied their factory and locked the director in his office.

It wasn't long before strike fever gripped the country. At Renault-Billancourt – a bastion of working class militancy and a stronghold of the PCF and CGT – young workers took spontaneous strike action. The tensions between the traditional leaders of the working class and the younger workers were beginning to show, since it was young workers who led the action, against the wishes of the local union leaders.

This movement soon spread. A defining feature of May 68 was the way in which the strike deepened without any call from the unions. French workers were taking things into their own hands, rather than waiting for the union bureaucrats to say the word. Soon, 10 million workers had downed tools.

The demands of the strikers were varied. One of the problems of the strike was the localised nature of the struggles. Many of the strikers had local scores to settle as a result of the ongoing unrest around salaries and managerial power, in which management had proved

Women in May 68: ripping up the rule books

IF YOU type women and the French general strike of May 68 into Google, you won't find much – apart from the occupation of women's dormitories in Nanterre. However, women were amongst the most militant strikers. Women made up a significant proportion of the OS (ouvriers spécialisés), whose anger at their working conditions – the endless repetitive nature of their work, the low pay – exploded in May 68.

Additionally, French society imposed strict conditions on women (who gained the vote only after 1944): a woman needed her husband's agreement to hold a bank account or mortgage and in many workplaces women were not even allowed to wear trousers. Despite

this, there was little in the way of specific demands for women workers during the actual strike. It was after May 1968, that the women's liberation movement took off and women began to take up issues around their oppression.

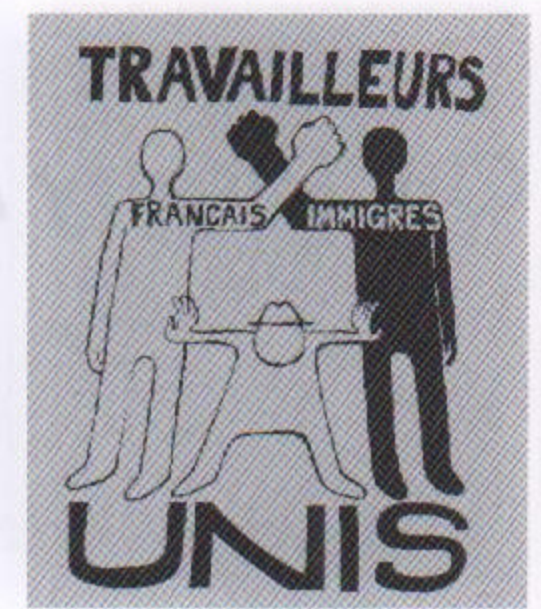
One of the most powerful films of May 68 is of women strikers at the Wonder battery factory refusing to go back to work. Women workers were becoming radicalised and by the time of the famous strike and occupation of the Lip watch factory in 1973, women strikers were denouncing patriarchy in the workplace and setting up women's groups.

The following is an eye-witness account of women strikers at a post office bank in Paris. It not only

illustrates the militancy and anger of these women against their managers, it also shows how women's oppression can serve to prevent working class women from taking part in class struggle and the need for specific forms of organisation for women flowing from this, alongside democratic class-wide organisations that can provide the sort of solidarity needed to bring all workers into strike action, regardless of their personal situation.

Parisian post office bank workers join in the dance

DURING THIS time, in the strike committee, other activists raised the issue of how popular the movement was and how we should not make things difficult for the most vulnerable members of the population: for example, continue to pay pensions and disability allowances. We decided to keep the counter on the Rue des Favorites open to visitors. We would take turns to staff the counter so long as there were cash funds available. Every morning during the occupation, there would be a general assembly in the street until 8am. Every day there would be discussions on how best to proceed.



intransigent to workers' demands. The national strike wave gave workers the opportunity to overturn the balance of forces in their favour.

On the other hand, there were clearly issues around which national demands could be based, in particular the defence of the social security system. Additionally, the many of the specific, local demands could easily have been incorporated into unifying national slogans.

All of French society was affected by the general strike. Companies such as the paternalistic Peugeot, which had never experienced a strike, now had their factories occupied. Michelin workers, too, came out for the first time. Docks and mines were at a standstill and public transport workers paralysed the rail system. Small farmers organisations declared their support for the general strike, laying the basis for the today's Confédération Paysanne.

Strikers held daily general assemblies. In many factories it was not just wages and working hours that the strikers were fighting over. Managerial authority was a key concern. Workers known as OS, *ouvriers spécialisés* (semi-skilled workers), who despite their name were

unskilled assembly line labourers, were in regular dispute over pressurised line management. Such workers had swelled the ranks of the working class due to the technological innovations of the post-war years and the economic boom.

The demands of the strikers were varied. One of the problems of the strike was the localised nature of the struggles. Many of the strikers had local scores to settle

Many were young workers who found the monotony of "scientific management" of the production process in stark contrast to the promise of pleasure and prosperity offered by the swinging Sixties. Debates also spilled over beyond the workplace concerns to issues about power

Some managers allowed some of the women to arrive at midday and signed them off soon after, so as to dissuade them from taking strike action. Their main concern was not account holders, but how to undermine the strike.

The women would come along and get involved, discussing things, looking and laughing at their favourite scab supervisors, squashing their noses against the shut gates. A few days later, we got organised, and had a change of guard at midday, otherwise known as the wall of shame: the non-strikers had to go past a line of activists and strikers who weren't very understanding.

The men were the most aggressive, some of them threw coins at the women as they went in. They never tried to discuss with the women. The reasons why some of the women were not going on strike was not necessarily to do with not wanting to lose money, or because they were against the strike. Some were forbidden by their husbands, who thought that strikes were not for women. For others, married to postmen, it was a kind of division of labour: "My husband is on strike at the sorting office at Paris-Brune, we can't both go on strike, so she had to work and face the picket line." Others were single mums and were

desperately unhappy, going to work even though they would rather have joined the strike . . .

By throwing money at the women going through the picket line the men were treating them like prostitutes. This shows that the picket line is a focus of tension, not only between strikers and non-strikers, but also between strikers with different outlooks.

Even though the union archives have not kept many traces of May 68 at the Post Office Bank, there are those who remember it well: how our managers and supervisors at the centre didn't think that a strike and occupation could happen to them, so used were they to seeing the women as irrelevant. They were extremely shocked at the attitudes of their little ladies, normally so nice.

At the entrance of the banking service, the head of the famous disciplinary section tried once too often to impose his habitual reign of terror: My girls will not walk out, he shouted in military tones. He had no idea of the rapid changes that were taking place. The women ran out, crying free the bank! , and for once it was the head of service who experienced an unpleasant 15 minutes. That day, the women who he had humiliated each day, who he put down on every occasion, who he

sometimes insulted, rushed at him, screaming how much they hated him: he didn't have the right to treat them as he did, he must get his just deserts! The union activists had to intervene to protect him from being lynched. Now he was the one who was scared, he was the one being browbeaten by the anger of the women that had put up with his punishments and humiliations every day, the women he had treated as incapable, as less than nothing. He got what he deserved, but they had to avoid any incident that could be exploited by those against the strike.

Some very determined women decided to occupy the site, they rightly thought that an occupation was vital to strengthen the strike. Some of the political activists were reticent, preferring to wait for De Gaulle's speech. A group of very determined women pushed the occupation through, with the agreement of CFTD members.

*Original text published on the website of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire. www.lcr-rouge.org/spip.php?article1461
Translation: Permanent Revolution*

and authority in society. French workers were contesting the role that capitalism was forcing upon them – that of an alienated profit-producing wage slave. May 68 was, in this respect, about workers demanding their rightful place in society.

And it wasn't just the traditional working class that was affected by the strike contagion. Journalists and other media workers took action, going so far as to call for workers' control of the media. Opera singers refused to sing, actors refused to act, footballers refused to play. Theatres declared themselves soviets and became a space for debating the intersection between art and struggle. Some local church leaders even supported the strikes; in Angers the Bishop donated the mass collections to provide food for demonstrating workers and students.²

Stalinism rescues the government

All general strikes pose the question of who rules society. In May 1968 in France the working class had withdrawn itself from capitalist production. There was no transport, no petrol and limited food distribution. How then to organise society and provide for basic needs? A minority of workers gave a revolutionary response to this question. Nantes, in particular, became known as the "Commune de Nantes". Workers and small farmers took on many aspects of the town's administration, demonstrating in action that society could function without the institutions of the capitalist state.

However, the traditional leaders of the working class, the PCF and the CGT, had a very different response. For them there was no question that the events of May 68 would lead to a struggle for working class power. The

goals of the PCF and the CGT leaders were timid and out of kilter with what was unfolding before their eyes. Having been caught off guard by the general strike, and having failed to prevent it, they were now determined to use it to further their own narrow strategy, that of maintaining their bureaucratic influence in society by negotiating a few reforms for the workers.

First, though, they had to respond to the growing influence of the far left organisations. And they did this in true Stalinist fashion; not by democratic debate but by hysterical accusations against the students who took part in the "night of the barricades", labeling them as "agent provocateurs" and "criminal scum". Whilst the Maoists did have some workers in the factories, the numbers were so small as to not represent a major threat to the influence of the PCF.

The real threat lay in the student milieu, which is why, rather than calling for the unity of workers and students, the PCF was determined to keep them apart. When the students organised solidarity demonstrations from the Sorbonne to Billancourt, the CGT put up posters around the factory, warning the workers to steer clear of "those elements on the fringes of the labour movement", whose ultimate aim was to "serve the ruling class".

One result of this sectarianism towards the students meant that on 24 May, two demonstrations took place in Paris, one organized by the UNEF, the other by the CGT. However, in some of the provincial towns, it was less easy to keep the movements apart. In Caen, for example, there were frequent united demonstrations of students and workers. Delegations of workers took part in debates at the universities, whilst young workers and students took part in joint actions against state symbols.

May 68 timeline

Friday 3 May: 300 Sorbonne students meet to protest the closure of Nanterre University the day before. Police arrive and arrest male students. Students and residents fight the police for hours in the Latin Quarter. Police seal off the Sorbonne. 600 students arrested.

Monday 6 May: In the morning about 20,000 young people gather at Place Denfert-Rochereau to march to the Science Faculty, demanding release of those arrested. Near Sorbonne, police charge demonstrators. Huge fight takes place lasting all day and into the night.

Tuesday 7 May: 40,000 demonstrators take to the streets.

Wednesday 8 May: students meetings across Paris to discuss situation.

Thursday, 9 May: Sorbonne authorities agree to re-open university but government countermands decision. Students plan demo for next day.

Friday 10 May: 30,000 repeat Tuesday's march. Police block path in the Latin Quarter. Students decide to occupy the streets and erect barricades for the first time. Negotiations fail to get students released. Police charge crowds in early hours of Saturday to clear streets. Hundreds injured during four hour battle.

Saturday 11 May: Most trade unions call one day national general strike for Monday 13 May in solidarity with students and to protest at repression. Government announces release of students and opening of the university, but fails to defuse situation.

Monday 13 May: General strike. In Paris one million march peacefully to demand De Gaulle's resignation. Students declare a constituent assembly in the reopened Sorbonne, which becomes centre of debate, printing, organisation.

Tuesday 14 – Friday 17th May: Workers across France return to work, but many start occupying their factories. By end of week 200,000 workers on strike, more than 50 factories occupied.



In some mining communities CGT members were very angry when union officials said workers should avoid contact with students. They curtly reminded their leaders that students had stood by them during the 1963 miners' strike. Some even left the CGT in disgust at the anti-student rhetoric of the leadership.³

Worse still was the response of the CGT to the strike. It never put out an official call for a general strike around the key demands that workers were raising. It later justified this position by claiming that to have adopted a national call to action would have undermined workers' democracy at a local level. The cynicism of the CGT leaders was astounding. A national call need not have been counterposed to local democracy, since it would have been up to local union branches to decide whether to rally to the call, and, given the situation, the overwhelming majority would have done so. A national call would have given support to those branches where militants were isolated or workers hesitant.

Georges Séguy, leader of the CGT, used the tenth anniversary of May 68 to justify the failure to establish a centralised strike committee; better to ensure that the strike was controlled by the workers themselves than some central body through which different factions would fight for control.⁴

But it was precisely the lack of a centralised strike committee which disenfranchised the rank and file and kept control in the "faction" of bureaucratic leaders. It would have permitted every local strike to have representatives at a national level where tactics and key demands could have been elaborated; it could have prevented the sell-out, by ensuring that a democratic and accountable, organisation that united unionised and non-unionised workers,

was placed at the head of the movement. But this was the last thing that the Stalinists in the CGT and the PCF wanted.

Everything was possible, but little was gained

De Gaulle's response to the "chaos" that the workers and students were unleashing was to announce plans for a referendum on "participation" – the extent to which "social partners", or more precisely the representatives of the workers, had a role in co-management in the workplace or in running the social security system, a role that the Fifth Republic had reduced.

If he lost, he would resign. Only the PCF responded positively to this proposition. The PCF preferred to see

It was precisely the lack of a centralised strike committee which disenfranchised the rank and file and kept control in the 'faction' of bureaucratic leaders

De Gaulle fall from power by plebiscite rather than mass action. However, De Gaulle's withdrew this plan, fearing the outcome. This opened up a period of intense negotiations at Grenelle, through which the union leaders hoped they could squeeze some reforms from the government

Saturday 18 May: Fearing loss of control, union officials call general strike for better pay and conditions. By Wednesday 23 May, nine million on strike. Students all over France march to occupied factories.

Thursday 24 May: De Gaulle goes on TV to suggest a referendum on more workers' participation in running factories. Fails to make impression. Night of barricades in Paris after student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit refused re-entry into country. Stock exchange ransacked and burned. First protestor killed.

Friday 25 May – Tuesday 28 May: Strike committees spread to run key aspects of daily civic life; daily demonstrations throughout the country. On 27 May the left meet to discuss idea of alternative government but fail to agree.

Wednesday 29 May: De Gaulle flees Paris for discussion with military high command in West Germany. Government in chaos. Massive demonstration in Paris.

Thursday 30 May: Turning point. De Gaulle returns to France with military backing. Goes on TV to reaffirm prime minister and call an election for June; he demands a return to work or he will impose a state of emergency. In the evening nearly one million pro-government demonstrators pour into Paris.

Friday 31 May – Thursday 6 June: Drift back to work. Union leaders agree to "peace" during pre-election period. Police expel workers from public sector buildings. Much resistance by rank and file.

Friday 7 – 11 June: CRS turn on factory occupations and break them up with violence. Two Peugeot workers at Sochaux are shot and killed.

Wednesday 12 June: Government bans several student organisations and left groups. Student union leaders agree not to call more demonstrations.

Sunday 16 June: Police surround the Sorbonne and clear the occupation. A few clashes follow but no barricades.

Sunday 23 June: De Gaulle and the right win sizeable victory in the elections to the National Assembly. Crisis over.

and bosses and reclaim their role as mediator between the working class and the ruling class.

However, their schema didn't work. Séguy and Benoît Frachon – another of the CGT leaders – were so out of touch with the working class that they arrogantly presumed that a few crumbs from the bosses' table would end the strike. When they tried to sell the agreement to the workers – a miserly 7% increase in wages, the withdrawal of some of the attacks on the social security system – they were met with hostility. Séguy and Frachon made a symbolic visit to Billancourt to announce this great settlement – only to be jeered at by the young workers.

Everywhere it was the same story, the strikers rejected the agreement and stayed out. Fearing that things were sliding out of control, on 29 May the CGT and the PCF called for a further demonstration. Six hundred thousand people took to the streets, calling for a “popular government”. A shaken De Gaulle flew to Germany with his military advisors to discuss possible options. Government ministers began to burn governmental archives. Regime change was in the air.

However, it was not to be. De Gaulle returned to France

with a new tactic: a general election. His decision to dissolve the National Assembly chimed in well with the calls for a “popular government”. More importantly, the PCF was now focused on this outcome of the strike. The militancy of the working class had raised the aspirations of their leaders. No longer content with mediating over bread and butter issues via the CGT, the PCF now had a greater goal in sight and did everything in its power to convince the working class that to achieve the goal of a “popular government” they needed to go back to work. At the same time, De Gaulle mobilised his supporters in a 30,000 strong demonstration along the Champs de l'Elysée.

The elections and after

The first part of the PCF strategy, getting the workers back, was successful. In the absence of a strong political leadership able to see beyond the electoralism of the PCF, the workers gradually went back to work, but not without some resistance. In some factories, workers refused to put an end to the occupations. Women workers at the

How the far left failed the workers

THE KEY element that was missing in May 68 was a revolutionary party which could systematically challenge the leadership of the PCF and CGT – not by abstract denunciation but by seeking out ways of demonstrating in practice how, armed with a coherent revolutionary programme, and with democratic and inclusive working class organisations, workers' revolution could become a reality.

Concretely this meant – in the first instance – ensuring that workers controlled their own movement in order to resist bureaucratic attempts to sell out the strike. To some extent and in different ways, all three Trotskyist organisations recognised this. Where they fell short, however, was over the programme they advanced. Instead of advancing a programme of transitional demands that could crystallise the revolutionary mood

of the workers won the day.

The demands advanced by the OCI-FER barely differed from the demands being raised by the unions, and fell far short of what could have been achieved by the working class. Their key demands were for an “end to the laws against the social security system, for the 40-hour working week, for guaranteed employment.”

Their key slogan was for the formation of a central strike committee. Whilst it sounded radical, and was certainly beyond what the union leaders were prepared to call for, this slogan was ambiguous. In a situation where only the best strike committees really represented the workers, a centralised strike committee that was based on democratic, accountable local committees, would end up being constituted of the leaders already in place – the very leaders that

were engaged in selling out the strike.

Similarly, Voix Ouvrière (VO) did not see the need to advance slogans capable of raising the struggle to a higher level. On 22 May, VO declared, “Long live the general strike! Down with the Gaullist reactionary police state!” However, what they then proposed was less bombastic:

“The occupiers will not return home, work will not resume until the workers have obtained full and entire satisfaction of the following demands:

1. No salary below 1000F;
2. Immediate return to the 40-hour working week (or less, where possible) with no loss of pay, with work distributed between all workers.
3. Payment for all strike days, without which the right to strike is meaningless.
4. Full rights to union and political expression in the workplace: the right to distribute newspapers and ideas, the right to assembly within the workplace.”

These demands were advanced at a time when the general strike was at its height, when 10 million workers were out and when the question of power was clearly posed. At a time when some



Wonder factory on the outskirts of Paris refused to talk to CGT officials and barricaded themselves in.

In some cases, the CRS was sent to re-establish a return to capitalist order in the factories, with fatal consequences. At Renault-Flins, Gilles Tautin, a young Maoist school student, perished during a police charge. The CGT's response was to violently denounce the far left groups "which were clearly acting in the service of the worst enemies of the working class".

Four days later, at Peugeot-Sochaux, workers went back on strike. Violent clashes with the CRS took place, and this time two workers were killed. In response, the CGT and UNEF organised demonstrations – separately. The UNEF demonstrations, infiltrated by agents provocateurs, quickly descended into violence. The government seized the occasion to ban the organisations of the far left, arresting known militants. This marked the end of the movement. The PCF breathed a sigh of relief and looked forward to victory at the ballot box.

But to their amazement, the right romped back to power. Yet again the PCF demonstrated its total lack of understanding of, and distance from, the workers it claimed to

represent. The PCF lost over half its seats in the National Assembly, down from 73 deputies to 34. Its defeat was even more crushing in constituencies which were home to the major factories.

The reasons for the defeat of the left

One of the explanations given for the victory of the right is the profoundly anti-democratic electoral system. Youth under 21 could not vote. In addition, a failure to update the electoral register meant that around 300,000 youth who had just reached voting age were not on the electoral list. It is conceivable, however, that this would have made little difference, since young people were loath to support a party which had treated their struggles with such disdain and which had sold out the biggest strike in French history. Many workers and youth saw the elections for what they were – a snare for fools, or "piège à cons" as the popular slogan put it, due to the lack of a party that could truly represent the spirit of their struggle.

The PCF paid dearly for the role it played during the May

workers were establishing workers' control in their factories – an experience which needed to be extended to all the occupations – VO was silent on the question of power, preferring instead to start with the political consciousness of the majority of the workers... and stay there.

The call to bring down de Gaulle was not linked to the struggle in the factories. VO, despite its initial hesitation when confronted with the students' confrontations with the police, ended up viewing the street battles as the main way of carrying out the fight against the political institutions of de Gaulle: "It is only on the streets that we can really contest the power of de Gaulle because it is only there that the force that supports him can be challenged: the armed gangs of police."³

This was at a time when the real battle for power was above all in the occupied workplaces. The street battles with the police, impressive as they were, were not going to bring down the Republic. The factory occupations, the spreading of workers' control, strike committees, community-wide councils of actions – these were the forms of struggle from which a sustainable counter-power could

emerge, backed up by a workers' militias to repel the state forces. The state could only be defeated by laying down the foundations of a new, alternative society, creating a vision that could inspire the majority of the population.

The JCR, which was clearly an organisation that was moving to the left under the impact of the events of May, understood better the importance of raising demands that went further than the immediate consciousness of workers and students. The JCR called for the nationalisation of occupied factories under workers' control based on strike committees, and the opening of the books to workers' inspection.⁴ They also warned against co-management – which was being raised in the factories as a means of moderating the power of the managers and which would ultimately commit the working class to the capitalist labour process. Co-management would not have been a qualitative change to the organisation of labour, instead it was an extension of the major reforms that the working class gained the last time there was a revolutionary situation in France, after the Liberation.

None of the Trotskyist organisations took the inevitable,

treacherous role of the reformist leadership seriously. They failed to warn workers of the inevitable betrayals of their leaders and failed to see the importance of organising the rank and file of the unions against this treachery, and to push for a revolutionary break with reformism. All of them assumed that the spontaneity of the movement absolved revolutionaries of this vital task.

Another criticism of all three Trotskyist organisations is that they did not propose any alternative to the anti-democratic structures of the Fifth Republic. In response to de Gaulle's dissolution of the National Assembly, revolutionaries should have called for a constituent assembly linked to the struggle to building workers' councils, and ultimately, a workers' government. Such a call would have had a clear resonance amongst workers reluctant to accept the crass electoralism of the PCF.

ENDNOTES

1. Informations Ouvrières 387, mai 68
2. Voix Ouvrière 20.5.68, p1
3. Voix Ouvrière, 20.5.68, p1
Ibidem.
4. Avant-garde jeunesse 14,27.5.68, p5

events. It had had the chance to put an end to the Fifth Republic, it chose instead to preserve it. Subsequently, the PCF's hegemony within the working class movement suffered a severe setback and was increasingly challenged over the next decade by the social democratic reformists who used the events of May 1968 to reestablish a united socialist force, which was to become the Parti Socialiste.

So what did the working class gain from May 1968? In terms of their demands, very little beyond an increase in wages and guaranteed representation in the workplace. Important reforms in and of themselves – the 30% increase in the minimum wage, 7% on average – they demonstrate how scared the bosses were of the power of the workers, but they were much less than what could have been gained.

The two other great moments of French workers' history of the twentieth century led to qualitative changes in the conditions of the working class; 1936 led to paid leave and the 40-hour working week; the struggles following the Liberation in 1944 brought in universal social

security and health insurance coverage. The same cannot be said for 1968. Key demands around the withdrawal of the social security reforms and working hours were not met. The lack of a national strike leadership meant that many of the demands of the strikers were negotiated at branch level.

On the other hand, the experience of May 68 was invaluable. French workers had a glimpse of what workers' power could achieve. For the youth, it was an unforgettable moment which shaped their entire outlook. For young workers, in particular, the experience of participating in the biggest ever general strike was to have a lasting effect on their subsequent union activity.

The general strike shook French society to its core and fundamentally weakened the strong Gaullist state. Yet, so much more was possible. May 68 could have – should have – been a revolution. So much was at stake, and so much was squandered by the political leadership of the working class.

In place of the PCF's readiness to negotiate away work-

THE FAR LEFT AND THE STRIKE

Blinded by the workers' spontaneity

THE FÉDÉRATION d'Etudiants Révolutionnaires (FER) was the student organisation of the Lambertist Organisation Communiste Internationalist (OCI), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It was by far the most conservative of the Trotskyist groups, demonstrated by its attitude to the "night of the barricades". Instead of joining the students on the barricades, they denounced the "petit bourgeois" nature of the demonstration and called on the students to disperse.

For the FER it was futile to think that 30,000 students could take on the forces of the state; a bloodbath would be the inevitable outcome. The politics of the FER were not so far from their *bête noire* – the PCF. The roots of the FER's politics, however, differed, based as they were on an orientation towards the socialists in the student and workers' unions.

The Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR) was key player in the "mouvement 22 mars". As the youth section of the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), prior to the

events of May its main strategy revolved around entryism inside the PCF, from which the revolutionary party would be built. The JCR, however, due no doubt to its experience of working alongside radical students, ended up breaking with this schematic approach to party building.

Voix Ouvrière (VO) was the forerunner to Lutte Ouvrière. VO was originally disdainful of students' struggles. In the autumn of 1967, when the first struggles over the Fouchet reform broke out, VO thundered:

"In and of themselves, the demands [of the students] have no chance of succeeding since they are attacking a concerted plan of the state which is not about to give in to a few 'hotheads' in the Latin Quarter . . . The real struggle lies elsewhere: in the factories, where the only revolutionary class, the proletariat . . . the best elements of the student youth must break with their social milieu by placing themselves at the service of the workers and of socialism."

With this petit bourgeois moralism, VO hoped to recruit students on the basis of guilt but

this soon proved useless as a way of intervening in the movement.

Once the "22 mars" was established, VO finally realised that the student movement was more than a few "hotheads" taking on the police. At the beginning of April, their workplace bulletins began to praise the struggles of students throughout Europe, going so far as to say that the students' struggles could be an example for the workers.

All three organisations emphasised the centrality of the working class but none explained how to link the struggles of the students with those of the workers, beyond participating in each others' demonstrations.

Even worse, specific demands of the students were largely absent from their publications. The spontaneity of the movement tended to blind the far left groups from the tasks of the day.

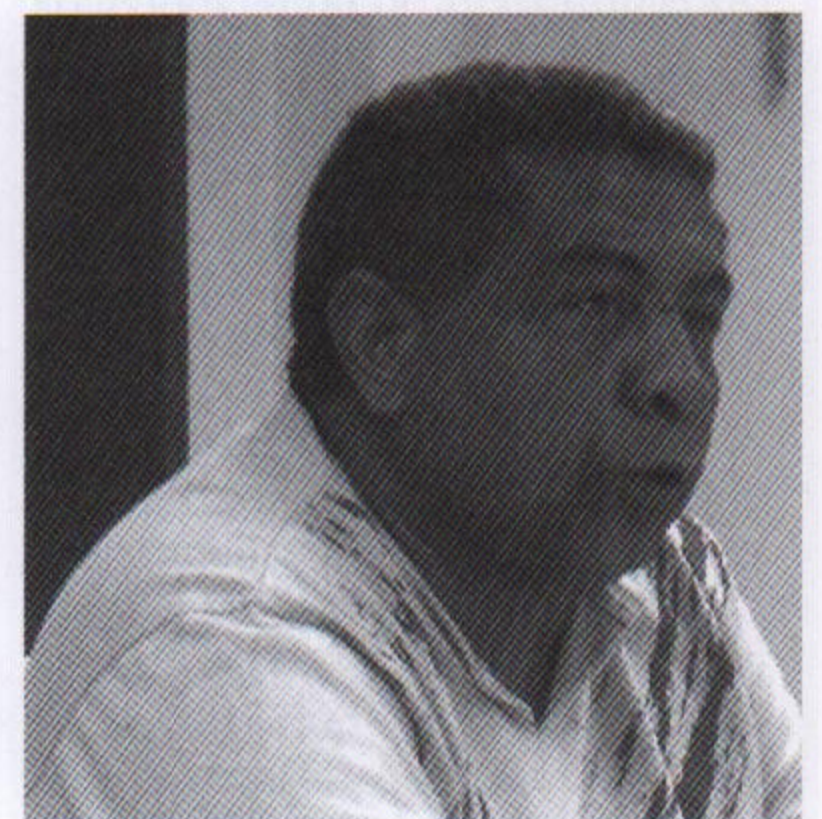
BOX REFERENCES

1. Combat 17.5.68
2. Voix Ouvrière, 29.11.67, p4
3. Voix Ouvrière, 3.4.68, p4

INTERVIEW WITH ORLANDO CHIRINO

Fixing the bathroom in a school isn't socialism

Orlando Chirino, is a national coordinator of the largest Venezuelan trade union federation in Venezuela the UNT. The following interview was conducted by Wladek Flakin in Ciudad Guyana at the end of March



ORLANDO CHIRINO has become a very contentious figure in the workers' movement in Venezuela both for refusing to join the government's new party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and for calling for a blank vote in the constitutional reform referendum initiated by Hugo Chávez last year. Largely because of these positions, he was recently fired from his job at the state oil company PDVSA, and there has been an international solidarity campaign against his dismissal.

I spoke to Orlando Chirino on 24 March in Ciudad Guayana, in the midst of the workers' struggle at the steel works SIDOR. We don't agree with all his positions or his entire political trajectory, but we believe he has made an important and courageous stand in resisting the pressure by the Chávez government to place the workers' movement under state control. We would like to make his views known to an international audience, in order to clear up some misconceptions which have been spread by Chávez supporters within Venezuela and internationally.

Comrade Chirino is currently a member of the "International Workers' Unity" (UIT) a Trotskyist international current centred in Latin America based on the political heritage of Nahuel Moreno. As is the case with most Venezuelan trade union leaders, Chirino speaks extremely quickly and for long stretches. We have done our best to provide an accurate and readable English translation of the interview, but to judge Chirino's political positions fully it is best to read statements of his in Spanish.

Wladek Flakin, REVOLUTION,

Independent youth organisation, Berlin, May 2008

Comrade Chirino, as a leader of the workers' movement in Venezuela, how do you analyze the situation after the referendum for a constitutional reform on 2 December of last year?

In the first place, the result of the referendum was a defeat for the government, for its new party the PSUV and for its trade union bureaucracy. This marked the end of one period and the beginning of another, in which President Chávez, not only in his speeches but also in his concrete policies, has shifted further and further to the right, making greater concessions to the bourgeoisie at the national and international level.

Can you give some examples of this shift?

If you think about his policies in regards to the summit of Río [with Colombian president Alvaro Uribe and Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa], it's evident that this was a capitulation to Uribe and US imperialism. Also the decision to lift or make more flexible the price controls on most basic foodstuffs was a capitulation to the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. Chávez even made a decree which suspended, for six months, the regulations stipulating that import companies, in order to maintain their licences, have to respect certain labour standards such as allowing collective contracts, discussing with workers' representatives, paying workers who are victims of labour accidents etc. The regulations said if a company didn't comply with this, their license was to be removed so they couldn't import. But these have been suspended

for six months. This is the clearest expression of the shift to the right.

So the government's latest policies mean taking back workers' rights that had been won in the past?

Exactly. At the moment, the government is negotiating with multinational corporations – for example with auto

The referendum marked the end of one period and the beginning of another, in which President Chávez has shifted further and further to the right

manufacturers – and these negotiations are taking place without any participation by the workers' movement and the trade unions.

That's why I said the shift to the right is also visible at an international level. The most serious example is that the government (which we've called anti-trade union in the past) has put the Labour Ministry at the service of the PSUV and the trade union bureaucracy, in order to attack and try to defeat the trade union movement. By that I mean they attack the class-based trade union movement which fights for autonomy and independence. More concretely I'm referring to the C-CURA¹ and also myself. As you know, I've been fired from my position at PDVSA for political reasons.

What do these attacks mean concretely?

Look at the struggle that's underway at SIDOR. First the government tried to impose an arbitration council on the workers. As this was openly rejected by the workers and their trade union, the government tried to set up a parallel union. Now, the third attempt by the government to serve the Argentinian multinational Ternium-SIDOR in this conflict is that the government and the owners are trying to impose a referendum on the workers. But this kind of democratic consultation is a question exclusively for the workers and their trade union, not the National Electoral Council [CEN] and the owners.

The workers and their trade union will carry out a consultation when they believe there is any possibility of reaching an agreement with the company. These are three pieces of evidence which show that the government wants to destroy the workers' struggle. They know if the SIDOR workers win, that will force a qualitative change in the government's policies, because it will mean a defeat of the unilateralism with which they try to control the workers' movement.

How have they tried to do this?

Last year on May Day, the government, with the reserves of the Venezuelan state, organised the May Day rally, decided on the speakers, published the manifesto, etc, going over the heads of the UNT completely. The year before, it had been the UNT that organised the May Day

rally. But under this Labour Minister the government is trying, in general terms, to destroy the autonomy and independence of the trade union movement.

And Chávez has spoken out against trade union autonomy, hasn't he?

That was on 24 March of last year at the meeting to launch the PSUV. In the speech (which was crucial for us of C-CURA in our decision not to join the PSUV) he said that trade union autonomy was just "poison from the Fourth Republic". This was right at the beginning of the formation of the PSUV when the first proposals for the new party were being made.

Losing the 2 December referendum was a defeat because more than three million people who had voted for Chávez in the last elections stayed at home; a part of the Venezuelan workers voted "No", a part voted blank, but the largest part abstained. It's a clear rejection of the government's policies. What are all these policies aiming at? In SIDOR, today is an important day – the top leadership of the PSUV is here, as well as a commission selected by the President of the Republic, for a secret meeting to try to negotiate a solution between Ternium-SIDOR and the workers (and to weaken tomorrow's national meeting of trade union leaders for solidarity with SIDOR), to try to impose a referendum and avoid an indefinite strike.

Is it normal in Venezuela for the National Electoral Commission (CEN) to organize referendums within workplaces?

No, no, no. This kind of referendum is a normally question for the trade union. The CEN is committing a serious abuse of power. All bourgeois democratic governments in Venezuela tried to control the trade union movement, but they did it via their trade union bureaucracy, via their leaders in the workers' organisations. Today it's the state, going over the heads of the trade unions, that is trying to control the workers directly. The bureaucrats of the Bolivarian Socialist Workers' Force (FSBT)² don't have any representative in the leadership of SIDOR's trade union, SUTISS.

It's evident that in this period, the concrete facts about collective contracts – not only in SIDOR but in all sec-

management level, who are mostly technical personnel, and the company uses them as a contingent. That's 1,800 votes the government and the bosses are counting on, as well as many new workers just entering the plant who might also vote for the company's proposal. But these people, who would vote in the CEN referendum, have nothing to do with the contract at SIDOR.

Is this case alone enough to talk about the government's "anti-worker policies"?

To give another example, since 2004 they have refused to discuss with public sector workers about their collective contract at a national level. The contract ran out in 2004. If you combine this contract from 2004 with an inflation of 22.5% last year, with a projection heading towards 30% for this year and the food shortages, much of which has been provoked by sectors of the right, it's a salary that has been pushed down massively. At a time when they won't discuss the collective contract and there's high inflation, it's obvious that there's a lot of pressure to struggle, and lots of people are struggling, for example blocking streets.

I'll give you an example – yesterday the employees of the Labour Ministry occupied a ministry office in Caracas. What were their demands? It's been 17 years since their collective contract was last discussed – that's eight years under the Fourth Republic and nine years under the Fifth Republic!

Weren't you occupying the Labour Ministry last year?

That's a different story, but I'm happy to tell it: 17 trade union leaders who had been delegated by almost 100 trade unions of the base went to present a proposal for a collective contract to the Labour Minister. But he refused to accept it, even though article 51 of the constitution specifies that every functionary is obliged to receive complaints and proposals. The 17 of us occupied the office and they brought armed thugs [pistoleros] to drive us out. The next day the minister went on TV to say that the workers themselves had driven us out of his office. And we had no right to present a response – the state TV gave us no possibility. We're still waiting for him to call us up to discuss the contract.

How does the workers' movement reflect this?

At the UNT congress of 25-27 August 2006 – and this is recorded, since we distributed the records around the world – of the 1,750 delegates at least 1,100 supported the positions of C-CURA. After that congress the government and its trade union bureaucracy, the FSBT, sabotaged the UNT. They left the congress and they never came back. Since then there hasn't been a meeting of the UNT executive – not one meeting since May 2006.

So two years without a trade union centre?

Almost two years. I said I'm a national coordinator of the UNT, but I can't speak for the coordination since it doesn't meet or make decisions. After that, the nomination of the current Labour Minister José Ramón Rivero, who is one of the leaders of the FSBT, was intended to develop its anti-worker and anti-trade union policies.

Losing the 2 December referendum was a defeat because more than three million people who had voted for Chávez in the last elections stayed at home

tors of the working class – show the government refusing to negotiate with workers. They want to impose the referendum not because they think they're going to win, but as a means to dismantle the trade union movement altogether.

The organised workers in SIDOR oppose the company's proposals, but there are also 1,800 workers from the

Rivero, who was a member of our party at one time³³, and his trade union tendency have consistently opposed elections within the UNT.

The UNT was born on April 5, 2003, so it will be five years old soon. The original coordination was named for a transitional period of one year and then there were to be elections by the base – universal, secret, direct elections. But the government and its trade union bureaucracy couldn't permit elections because yesterday, today and I suspect also tomorrow, the C-CURA would win them easily. So what do they do? They split the UNT, build up parallel trade unions and they're talking about setting up a pro-government trade union centre.

At the congress, a big question was that of autonomy. In the first congress, in the discussions about the declaration of principles, they wanted to remove the part about autonomy because they said under a socialist government it wasn't necessary for trade unions to be independent.

That's what Trotsky said around 1920/21, but it's difficult to compare the Soviet workers' state with the Venezuelan state.

Clearly. And even in the 1920s, under a workers' state, Trotsky was mistaken!

You received a lot of attention because you called for a blank vote in the referendum for a constitutional reform. A number of activists from the workers' movement, some even calling themselves Trotskyists, accused you of helping the opposition, calling for counter-revolution etc. Why did you call for a blank vote?

First off, we need to go back to 3 December 2006, when the president won the election with 63.7% of the votes. It was a fact that the workers, peasants and popular masses of this country gave their support to Chávez, and we supported him as well. As a workers' leader I was also in favor of defeating the right, which we did. It was a smashing victory. It was the first time after the attempted coup that the right, behind their candidate Rosales, acknowledged Chávez's victory. The hope of the millions of us who voted for Chávez was that he would begin with the dismantling of the bourgeois state, which is capitalist, which is the most powerful obstacle against the advance towards equality, socialism, justice, full social security, an end to exploitation, etc.

We had a clear position that this was the right time to organise a constituent assembly – sovereign, popular and independent, you understand. Chávez won, and 15 days later he said he was going to make a new party, the PSUV, and present a constitutional reform to the country. Now what did we question about the reform? The method for working out and presenting the reform was anti-democratic and openly caudillo-like.⁴ Chávez picked a commission which worked from 15 December, when he named it, until the first days of August. Only he knew what they were doing and which articles they were planning to reform. So that lasted ... January, February, March, April, May, June, July ... more than seven months.

The commission proposed to reform 33 articles of the constitution. Chávez threatened that if even one single comma were removed, he would withdraw the whole

project (the constitution gives him the power to make proposals but also to withdraw them if they're changed). So there were only three months to review these proposals, from August to 2 December, before the referendum took place.

But what were the contents of the reform you objected to?

Of the proposals that jumped out at me, at our international current and at our team here, one example involved

The constitutional reform didn't just defend private property, it added amongst the new concepts of property, the concept of "mixed property"

the question of property: the constitutional reform didn't just defend private property, it added amongst the new concepts of property, the concept of "mixed property". In our opinion, this is a step back from the current constitution, because in the current constitution the country's natural resources – in the sea, beneath the earth, all of that – are the property of the state. But the constitutional reform would have opened the door for multinational corporations, via mixed property, to own up to 40% of these resources.

In fact, before the proposed reform there was an event that we criticised enormously, which was the problem of the concessions in the Orinoco delta. The multinational corporations there had worked on a contractual basis. But all the multinational corporations (with the exception of Exxon Mobil) now form part of joint ventures with PDVSA. This means they went from being contractors to owning 40% of the project.

But wasn't it the case that they used to control 60% of the projects in the Orinoco delta and now can only control 40%?

Well no, they used to get 60% of the profits but in terms of property, they didn't have anything. The rules had to be changed because in reality they weren't paying the state anything – certainly their contributions were raised significantly. But our fundamental criticism was about these joint ventures. The constitutional reform spoke about socialism in order to give 40% of our natural resources to multinational corporations!

Were there other proposed reforms you opposed?

And the social vision had a strong Bonapartist⁵ element. In regards to what was called "the geometry of power" – indefinite re-election was introduced only for the president; there was to be only limited re-election of governors, mayors, etc. New municipalities and communities could be created by the president and he would have the power to name vice-presidents to rule over the new territories.

In practice this means if we won the governorship of the state of Carabobo (let's assume I became the governor of Carabobo because that's where I live) and implemented socialist policies from below, the president could name a vice-president and take over all the resources in that state. The president might say, "Well, I wouldn't do that to Orlando Chirino in Carabobo, only to Miguel Rosales in the state of Zulia" but the power would still be there

There was also a horrible thing about the workers in public administration. Article 141 of the current constitu-

The constitutional reform contained a strong element of increasing the president's power and struck against the autonomy of the trade union movement

tion says they are at the service of the citizens. The reform would have changed that to say they are at the service of public power. So if you're a governor and I work for your administration, I'm at your service and not at the service of the citizens directly. If I form a union, you have a powerful weapon to fight against that. Finally, we looked at the question of councils: communal councils, workers' council, farmers' councils, students' councils, etc.

On the international left many people see these councils as organs of self-government for the masses or even soviet-type bodies which will replace the bourgeois state in Venezuela.

From that point of view, we would defend the councils - we aren't against them. On the contrary, if the workers, farmers, women, students etc. decide to use these councils to develop their democracy, to intensify their struggles, to broaden their organisations - if they use them as organs of management, consultation, debate, representation - then it's important to work with them.

But what the constitutional reform proposed was a type of council like in Cuba, i.e. councils controlled by "the Party" and its people who are sent to the factories, councils that are unequivocally opposed to the trade unions (and are thus in favor of the bosses). We defended and we still defend the trade unions as the most important instruments of workers' struggle.

I can give 15 or 20 more examples, but that's just three things from the 33 articles proposed by the president. Afterwards, in the debate in the National Assembly, 36 more articles were added, and they were even worse.

Do these councils have the resources to act independently of the state?

When we talk about dividing the budget in this country, 25% goes to the governors and mayors, and 5% was to be destined to the communal councils (that was the original proposal, they later raised it to 10%) - the other 70% is controlled by Chávez. That's how the budget was distributed.

The constitutional reform contained a strong element of increasing the president's power, without any doubt, and strikes against the autonomy of the trade union movement. Establishing the workers' councils in the constitution - who was that directed against? Against the trade union movement. Because the government was looking for a form it could use to get the trade unions to submit to its control, but it wasn't able to.

That should explain my position, from the point of view of the trade union movement in Venezuela. What else do you want to know. We presented this position to the working class vanguard, not only here but internationally. We maintained that it was important to discuss the content of the reform, whether it would establish socialism or not. I know my position provoked strong reactions - there are sectors that love me and others that hate me because I pointed out there was not one single social improvement contained in the reform, not one step towards socialism

The reform was presented as a vote on socialism.

You can't tell me it's socialism just because a hospital works. In the developed capitalist countries hospitals work too. Therefore, from an ideological perspective, from the point of view of consistent Marxists, of Trotskyists, we had to oppose the reform. I thought we had to vote "No", but openly I submitted to the decision of my organisation [the "International Workers' Unity" or UIT]. An International Executive Committee came to Venezuela to discuss the question and we ended up deciding to call for a blank vote.

My position was that we were capable of explaining to the working class and the vanguard that the reform didn't have anything to do with socialism - that a blank vote wasn't a rejection of socialism, and this position didn't have anything to do with the right.

So how do you respond to accusations that by opposing Chávez in the referendum you were supporting the counter-revolution?

You won't find an honest worker or workers' leader who has any doubts about my supposed sympathies for imperialism. In the epoch when I was linked to the guerrilla [of the MIR], Chávez was just entering the military academy.

The root of the problem is what kind of government is this? What is its programme? This is an anti-worker government. When there are meetings in Miraflores palace [the government headquarters] with the president and the representatives of businessmen and workers, we ask: who are these representatives, how are they selected? With the government there's no doubt - it was elected by popular vote. But who are these businessmen? And above all: isn't the government itself picking who will represent the working class? We oppose this kind of "tripartism", and all forms of "social dialogue" designed to co-opt the workers' representatives and strangle any kind of mobilisation based on class independence.

It's a fact that the president has unilaterally determined the minimum wage in Venezuela. Since the fall of the dictatorship in 1958 until now, there were always workers'

struggles to raise the minimum wage, to force the president and the legislative branch to make laws. Well, these struggles have been eradicated. There are no more discussions with the workers. The minimum wage is now whatever Chávez says it is. There are no discussions for collective contracts – or when there are, like right now in the oil sector, the minister hand picks the negotiating committee which is supposed to represent the workers. This is combined with attacks against our tendency.

Don't the workers benefit from the minimum wage?

The organic law of labour obliges the president to revise the minimum wage, to sit down with the different sectors and work it out. He has revised it, but he doesn't consult anyone. He sent us a letter last year to inform us of his decision, but we didn't respond.

What do we think? Our current wants to discuss and debate, but he imposes measures like that. If you receive the minimum wage, you get an increase, but people who are slightly above the minimum don't get anything. There have hardly been any raises beyond the minimum wage for the last five years, which means 71% of the public sector workers in this country are now earning the minimum wage. Of the economically active population, more than half live off the minimum wage.

And how much is that wage currently?

614 Strong Bolívares, which is US\$280 at the official exchange rate.

And that in a very expensive country.

Yes, super-mega-expensive ["super-carísimo"].)

There have been rumours that you are planning to leave the UNT and join the CTV. What is the background to this?

We consider one of the best conquests of this revolutionary process was its trade union central, the UNT. Why? Because it was the fruit of a tremendous victory, the fruit of a defeat of imperialism in the lock-out/sabotage of late 2002, early 2003. If they had won the CTV would have been strengthened. But they lost, and the UNT was born. The UNT was the opposite of the CTV, which was born of political parties, especially the PCV [Peruvian Communist Party] and the AD [Acción Democrática]. In 1958 with their deals, they helped established the bourgeois democratic regime. These deals included an agreement to lower the salaries of workers in public administration and block strikes, which is the best example of their class collaboration.

What did I say in this situation? When the debate in the UNT began, the most bureaucratic and corrupt sectors – who today are in the PSUV, who today are deputies or ministers – said that workers who aren't with Chávez can't be part of the UNT, that trade unions who are against the process can't be in the UNT. In the UNT executive committee, which included other comrades, I was the only one to oppose this position of exclusion.

I believe the trade unions are the organs of all workers regardless of their politics or ideology. From there, the big difference emerges, because if the trade union is truly

democratic, if it truly wants autonomy, then we need to win all the workers who are still confused for the fight against capitalism. If we can't convince them, they have the right to present their opinions at every point in the class struggle, as we will present ours. The trade unions aren't political parties, they're organisations of all workers. Now the party we want to build up, that's different. Someone who believes in capitalism won't join us.

In one year we turned the UNT into a reference point in this country. I used to visit Miraflores as if it was my house. The old Labour Minister elaborated many policies based on debates he had with me. In the moment of the confrontation, i.e. of the coup and the sabotage and all that, I was building up the Bolivarian trade union movement, because a part of my organisation [the PST, Socialist Workers Party] didn't understand the dynamics of the movement and was super-sectarian in regards to Chávez. I left that organisation and I wasn't active for two years. I dedicated myself to building up the reference point. I discussed with Chávez. I was one of the first trade union leaders Chávez listened to, along with others of course. We told him about the history of the workers' movement.

But what happens? The UNT is born and for the first year it functions, but then it breaks down. Many trade union leaders coming from COPEI and AD sign up and set up a bureaucracy close to the government

What is the status of the CTV now?

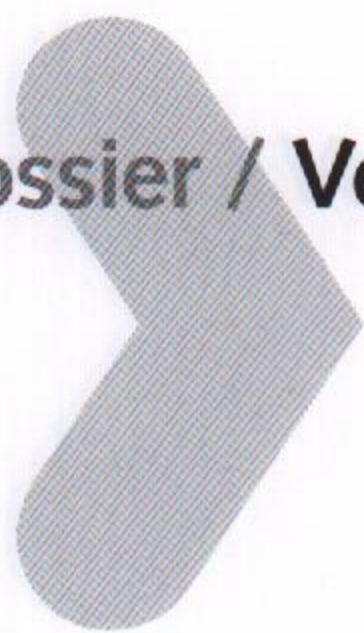
The CTV still exists, of course as a minority trade union central, much weakened. But I want to explain this little rumour from aporrea.org.net [a Venezuelan left website] and other sources. I don't have any illusions in the leadership of the CTV. At the point when it supported the 2002/3 strike-sabotage, this leadership ceased to be a workers' organisation and became a political party executing pro-imperialist policies.

But the CTV still exists – why? It organises more than a few workers in the education, health care and technology sectors. We say that the Venezuelan trade union movement is in a deep crisis: a crisis of identity, of unity, of autonomy, of everything. It's necessary to refound the trade union movement, to give it a programme that's revolutionary, socialist, based on class independence and

The Venezuelan trade union movement is in a deep crisis: a crisis of identity, of unity, of autonomy, of everything. It's necessary to refound the movement

self-determination, with a clear position on the foreign debt (because this country under the Chávez government pays the debt better than under previous ones).

This is the debate we want. If you're from the CTV and want to participate in this debate, we accept you. You have 20 minutes to explain your position. Those of the FSTB continue their policy of excluding the CTV. Now that we're



the majority trade union, we can win debates like this.

I never asked to have meetings with the CTV leadership, never. But the other currents of the UNT have been incapable of winning the trade unions of health care and education workers from the CTV. We work on this, and I go to these debates because I want to win the base. That's the clear policy. Our position is that there should be elec-

If we win the UNT elections, our policy would be to call a big congress of workers, with base delegates of all workers to unify the union movement in a single central

tions in the UNT because, as I said, it's a great conquest of the workers.

So you do favor a common central with unions currently organised in the CTV?

If we win the UNT elections, our policy would be to call a big congress of workers, with base delegates of all workers to unify the trade union movement in a single central, with a leadership legitimised by the workers themselves, elected directly via a universal and secret ballot. That would be the first time in Venezuela that we'd have a single central like that. Through discussions by the workers as a class, we could spread consciousness about what kind of government this is and what kind of country we want.

At bottom, bureaucratic sectors of the UNT want to wash their faces: they say the whole CTV is putschist etc. to distract from the fact that their own policies are the same or worse. They're not connected to the ruling class via AD, rather now it's through the PSUV.

When I came here two weeks ago, they attacked me, saying I was trying to destabilise the country by organising a strike at SIDOR and things like that. I believe that the workers of SIDOR have a right to strike and that all revolutionaries should support them, organising a national solidarity committee to build up an indefinite strike and stop anyone from entering the factory.

To repeat, I am very far from having any illusions about building up a new trade union leadership in this country together with the CTV leaders, who were putschists and seized control of the workers' movement during the confrontation. In the trade unions, they don't even hold elections. Our policies are completely different from theirs.

Moving on to the question of Chávez's new party, in your opinion, what is the character of the PSUV and how do you view the possibilities for revolutionaries working inside it?

After 24 March, 2007, when the president attacked trade union autonomy and the organisers of the PSUV attempted to carry out that policy, from that moment I said openly and firmly that I'm opposed, that I'm totally against the PSUV. Even back then, before it was founded – now it has

a programme and statutes – I said that it wasn't a revolutionary party. From the point of view of internal democracy it wasn't even clear how it was going to function; its structures had absolutely nothing to do with a Leninist party. It was profoundly anti-democratic. The process of foundation drowned any possibility of independent and revolutionary sectors participating.

That was your estimate a year ago. How do you balance the experience of the PSUV after the founding congress?

The delegates were completely knocked over by the top leaders of the government. Even though the delegates voted, the election of the national leadership was totally un-democratic. Why? The congress gave a list of 300 names to Chávez, and Chávez filtered these very well and picked 69 who could be elected. This way, even if the ones he most favoured weren't elected, there would still be people close to him.

For example, it was a progressive development that Diosdado Cabello, a leader of the right wing of the Chavistas, was not amongst the 15 principal members of the leadership, even though he was a principal cadre of Chávez (he ended up as one of the 15 alternate members of the leadership).

The general, Müller Rojas, didn't have such a good showing either, did he?

Müller Rojas was up for election, but even before the election he had already been named the first Vice-President of the party. Chávez has the power to name the Vice-Presidents – he didn't just choose the 69 candidates for the leadership, from which the congress could choose 30, he has also been given the power to name as many Vice-Presidents as he considers necessary. He divided the country in four regions and named a Vice-President for each one.

Another progressive development was that none of the military candidates ended up among the 15 principal leaders of the national leadership. But the principal leaders, who are civilians, are profoundly dependent on Chávez. One extreme example is the PSUV leader Aristóbulo Istúriz – the day after election he went on television for an interview and he said: "The people say I do what Chávez tells me to do. He is the maximum leader. What do you want me to do, what Mickey Mouse tells me to do?"

That's the main problem. But another problem is to create illusions that there's some possibility of changing the nature of this party – it's not a revolutionary party, it's a centrist party. Even the comrades of Marea Socialista⁷, people like Gonzalo Gómez who won a place as a delegate, don't have a chance to intervene in the debates.

Marea Socialista was present at the PSUV founding congress?

Marea had one single delegate, Gonzalo Gómez. That was out of a total of 1,677 delegates. As I said, the congress elected the national leadership in an anti-democratic way, and the upcoming election of regional leaderships will use the same method – the battalions elect 60 candidates which they send to the national leadership, and the national leadership picks the 15 principal and 15 alternate

members of the regional leaderships. That's the methodology. There is no debate, no possibility to present documents. Right now there's a battle going on about selecting the candidates for the elections at the end of the year, and Chávez has said that anyone who presents themselves as candidates too early will be expelled.

There is no possibility there to set up a revolutionary current, a tendency, a fraction to participate in these debates. Further, a party that is openly connected to the government can't be an instrument of the working class. We are in the phase of raising the banner for the construction of a revolutionary workers' party in Venezuela, which we will build up in the class struggle

For example, we are participating in the struggle of SIDOR, we are arguing for a workers' party. There are workers' leaders here in this state who in the past were Chavistas. Today they talk to you and say that what is happening here, day by day, makes it clear that the workers need our own party.

What are the next steps for setting up a workers' party?

Next month we have a meeting to strengthen C-CURA and we have decided to legalise our party in four states. That way, by next year we can have a national party. The four states are Aragua, Carabobo, Cojedes and Anzoátegui.

What exactly happened to C-CURA? Is the tendency divided, are there two C-CURAs or two tendencies in the same C-CURA?

To start at the beginning, C-CURA is a tendency we found ourselves forced to constitute on 18 February, 2006. The C-CURA was formed by people who were members of the PRS⁶ but also comrades of different organisations, it was a political and trade union organisation with different tendencies, including members of the MVR [Movement for the Fifth Republic] and the Tupamaros. But the fundamental cadre were broadly Trotskyist.

By 18 May, we had managed to win a majority at the UNT congress. That was a great triumph for C-CURA and it became the unquestionable majority tendency in the country, with lots of political respect. This led the government to develop a policy of destroying C-CURA.

When does the crisis in C-CURA begin? When the president introduces his project of reform, because sectors of C-CURA without a long tradition of political militancy, who were more Chavistas than Trotskyist, aligned behind Stálin Perez Borges and the Argentinean MST and the position of supporting the Chávez constitutional reform proposals. The people who came together in this way didn't have a clear programmatic identity. Their principal identification was the constitutional reform – whoever was against the reform was against Chávez, that's how they saw it.

There was no decision of C-CURA to join the PSUV. There was a meeting at which we agreed there were two political tactics. We told the minority, "if you want to go to the PSUV, then go, we believe it's necessary to build up a workers' party, and we'll work on that". If we agree on political questions then we can support a battle in the PSUV. But that's not what happened. The comrades

openly assimilated with a policy of open capitulation to Chavism.

We recognised that we had to let these people have their own experience. But this relationship broke down, and the comrades started a policy of spreading rumors in aporrea etc, saying C-CURA had decided to join the PSUV, that I wanted to join the CTV etc. These comrades did their part in the referendum campaign, expecting the "yes" vote to win easily, but the result was the exact opposite. After that, many leaders who had left us returned to C-CURA. There was a national meeting to make a balance sheet of the results and to discuss the policies for defending a great conquest of the workers which the government wants to destroy.

Well, certain leaders called on us to organise a national meeting. They came to my house with a letter, and I asked Stálin Perez Borges to sign up to a meeting. We owe it to the members to explain to them our positions about the constitutional reform and to examine them in light of the results. The results were that the right and imperialism was strengthened. The truth is that they refused to participate in this meeting – they just published a declaration about a "so-called meeting". After that, they voted to organise their current separately from C-CURA, and since then they haven't returned. You've seen they no longer use the name C-CURA. They don't use it anymore. They used to be "Marea Clasista y Socialista", now they're just the "Marea Socialista" current. Now we have many differences and I honestly believe they've given up the struggle for a revolutionary party in this country

To me it seems impossible that a trade union leader join a party with bosses and state ministers.

Of course. I said "I'm not going to join a party with exploiters, military officers and fascists." There are businessmen who violate the rights of the workers and there are corrupt state bureaucrats in the PSUV. Also there is no possibility for working at a grassroots level because there's no democracy.

The question of how to relate to Chavism – that's where the crisis in C-CURA came from. We never had a policy of entryism in Chavism. In certain moments we gave critical support to the president, for example in the last presi-

We are in the phase of raising the banner for the construction a revolutionary workers' party in Venezuela, which we will build up in the class struggle

dential elections. This was part of a tactic to maintain a dialogue with Chavista workers. But we always fought for workers' political independence.

There were two big mobilisations, on 15 July 2006 and 8 February 2007, right in front of the Miraflores palace. These mobilisations were against joint ventures. There were up to 10,000 workers protesting and their demands included

an emergency increase in salaries and workers' control – which meant an objective opposition to Chavism. But unfortunately, some comrades couldn't resist the pressure of Chavism and gave up independent class politics.

At this moment in Venezuela, when the overwhelming majority of the working class still has strong illusions

It is ridiculous to think of this government as revolutionary. Workers' control of industry doesn't exist, and even cogestión is under-developed

in the Chávez government, do you think the call for a workers' party will have a serious resonance?

Yes, and the problem is as follows. We are not talking about the presidential elections. Today's Chavismo isn't even half of yesterday's Chavismo. He still has 45% support, but it used to be over 70%. The most important thing I'm going to tell you is this – there is a strong resistance from below, and there are strong sympathies for leaders who fight. I'm not saying that Chávez isn't a popular figure – he enjoys the support of 45% while all other political figures are around 8%, 10%, 12% . . . But the problem today is that the polls are predicting Chavismo will lose something like eight governorships

So it's important that workers who are becoming disillusioned have a left alternative, so they don't have to switch to the right?

Exactly. It's important to build our party. The people who are disillusioned with Chávez aren't running to the opposition. This has opened a big political space which, in our opinion, can be filled with a great sympathy for revolutionary positions. For example, I'm from the state of Carabobo, and Chavismo is in a terrible crisis – the governor is constantly losing support. That's why we believe it's very important to create our party and offer an alternative for the workers.

What would you say about the class character of the Venezuelan government? Internationally there have been many debates, some Marxists calling it a bourgeois government – as I would – other a workers' and peasants' government, a "hybrid" government or one of indefinite class character.

Obviously it's a bourgeois government, totally capitalist. We characterise the government as a form of bonapartism *sui generis* [of a special kind], in which the government has to mobilise the masses, but in order to defend the class interests of the bourgeoisie. It is ridiculous to think of this government as revolutionary. Workers' control of industry doesn't exist, and even *cogestión* [co-management] is under-developed. You can see the capitalist nature of the government here in the SIDOR conflict, where the national guard – directly under the control of the President

– repressed the workers and destroyed 53 of their private cars. Of course it's a bourgeois government.

So how do you respond to the talk about the "Venezuelan revolution"?

From a classic point of view, there's no revolution. There have been important conquests by the people, won via their mobilisations – missions like "Barrio Adentro", literacy campaigns, etc. But these conquests don't necessarily lead to abolishing capitalism. Just fixing the bathrooms in a school doesn't mean we're living in socialism. If you don't advance, expropriating industry, then corruption and bureaucracy will grow and the capitalist system will be strengthened.

So is there a possibility of changing things by struggle from below? The problem is that the communal councils are managed by the state bureaucracy and the PSUV. They are organs of control, not self-organisation. If you work for a state institution, for example, and raise some problems in your communal council, you can face repression from your employer and the council's funds can be cut. That's how these communal councils work. But if you're referring to projects of workers' councils, I can repeat what I said before – if these projects emerge from the workers and peasants themselves, if it's an autonomous instrument they created, obviously we should participate – a revolutionary party should try to win such councils for its perspective.

What kinds of developments do you expect in the coming year? Will there be increasing conflicts between the Chávez government and its social base?

If the strike of SIDOR wins, there will be a political crisis in the country. It's not that I expect conflicts – we are in the midst of conflicts right now. It's everywhere – in the streets, in the hospitals that don't work. Just yesterday there was a strike in an office of the Labour Ministry. The workers shut it down spontaneously. Workers in the oil sector are watching what happens at SIDOR, because if you remember the government imposed a collective contract on them with very few improvements, a very bad contract. They got a raise of 30 Strong Bolívares for the next two years, but they had been demanding 45. The electricity plants are involved in a huge strike right now. The government had to make some retreats because the trade unions made lots of protests – well they're Chavistas but they are also class-based. They fight. The workers in the aluminum sector are also beginning a struggle.

So you see this as a new stage in the class struggle which is beginning?

Trade union leaders who are close to the government keep losing support. Just look at the hatred for the Labour Minister.

So the struggle for a revolutionary workers' party is a question of the coming months?

I agree, but remember, we want to build the party by being the best fighters for the workers in this country. But we can't limit ourselves to the trade union struggle. Two years ago, when Chavismo was much stronger, it was

much more difficult to explain to the workers the need for a political instrument, not just for trade union struggles, but also for political struggles. But the experiences of SIDOR, the conditions of slavery and the repression by the government are elevating the workers' political consciousness.

Why are we doing this now? One reason is that the state elections are approaching, and in the course of the

electoral struggle there are people who want to become active. You can be the best fighter amongst the workers, but it's important to present them with a political party they can support.

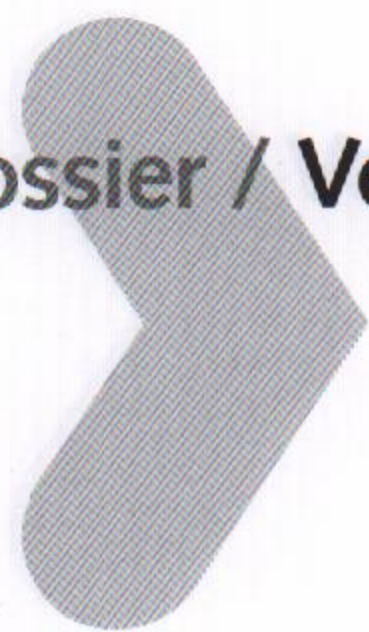
Thanks for all this information.

You're welcome. I hope I could clear up, in English, those rumours regarding me and the CTV.

ENDNOTES

- 1. C-CURA, "Class Unity Revolutionary and Autonomous Current", was a far left current within the UNT which at one time formed a majority of the UNT leadership.
- 2. The Bolivarian Socialist Workers Force (FSBT) is a tendency within the UNT. It played a major role in fragmenting the UNT at its second congress in May 2006, opposing leadership elections in the UNT leadership as a "distraction" from campaigning to re-elect Chavez. José Ramón Rivero, a leader of the FSBT, became Labour Minister using his position to further his trade union faction's position and becoming increasingly unpopular as he tried to undermine the workers on strike at SIDOR. In the middle of April he and the FSBT announced at a press conference that they were forming a new trade union federation and that workers should leave the UNT. Within days Chavez sacked Rivero and replaced him with Roberto Manuel Hernández, a former member of the Venezuelan Communist Party.
- 3. Chirino is referring to the PST (Socialist Workers Party) the Venezuelan section of the LIT-CL, a Morenoite grouping that was dissolved in 1999.
- 4. Caudillo is the Latin American term for a cult-like leader - often but not always military.

- 5. Bonapartist - where a strong leader rules the country appearing to be independent of the interests of the main social classes whilst, in fact, ruling on behalf of the bourgeoisie.
- 6. The Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV) was the old bureaucratic and corrupt trade union movement, which was in the pocket of the old governmental parties swept away by the electoral landslide that brought Chavez to power. The CTV actively supported first the April 2002 coup against Chavez and then the lockout launched by the bosses at the end of 2002 to try and oust him from power. While the CTV still exists amongst sectors of workers it has never recovered its former influence.
- 7. Marea Socialista ("Socialist Tide") is a tendency inside the PSUV which is also part of C-CURA. Led by, amongst others, Stalin Pérez Borges, it disagreed with the majority of C-CURA which was against joining the Chavez party.
- 8. The Party of Revolution and Socialism (PRS) was a still-born attempt to form a revolutionary organisation. It was initiated in the second half of 2005 by many of the leaders and members of C-CURA, including Chirino and Stalin Perez Borges, but it never cohered as a properly founded organisation.



'The end of one phase and the beginning of a new one ...'

Impressions from a month in the Venezuelan class struggle

EVERY FIVE years or so young leftists from the west, bored by the slow pace of the class struggle in the imperialist heartlands, pack their bags and head off to some distant corner of the globe. In this particular corner, Venezuela, social revolution is rumoured to hang in the air like pollen. The struggle for fundamental change in the midst of capitalist decadence can seem daunting, depressing, senseless; the endless fight to reach a working class dominated by social democracy and passivity, the dry ideological struggles at the university amongst students worried about their careers. It's just too tempting to take a break from all this and go somewhere where the revolution is, y'know, in full gear.

In the 1980s the Mecca of the young leftists was Nicaragua, in the 1990s it became Chiapas in Mexico and after 2000 it was Argentina. Now, the left wing Hajj can't lead anywhere but Venezuela. The key words change with the geography – "Sandinista", "Zapatista", "Piquetero", "Bolivariano" – but the idea is basically the same everywhere; the mass anti-imperialist struggles create opportunities for political organisation, alternative education and creative projects that are hard to find elsewhere. In the case of Venezuela, most activists head out to the slums above Caracas and get involved in the activities of the urban poor. They offer English courses, paint murals, work at community

radio stations and do similar projects. They are generally infatuated with the "Bolivarian Revolution".

As a Berlin-based leftist, it wasn't unusual to be sitting in a café and run into some well known activist's face: "Oh, you're here too?"

The contradictions

But a number of activists learn that the "Bolivarian revolution" does not live up to the hype. Some even notice that there's not much of a revolution at all. What shocks a left wing visitor to Venezuela most is the wealth – the almost unimaginable wealth of an oil state, proudly on display in Caracas in the form of gargantuan shopping malls and polished SUVs as far as the eye can see. Of course, this wealth is in the middle of equally unimaginable poverty – the slums on the hills around Caracas are juxtaposed with the steel-and-glass high rises.

Chávez won the presidential elections in 1998 with 56% of the votes. Since then he has won at least eight more national elections by ample majorities, and maintains the support of Venezuela's poor masses. But, after nearly ten years in power, discontent is growing within Chávez's social base – despite the record-breaking oil price (which has actually quintupled in the last decade!) and all the



talk of “21st century socialism”, terrible poverty continues to exist alongside tremendous wealth. The inflation rate of almost 30% means that workers’ wages must be stretched just to buy basic foodstuffs, which are in any case in short supply. It’s not that the pro-Chavista masses are angry at Chávez, but there is growing anger directed at Chavista mayors, governors, ministers etc, who are accused of bureaucratism and corruption. (One thinks involuntarily of the peasants in the Soviet Union enraged by some local bureaucrat: “If only Stalin new about this!”)

In short, the social base of the Chávez government is becoming wobbly. In the elections at the end of the year, the opposition has a realistic chance of taking over a number of city and state governments. The opposition politicians have turned up their social demagoguery a notch, feigning concern about the lack of rice and beans on the shelves in the slums. In this situation, El Presidente has again needed to radicalise the content of his speeches in order to keep his supporters on his side. (The half-Chavista, half-Trotskyist International Marxist Tendency recently certified that Chávez speech on 1 May 2008 was his “most radical speech ever”!)

Proletarian awakening

The working class has so far only played a marginal role in the “Bolivarian process”. Only in times of crisis, such as the bosses’ “strike” in late 2002 and early 2003, when the workers’ of the oil industry organised themselves and managed to keep the oil production running despite a lock-out by management, has the power of the working class been easily visible. But even in this case, as soon as the workers had shown that they were capable of running industry themselves – and that workers’ control was central to the struggle against the counter-revolution – the government moved in and ended all workers’ control “experiments” in the oil industry, putting all of its faith in a new class of loyal Chavista bureaucrats.

A common misconception about the process in Venezuela is that the working class makes up an insignificant minority of society. Venezuela solidarity activists tend to claim that either the poor masses in the slums or the peasants in the countryside are the majority of the population, and therefore the true revolutionary subject. But, as Chávez himself admits, Venezuela has very low agricultural production and peasants make up a small part of the population.¹ The slum dwellers, far from being some kind of new social class who are outside the production process, work to a large extent below the slums, down in the cities. A worker at the Ministry of Labour claimed that of Venezuela’s 24-27 million inhabitants, around 12 million sell their labour in order to survive (the most classical definition of proletarians), and of these, seven million have a regular, salaried job (but not necessarily a contract).

The working class will be decisive for the further development in Venezuela. When the alliance between the “patriotic” sectors of the bourgeoisie and the masses grouped around the left-bonapartist government of Chávez begins to splinter in the coming months or years, the working class can intervene and resolve the crisis by imposing

their own rule in the form of a workers’ government. But for this to happen all efforts need to be directed towards building up an independent political force of the working class, a point which I have made in an earlier article in *Permanent Revolution*.²

Wladek Flakin, REVOLUTION,
Independent Youth Organisation

A lunch with Venezuela’s “socialist businessmen”

Caracas, 13 April 2008

VENEZUELA’S PRESIDENT Hugo Chávez, who refers to himself a “Bolivarian socialist”, has called for alliances with the national bourgeoisie. He has even called on nationalist businessmen to participate in the “Venezuelan revolution”. But have these businessmen answered the call?

The majority of Venezuela’s capitalists are fiercely opposed to the Chávez government, as they’ve shown in two attempted coups. But there is also an important sector of the bourgeoisie that supports the government, expecting high profits from its policies of reducing dependence on imperialism by developing national industries. Who are these capitalists? What do they think about the situation in Venezuela?

To answer these questions, I visited a “technical round table” hosted by the “Association of Businessmen for Venezuela”, better known by the informal name “Association of Socialist Businessmen”. At the meeting, which took place in a chic bar in Caracas’s most expensive shopping mall, businessmen and the press could exchange their experiences

doing business under the “socialist government”. No expense had been spared to woo visitors: there was fresh-pressed melon juice, filet mignon on toothpicks, little cakes brought around by waiters – and at night, as one of the young assistants told me, this bar was the best disco in the city.

This businessmen’s association was founded during the bosses’ lock-out (sometimes referred to as a “strike”) in December 2002. This adventurist attempt to topple the Chávez government failed, but not without doing great damage to the national economy. A group of middle-sized businessmen, including a few directors of large corporations, made the call – “No to the strike! Yes to work!” – and the association was born. At the beginning it had 3,000 members; today more than 300,000 mostly small and middle-sized businesses have signed up.

I spoke for a while with Dr Uzcátegui, president of the association, and my first question was of course: “Socialist businessmen? Isn’t that a bit contradictory?” but he was used to the question: “We need to be more precise. The government is talking

about socialism of the 21st century, which is neither dogmatic nor reformist. It's a nationalist socialism, a Venezuelan socialism, which is being built with all social sectors, including businessmen."

I mentioned that Chávez is often attacked in the international press for restricting the free market, and Uzcátegui replied: "The state needs to regulate, to control the economy. The traditional businessmen have a mentality which is neoliberal and speculative, not productive. This mentality can't run free, it needs to be controlled. We support the economic model of the government, which has been successful. Traditional businessmen are losing influence, which is why they want to destabilise the government. But we aim for an integration of the private sector with the Bolivarian government."

Our talk was interrupted by a round of presentations. A representative of a chemical manufacturer explained how he was going to a business conference in Shanghai with the help of the Venezuelan labour ministry. Then I had to present myself from the stage as well: "We have a friend, a journalist from Germany, here." I'm not much of a public speaker: "Yes, uh, thanks, uh, for the food . . ."

When we continued, I asked about the strategic vision of the "patriotic capitalists", and Uzcátegui presented a vision very similar to that of Chávez himself: transforming the economic model of the country, towards more distribution of wealth, less exploitation, more production and less monopolies. He referred to this goal repeatedly as "socialist production". "Economic power is still very important in Venezuela, and it's the old oligarchy that has this power and is running a media campaign to mis-interpret the policies of the government." Breaking the oligarchy's economic power was his goal, even if it was "the most difficult sector of the revolution".

About the government's policies of nationalisations, Uzcátegui said they were supported by the businessmen's association, for

example the recent announcement of the nationalisation of the steel works SIDOR. "These businesses have all been strategic, and the nationalisations have benefited thousands of other businesses." At the same time, he said the word "nationalisation" wasn't quite right, since the businesses have been bought at a market price by the government. "The government and the multinational corporation sit down at a table and work out a deal that's acceptable to both sides. In the case of [the Caracas phone company] CANTV, for example, there wasn't one complaint by the shareholders. The government was excessively fair, paying 480 million for the company."

Finally, I asked if the "socialist businessmen" were concerned about a radicalisation of the Chavista movement - after all, there are some sectors behind the president who call for the complete nationalisation of the economy. But Uzcátegui isn't worried at all: the country has a "common leader who's strong" in the person of Chávez (who meets with the "socialist businessmen" at least once a month) who will ensure that the government's policies don't hurt business interests. Chávez' main accomplishment was, in the words

of the business leader, "reforming nationalism", with policies which have strengthened the "productive business sector" (i.e. the small and middle-sized bourgeoisie).

The "Association of Businessmen for Venezuela" (in Spanish, EMPREVEN) is growing rapidly, at the expense of the traditional and virulently anti-Chávez association, FEDECAMERAS. The name means simply the "Federation of Local Chambers of Commerce", and more and more of these chambers which make up FEDECAMERAS are switching over to EMPREVEN.

The Chávez government's policies of national development, reversing earlier privatisations with profits from the oil industry and giving credits to small and not-so-small businesses, are creating a new bourgeoisie which is loyal to the regime. The Chávez project - and here I, as a Marxist, agree with a representative of the capitalists - is a project of developing a strong, independent economy in Venezuela which is based on private property.

Dr. Uzcátegui summarised our talk: "It's a great time to do business in Venezuela. Fantastic, even." The motto on the fliers of the association says it all: "To transform Venezuela into a world power."

SIDOR's steel workers fight owners and Chavez police

31 March 2008

ON 14 March Venezuelan police brutally attacked a demonstration by thousands of striking steel workers from the SIDOR factory.

The "Bolivarian National Guard" arrested 53 workers, injured more than a dozen with rubber bullets and even smashed up 51 cars with batons. This repression was directed

against a three day strike by the SIDOR workers, part of an ongoing struggle over the last 15 months.

SIDOR, Latin America's biggest steel works, is located in the city Ciudad Guyana in the state of Bolívar. More than 13,000 workers are demanding a new collective

Hugo Chávez has been largely silent about the SIDOR conflict: even now, two weeks after the brutal repression, he has not distanced himself from it

contract with wage increases and improvements in working conditions.

SIDOR was privatised in 1998 by the government of Rafael Caldera. Currently it is controlled by the Argentinean multinational Ternium-Sidor, which is part of the consortium Techint. Ternium owns 60% of the factory, 20% belongs to the state of Bolívar and 20% belongs to the 15,000 workers who were employed at the factory at the time of privatisation.

In the nine years since privatisation working conditions have become worse and worse – 19 workers have died on the job! On 25 March, a 52 year old worker died of a heart attack. His station, which used to be run by three workers, is now maintained by a single worker thanks to “rationalisation”. This death provoked a further 72-hour strike by the SIDOR workers.

The strike was decided at an emergency workers' assembly on the evening of the death, without any leaders of the trade union present; they had also missed the spontaneous assemblies before the three day strike on 13 March and the one day strike on 24 March. The latest strike included a 5,000 strong demonstration through Ciudad Guyana.

The workers and their trade union SUTISS (United Trade Union of Steel Workers and Similar Industries) are demanding not only a collective contract but also the re-nationalisation of the steel works,

since in the last few years the Venezuelan government has talked a lot about reversing privatisations.

Less than one-third of the workers at SIDOR have a secure job. The other two-thirds are employed on temporary contracts and have significantly fewer rights (vacation,

housing benefits, job security etc). A further demand of the current struggle is to win permanent contracts for all workers.

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has been largely silent about the SIDOR conflict: even now, two weeks after the brutal repression, he has not distanced himself from

the actions of the National Guard or responded to the demands for nationalisation. The Chávez government doesn't want to jeopardise its good relations with Argentinean government of Cristina Kirchner, which stands behind the Techint corporation.

“If this were a Yankee company, the government would have re-nationalised it long ago,” the workers' representatives complain. José Melendez, from the executive committee of SUTISS, argued that “what's good for the rooster is good for the hen”, referring to the need to nationalise all multinational corporations. “In Venezuela we talk about socialism, but our leaders should tell us what socialism they mean, since the capitalists continue to do as they wish at the expense of the workers.”

The strikers' most well known banner made the same point: “Chávez, rampant capitalism is present in SIDOR”. The “Trade Union Alliance”, a left wing list

APRIL STATEMENT

Solidarity with the workers of SIDOR!

FOR THE last 15 months the workers of the Venezuelan steel works SIDOR have been fighting for a new collective contract and the re-nationalisation of the factory. There have been at least eight strikes, multiple demonstrations and a national assembly of solidarity. On 14 March a demonstration by SIDOR workers was brutally attacked by the national police, leaving more than 50 workers under arrest and more than a dozen injured.

We denounce this repression, an act by Venezuela's capitalist state (even though the government calls itself “socialist”) to silence the legitimate demands of the workers. The solution to the workers' problems lies in the

expropriation of the multinational corporation Ternium-Sidor, not under the control of the state bureaucracy but under the control of the workers themselves. A victory of the SIDOR workers will inspire workers across Venezuela and Latin America to fight for their interests. Therefore, we say:

- › Solidarity with the workers of the SIDOR steel works!
- › For the nationalisation of SIDOR under workers' control!
- › For socialist revolution in Venezuela and across the world!

8 April 2008
REVOLUTION – independent youth organisation, RSO, Permanent Revolution

within SUTISS (of which Melendez is a representative), pointed out in a flyer that a presidential decree gave the temporary workers at the state-owned oil company PDVSA permanent contracts. Their flyer continued: "We demand the President treats us the same as the workers of PDVSA."

But the government has so far been largely on the side of the

committee. Cruz Bello, also from the executive committee, talked about the need for a political party of the working class to fight for workers' interests in conflicts like the current one. Many SIDORistas felt that the government's backing for the owners in this conflict will significantly reduce its support in the industrial region around Ciudad Guyana, which up till now

Oscar Figuera arrived at the very end of the assembly and spoke for 45 minutes in an attempt to cool the discontent with Chávez. He explained that "the main enemy isn't the national government, it's the multinational corporation" and "we need to define the main enemy so we can win allies, we can't drive the government away with too much criticism". But as this point he was interrupted by angry workers who interjected, "But they're defending capitalism!"

The assembly in support of the SIDOR struggle was just one expression of the growing alienation between the Chávez government and the Venezuelan workers. After nine years in power, Chávez' "Bolivarian revolution" hasn't brought about fundamental changes to the economy, and the daily life of Venezuela's workers still consists of "rampant capitalism". Many activists see the struggle at SIDOR as a possible turning point, when the working class will take up an independent role in Venezuelan politics.

Orlando Chirino, a national coordinator of the National Workers' Union (UNT), expressed this clearly at the assembly: "If the SIDOR workers win, this anti-worker Labor Minister will fall in a few minutes. If the SIDOR workers win, the workers in the public sector will win their struggle. If the SIDOR workers win, the fight for trade union autonomy will win."

In this spirit, the assembly passed a resolution agreeing to form a solidarity committee for SIDOR and demanding the president speak up about the repression of 14 March.

The night before the national meeting, there had been a big solidarity festival in a park on the Orinoco river. Up to 1,000 workers and their families came to listen to music and speeches to draw strength for the struggle ahead. Messages of solidarity arrived from all over Venezuela and Latin America, including a declaration by Argentinian train workers describing their struggles against Techint and the need for a united struggle of the workers against multinational corporations.

At a national meeting to build a solidarity campaign for SIDOR the mood amongst trade union leaders and workers was quite hostile to the "socialist government"

bosses. Labor Minister José Ramón Rivero first tried to install an "arbitration council", a body hand-picked by himself which would decide on a solution to the conflict that the workers would have to accept. The workers rejected this proposal entirely.

Then the minister tried to impose a "referendum", a vote of all the SIDOR workers about the owners' latest offer, organised by the National Electoral Council. Again, this proposal was rejected as state interference in the sovereign decision-making processes of the trade unions.

Labor Minister Rivero has earned the hatred of the SIDORistas. Melendez commented: "They shouldn't call him the Minister of Labor but rather the Minister of the Owners!" But President Chávez, who is very popular amongst Venezuelan workers, is also subject to mounting criticism.

At a national meeting to build a solidarity campaign for SIDOR, in Ciudad Guyana on 29 March, the mood amongst the 200 or so trade union leaders and workers from all over Venezuela was quite hostile to the "socialist government".

"I've been at SIDOR for 30 years and I've never seen this kind of repression, not even in the Fourth Republic [the Venezuelan Republic until 1998]" said José Rodríguez from the SUTISS executive

has been a bastion of "Chavismo".

The lawyer representing SUTISS took this thought even further: "On 14 March - precisely on the anniversary of the death of Karl Marx - when President Chávez was talking about Marx and the proletarians, the National Guard, which is under the command of the president, was attacking protests by the proletariat. Even in the strike of 1971, which I supported back then as a law student, I haven't seen such repression . . . Even if it does write 'socialist' on its forehead, the bourgeoisie still needs to repress the working class."

At the solidarity meeting the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) sought to reconcile support for the SIDOR workers with sympathy for the government. The PCV's first representative who spoke declared that the struggle at SIDOR should be "the spark that sets Venezuela ablaze" and explained that the repression by the police was because the "state in Venezuela is essentially a state at the service of the bourgeoisie. We must destroy it and construct popular power!"

But at the same time, he said the fight for the victory of the SIDORistas and the destruction of the state would be "side by side with the Bolivarian government", i.e. with the leadership of the state that's repressing the workers!

The PCV's Secretary General

The nationalisation of the Venezuelan SIDOR steelworks is a victory for the workers

Caracas, 20 April 2008

IN THE early hours of Wednesday 9 April, Venezuela's Vice-President Ramon Carrizalez announced that the SIDOR steelworks in the city, Ciudad Guyana, would be nationalised by the government. At this moment, negotiations are going on between the Venezuelan government and Techint about the sale price of the shares, and Techint is expected to keep a 20% share of the company.

This announcement is in the first place a victory for the 15,000 SIDORistas, who for the last fifteen months have been fighting for higher wages, better working conditions and permanent contracts for the 9,000 temporary workers in the plant. They have also been demanding the re-nationalisation of SIDOR, which was privatised in 1998.

The conflict escalated this year, with nine strikes in the first four months of 2008, as well as national solidarity meetings and demonstrations in Ciudad Guyana. More than once the workers' suffered brutal repression at the hands of the Bolivarian National Guard.

The SIDOR workers greeted the government's announcement last Wednesday with a massive celebration that very morning, and the local trade union leaders outdid each other in praising Chávez and his government. They conveniently forgot their own harsh criticism of just a few weeks earlier and, more importantly, they ignored the fact that the surprising decision in favour of nationalisation was not some gift from the Commandante en Jefe, but rather a reaction to a

particularly determined struggle by the workers.

At the same time, the announcement was a blow for Venezuela's Labour Minister José Ramón Rivero (who was a Trotskyist militant until the late 1990s and still sometimes refers to himself with that term) who, from the beginning of the conflict, had intervened on the side of the bosses. On April 15, a week after the nationalisation was announced, Chávez removed him from his post. This was a genuine "Chronicle of a Death Foretold", since even in the final negotiations between the government, the SIDOR management and the workers, the government was no longer represented by the Labour Minister

pro-business attitude of government was leading to fissures in the social base of Chavismo. A national meeting of trade union leaders in Ciudad Guyana on March 25 was filled with criticism of the government, sharper than any time in the last nine years. Many working class activists felt that the struggle at SIDOR could lead to a break between the Chávez government and the working class vanguard. It's clear that the government saw things exactly the same way, and made a surprising 180-degree turn in its policies towards SIDOR. At the same time, this decision can also be seen as part of a long term shift towards a stronger focus on developing national industry in Venezuela,

The conflict escalated this year, with nine strikes in the first four months of 2008, as well as national solidarity meeting and demonstrations in Ciudad Guyana

but rather by the Vice-President Rivero.

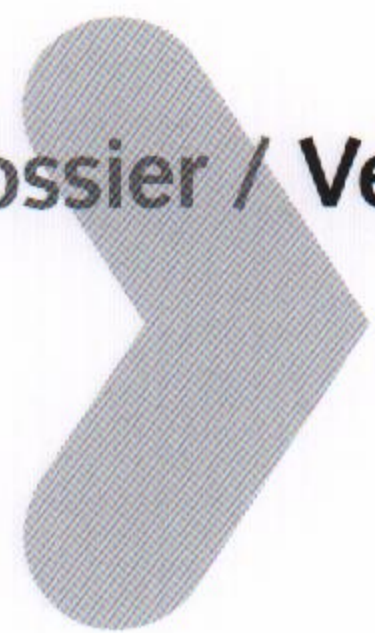
Rivero is hated by more or less the entire workers' movement in Venezuela, including the members of his own trade union tendency, the Bolivarian Socialist Workers' Force (FSBT). His pro-business position was most clear during the conflict at the ceramics factory Sanitarios de Maracay, where he steadfastly refused the workers' demands for the nationalisation of their plant.

The conflict at SIDOR and the

which requires a reliable supply of raw materials like steel.

Several things are clear from the SIDOR struggle: the Chávez government still has plenty of room to manoeuvre – with oil at over \$100 a barrel, it still has plenty of money to finance its development projects and buy the support of the workers' movement.

A break between Chávez and a significant sector of the workers has been averted – for now. But the fundamental problems of the SIDOR workers have not been



solved: the 9,000 temporary workers still need permanent jobs and the 4,000 permanent workers still need a large raise just to match an inflation of almost 30% per year.

The government isn't questioning the "right" of a multinational corporation to own at least 20% of the steel plant, and in no nationalised factory in Venezuela has the "socialist" government allowed full-scale workers' control, as demanded by the SIDOR workers.

So the struggle at SIDOR is not over. The course of the struggle up till now shows that the workers cannot rely on Chávez government to defend their interests. They must force its hand by organising,

demonstrating and striking – and defending themselves against the "Bolivarian" police and the "socialist" state bureaucracy. The government's policies of developing a national industry in Venezuela (a task which big bourgeoisie has ignored for the last century) are a long way from "socialism" and are not in the long term interest of the workers.

The workers in Venezuela need to build up their own revolutionary party, independent of capitalists and state bureaucrats, in order to consistently defend both their immediate class interests and also the strategic goal of abolishing capitalism.

Venezuelan industry. The workers point out that the government runs a huge housing project, Petrocasa, which needs 18,000 bathrooms this year alone. But the government gave the contract to the other big ceramics factory in Maracay, which is a normal capitalist business.

Over nine months the struggle at Sanitarios Maracay slowly ran out of steam and money. The hard line of the Bolivarian government demoralised a large number of workers who had counted on support from their government:

"We've had visitors from the US, Germany, France, Korea and all over the world. The only person who hasn't visited is Chávez, even though he lived only 90 kilometers away" comments José Villegas, one of the strike leaders.

By 10 August 2007 it was possible for a co-ordinated action of the Labour Ministry, the trade union bureaucracy and the administrative personnel of the factory to depose the strike committee and convince a majority of the workers to accept a settlement. They got at least 3,000 Strong Bolívares each (about US\$1,400) and ended the occupation.

Only a small minority of workers decided to continue the struggle – about 60 in total (down from the 600 who began the occupation nine months earlier).

In December, they occupied a small production installation just across the street from the main complex, where plastic parts for the bathroom products were produced. In the last six months they have been producing toilet seats,

The struggle at Sanitarios Maracay continues

SANITARIOS MARACAY is a factory that produces ceramic bathroom products, located in the Venezuelan state of Aragua. The factory's name has become synonymous with a heroic workers' struggle and the massive contradictions that exist between the workers' movement and the "socialist" government in Venezuela.

Sanitarios Maracay is a huge factory, which employed as many as 1,000 workers and controlled around 70% of the Venezuelan market for bathroom fixtures, producing up to 2,500 complete bathrooms per week. But the business went into a downward spiral in 2003 and eventually the owner filed for bankruptcy.

When he announced that all workers were to be fired and re-hired under significantly worse conditions in November 2006, they occupied the factory and began

producing under workers' control.

From the outset the position of the Venezuelan government towards the occupation was hostile. The government had previously nationalised a number of businesses which had been abandoned by their owners, for example the factories Inveval and Invepal. But the Labor

The government had previously nationalised a number of businesses which had been abandoned by their owners, for example Inveval and Invepal

Minister José Ramón Rivero consistently rejected demands for nationalisation of Sanitarios Maracay, arguing that the business simply wasn't "strategic" for

plungers and similar products and selling them on the street.

In the last year there has been little information about Sanitarios Maracay in the English-speaking



left. This is principally because most reports had been published by the "International Marxist Tendency" of Alan Woods, whose strategic goal was a negotiated settlement between the workers and the government.

As the government refused to negotiate and the confrontations intensified – the state forces brutally attacked workers going to Caracas for a demonstration in April 2007, and the workers of Maracay responded with a regional general strike – the IMT group decided to withdraw. "The people from FRETECO [the IMT's trade union front] don't come around anymore" said Marco Pacheco, one of the leaders of the occupiers.

"They've got a very friendly position with the government." The IMT's Chavismo goes so far that they blame the workers for the fact that the government didn't nationalise the plant – they argue that the regional general strike scared off the well-meaning "revolutionary" government!

The workers of Sanitarios Maracay desperately need solidarity in order to maintain production. Spread information and collect funds in support of the occupation!

BACKGROUND LINKS

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanitarios_Maracay
<http://www.marxist.com/sanitarios-maracay-balance-sheet.htm>

election of the PSUV's national leadership at the founding congress one month ago. The 60 members who received the most votes would form a list of possible candidates. Then the national leadership would select from these 60 the 15 members and 15 alternates of the regional co-ordination. "I don't like it either, but that's the way it is" was all the battalion's spokesman could say about the process.

This electoral farce shows the truth behind the repeated claims by the Chavez government that the PSUV is being built "from the bottom up". It also shows how little power the members of the PSUV have to oppose these bureaucratic structures; at the PSUV founding congress, hundreds of delegates signed a letter of protest against the process of selection (not election) of the national leadership. But this protest has obviously had no effect, as a similar process was used at the regional level.

The most notable thing about the battalion's meeting was its composition. Chavez announced the formation of the "Socialist Battalions" as bodies of roughly 200 PSUV members each. The election meeting of Battalion No 13 was attended by just 23 – and this is no exception.

The only people under 30 were two young children of PSUV members and one "Chavotrotskyist" from the tendency "El Militante" (linked to the IMT). The only worker who was active in a trade union explained that he had been attending these meetings "since way back when this used to be called the MVR." Many analysts from the international left want to see a qualitative shift between Chavez' old, bourgeois nationalist party, the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR), and his new party, the PSUV, but many members of these parties recognise the continuity.

To put this in numbers – when the PSUV was formed, it claimed six million members. Only about 15% of these six million, or 900,000 people, ever attended a PSUV meeting. And six months later, only about 10-15% of these 900,000 –

Impressions of a socialist battalion meeting of the PSUV

ON SUNDAY 5 April the members of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) voted for the 24 regional co-ordinations of their party. The "Socialist Battalions", the base units of the PSUV, met up all over the country. I attended the assembly of the "Socialist Battalion Number 13" near the Plaza La Concordia in Caracas. The meeting took place in a long, narrow loft where the fans swinging back and forth on the walls couldn't do much against the exhausting heat. "The temperature in this hall helps to keep meetings short" was the comment of one PSUV member.

I had been expecting a large, city-

wide assembly of delegates to elect the local leadership, but instead there were only meetings of the neighbourhood groups. The members in attendance were instructed to each write three names on a slip of paper. The lack of an assembly meant it was impossible for candidates to present themselves, so most of the time was spent discussing questions of eligibility: "Is he a member of the PSUV in Caracas? Does he already have a party function somewhere else?"

The election process was just as ridiculously undemocratic as the



100,000 or so – are still active.

The PSUV, with 100,000 active members, is of course a mass party. But it's not the totally-super-gigantic-mass party that many expected the PSUV to be – in fact it's not larger, relative to the size of the population, than most social democratic parties in Europe. This might explain the lack of success of the left wing groups that dissolved in order to enter the PSUV and work inside it. Of the more than 1,600 delegates at the founding congress, the tendency "El Militante" had just seven; the group "Marea Socialista", which includes a number of well known trade union leaders, had one single delegate.

In a conversation after the meeting, the member of the tendency "El Militante" who was present explained: "I think the PSUV is a bureaucratic instrument

for the government to control the masses. I can say that to you, but I can't say that to the masses in the PSUV, because they wouldn't understand it. They see the PSUV as a democratic instrument to transform the country."

Well, I agree with the first part of what this "El Militante" activist said, but in contrast to him I think the masses can and must understand that the PSUV is not an instrument to fight for socialism. But for them to understand it, Marxists inside and outside the PSUV will need to present their views openly. If the PSUV members want socialism they'll need to create their own revolutionary, socialist party, independent of "socialist" businessmen and the "Bolivarian" state bureaucracy.

and participate in the state elections at the end of the year.

These elections could be decisive for the whole Chavista project. Chávez remains very popular throughout Venezuela, but there is a growing discontent with the day-to-day realities of "21st century socialism", which is expressed as increasing frustration with local functionaries.

Concretely this means the government camp could lose the governorships in up to a third of Venezuela's 24 states to the opposition. In this situation the leaders of the USI want to present a political alternative to the left of Chávez so that disillusioned workers don't abstain – as happened in the referendum on the constitutional reform – or support the opposition. This is why they are working to have the party legalised in a number of states as a step towards becoming a national party. The founding congress of the USI is scheduled for this summer.

The name of the new party is "certainly not ideal", as Miguel Angel Hernández admits. However, Venezuela's electoral laws prohibit parties from mentioning "social sectors" in their names, so for instance the word "workers" cannot be used in its title. The original name proposed for the new party was the "Party of the Socialist Left" but the Electoral Council instead gave them the name Socialist Unity of the Left.

There has been some preparatory work for the formation of a workers' party – for example, the regional congress of the UNT in Aragua last year voted for the creation of a political instrument of the working class. But there has so far been no big campaign of workers' assemblies to discuss the new party. Indeed the activists initiating the USI don't believe it's the moment for a mass workers' party in Venezuela. Only a tiny vanguard has broken from Chavismo, and while larger breaks are inevitable, this will not necessarily happen in the coming weeks and months. The USI is conceived as an instrument to intervene when significant sectors of the working class move to the left of the Chávez government.

Socialist Unity of the Left

WHILE ALL eyes in Venezuela and internationally are focused on the government's new party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), steps are being taken to form a new party based exclusively on the working class.

In late April, the National Electoral Council (CEN) legalised a regional party in the state of Aragua. As Richard Gallardo, a national co-ordinator of the trade union federation UNT, explained, this new party, the Socialist Unity of the Left (USI), aims to construct "an authentic party of the Venezuelan workers who are committed to the revolutionary process, in struggle against imperialism, multinational corporations, businessmen and big landowners, in defence of national sovereignty and for the construction of a revolutionary socialist society free of exploiters

and oppressors."

The initiative for the new party is supported by well-known activists like Orlando Chirino, national coordinator of the UNT, José Bodas, general secretary of the oil workers' union in Anzoátegui, Miguel Angel Hernández, professor at the Central University of Venezuela, Richard Gallardo, president of the UNT in Aragua, José Villegas, the principal leader of the strike at Sanitarios de Maracay and many other workers' leaders.¹ Last year, these activists created the "Movement for the Construction of a Workers' Party" and began developing common political work – among other things, they called for a blank vote in the referendum for the government's constitutional reform, which got a lot of attention on the international left.²

Now they are taking steps to build up the USI as a political party

The discussions about the formation of a new party have gone on around the Venezuelan supporters of the "International Workers' Unity" (UIT), an international Trotskyist current centred in Latin America. The USI is conceived as the Venezuelan section

independence from the government. The UIT activists have a problematic tradition in relation to Chavismo - for example in the PRS they were against a workers' candidacy in the presidential elections. The Morenoite tradition of Trotskyism includes countless

leaders, but to involve the broadest sectors of the working class in a campaign to discuss the programme and perspectives of the new party. Only by counter-posing radical workers' democracy to the bureaucratic control in the PSUV will it be possible to win an important number of activists for the USI and an independent, revolutionary socialist party.

Chávez remains very popular throughout Venezuela, but there is a growing discontent with the day-to-day realities of "twenty-first century socialism"

The workers who have struggled most under Chavismo are the most conscious of the necessity for a workers' party. As José Villegas, one of the principal leaders of the struggle at Sanitarios Maracay and also a supporter of the USI project, explained: "Just as we workers demonstrated that we can control and direct the production in businesses during the bosses' strike-sabotage of 2002, or in the experience of workers' control in Sanitarios de Maracay, we also want to propose that we can direct the country via a workers' government, and for this we need our own political party without bourgeois, without big landowners, without bureaucrats and corrupt people."

of the UIT, as a Trotskyist cadre party with no more than 100-200 active militants at the beginning. "It will be a small party but it will include important workers' leaders, and via them it will have a mass influence" explains Miguel Sorans, an Argentinean who is one of the principal leaders of the UIT. At the moment in Venezuela he believes it isn't possible to create a mass party based on the trade unions containing many political tendencies, similar to the "Workers' Party" in Brazil in the 1980s. "The difference is that the PT was centred around Lula, a Christian trade union bureaucrat, whereas a workers' party in Venezuela would be centered around Chirino, a revolutionary and a Trotskyist".

adaptions to bourgeois nationalism and populism, and includes many stitch-ups with reformist bureaucrats carried on alongside revolutionary phraseology.³

But it is clear that the UIT in Venezuela is playing a central role in the struggle for workers' political independence from Chavismo, and deserves the support of revolutionaries internationally (without abandoning criticism of their inconsistencies). The formation of the USI could be a step towards the creation of an independent, revolutionary workers' party with a mass base in Venezuela. But in order to win the masses for this project, it will be necessary to not only rely on the prestige of different C-CURA

ENDNOTES

1. a longer list: <http://www.uit-ci.org/modules/news/article.php?storyid=112>
2. English translation of this call: <http://www.permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=1811>
3. A number of articles on Morenoism and its history can be found on the Permanent Revolution website - just use the search tool for "Morenoism"

It has been almost ten years since the last significant Trotskyist organization in Venezuela, the Socialist Workers' Party (PST) dissolved. Many local Trotskyist groups continued to exist - each one grouped around a trade union leader who came from the PST - and produce small publications. The first attempt to bring these groups together was in 2005 with the foundation of the Party of Revolution and Socialism (PRS), which fell apart in 2007 over the question of how to relate to the PSUV.

The formation of the USI now represents the next serious attempt to form a revolutionary socialist organisation at a national level, based on the principle of



Chinese and the

As the credit crunch bites and US imports slow, the left eagerly awaits the collapse of the Chinese economy. A new period of stagnation has arrived they say. Bill Jefferies takes issue with the stagnation theorists and shows that China's astonishing sustained vitality and growth rests on the impact of capitalist restoration on the Chinese working class and poor, not simply on the US's desire for cheap t-shirts

CHINA'S PHENOMENAL economic growth of the last two decades continues to confound various leftist commentators reminiscing on the stagnation of the 1970s/80s. The Maoists of the US journal Monthly Review summed up this view in their April 2008 issue:

"As the US housing bubble bursts and the dollar's dominance over the global financial system becomes increasingly precarious, the US economy is now going into recession and the global capitalist economy is entering into a new period of instability and stagnation."¹

While conceding the rise of China, they assert that its growth is dependent on US current account deficits. They claim that, due to rising inequality and the poverty of Chinese workers, its domestic economy is too small to play a significant part in the world market and that the predominance of exports within it means it is uniquely vulnerable to a US slowdown.

They are not alone. In one form or another Monthly Review's under-consumptionist² analysis of the US/China axis is repeated across the left. To quote Chris Harman in the ISJ:

"So the US economy holds the Chinese economy up by

capitalism left

buying its excess production as imports, and the Chinese economy holds the US economy up by providing its firms and consumers with the cash to maintain their present level of consumption.”³

Since the credit crunch of last year – and especially since the first signs of recession in the US early this year – leftist commentators have been waiting for signs that China’s growth is being knocked off course, bringing global recession in its wake. They are likely to have longer to wait as, far from being another bubble about to burst, China has massive reserves which serve to insulate it and the world from the US’s credit crunch and associated crisis.

Between 1978 and 2007 official mainland China GDP grew at an annual average of 9.7% – a world record.⁴ In the last five years China has grown at least 11% annually in real terms, as very high levels of capital investment and a rapidly growing urban population have spurred its tremendous growth:

“Indeed, Chinese economic growth springs largely from two sources. First, high savings rates finance robust growth in capital spending. Second, migration of millions of rural under-employed workers gives the teeming factories in the coastal provinces a source of cheap labor.”⁵

China’s average saving and investment ratios from 1978 until 2007 were nearly 38% of GDP. In 2003 the ratios skyrocketed, reaching an estimated 51% of GDP last year,⁶ while the share of income going to labour fell from 51% in 1991 to 38%⁷ in 2006, massively increasing profits.

Capitalist restoration and the restructuring of industry

The slaughter of Tiananmen in 1989 removed the final social obstacle to the Chinese Stalinist programme of capitalist restoration. Through the course of the 1990s the butchers of the democracy movement completed the demolition of the central plan and its replacement with state-supervised capital accumulation.

This was no smooth process. Tiananmen was the result of the collapse of the plan during the 1980s, leading to growing unemployment and inflation. With the working class crushed and atomised, the Stalinists wasted no time. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) were given profitability targets and some autonomy to adjust prices and thus avoid losses. Secondly, they stripped away state enterprises’ “social

Through the course of the 1990s the butchers of the democracy movement completed the demolition of the central plan and its replacement with state

welfare burdens” – the provision of hospitals, schools, housing and other administrative liabilities that had long been managed directly by SOEs and funded out of their own revenues. Finally, in the mid-1990s the government recognised that many state enterprises were chronically unprofitable and they were shut down.

In the absence of formal bankruptcy procedures, enterprises were not disbanded and employees did not enter the formal ranks of the unemployed, but the statistical discrepancy could not hide the truth. Instead, workers continued to receive nominal payments from the workplace or from local budgets and only if funds were available at that. Between 25 and 30 million workers were sacked. As a result, formal enterprise subsidies fell dramatically, from more than 6% of GDP in the early 1980s to only 0.1% of GDP in 2008.⁸

In 1978, at the beginning of the reform process, the authorities determined nearly every price in the economy at the retail, wholesale and farm gate level. Twenty-five years later the number of controlled prices had fallen to

well under 10% of the total in energy, utilities, food staples and various service categories such as transportation, telecommunications and healthcare.

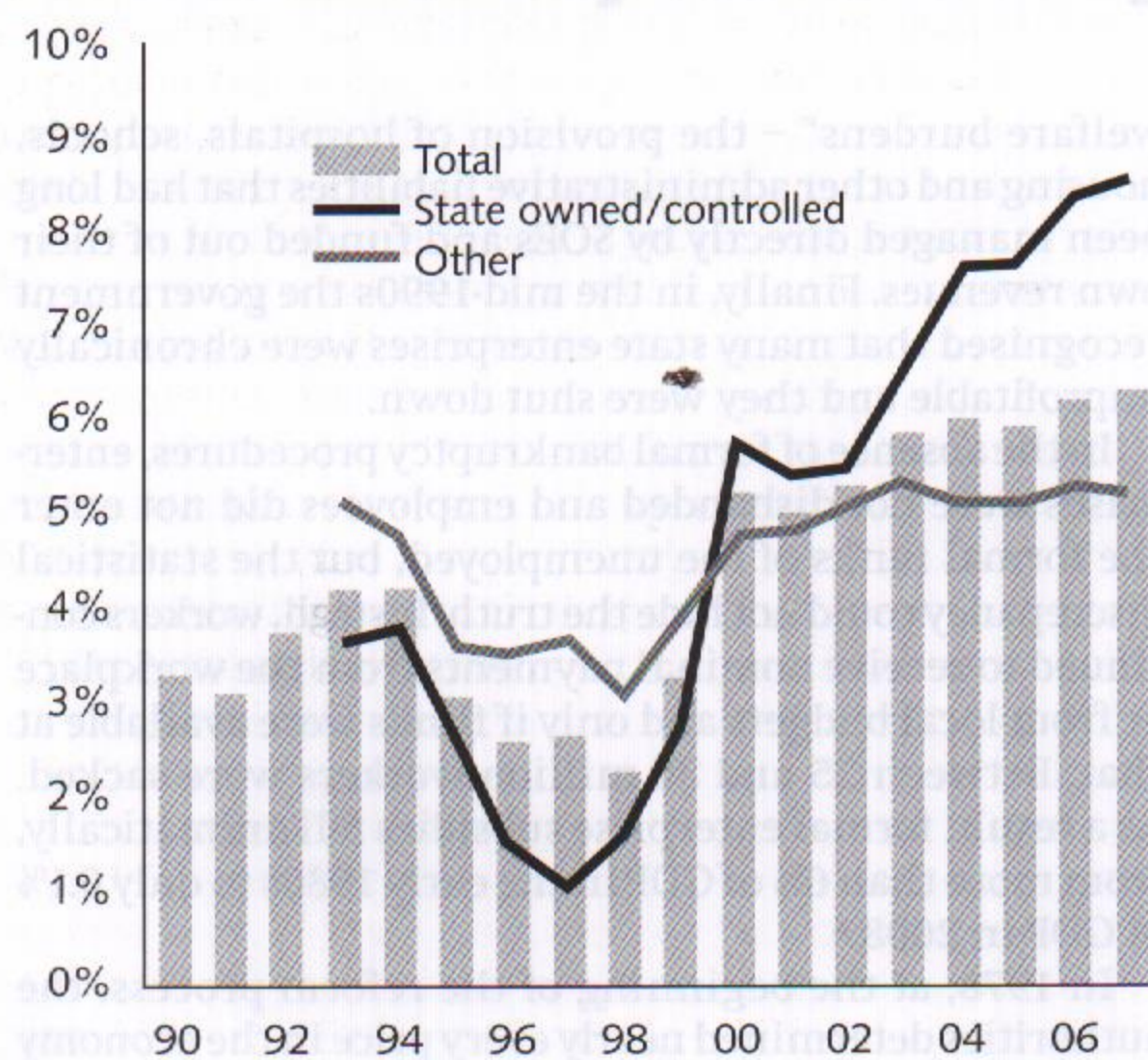
Investment and capital accumulation

By the late 1990s the pre-conditions for the rapid advance of Chinese capital were in place. The demolition of the plan meant a mass of means of production was transformed into fixed capital for free. This, combined with the accelerated growth of a Chinese working class, atomised and vulnerable to exploitation at very low rates of pay, meant profit rates were very high and growing. As the integration of the domestic Chinese – now capitalist – economy into the newly opened globalised world ensured, a virtuous cycle ensued. More investment accelerated profitability, dragged ever more millions of workers into the orbit of capitalism, generated ever more profits providing the funds for increased investment. Far from this mass of fixed capital pointing to over-accumulation and consequent falling profits, it raised them:

“Data on corporate earnings, on the other hand, suggests a very different picture of the health of investment and thereby the overall Chinese economy: 1) the investment is financed more by retained earnings; and 2) the return on investment in China has been high and rising since the turn of the century, suggesting that China can invest more before its investment return gets lower. In our view, improved corporate profitability and rising profit share in national income are mainly reflections of the successful state-owned enterprise restructuring in 1997-99, and the accelerated integration of China’s abundant labor in the global economy.”⁹

As Graph 1 illustrates the trend over the last ten or so years has been for profit rates to rise steadily.

Graph 1: Industrial profit margins



Source: CEIC, UBS estimates

From the turn of the millennium onwards huge investments in heavy industrial capacity were spurred by growing domestic demand and record profits. The state’s credit restriction and fall in demand in 2003-04 could have led to retrenchment in investment and a spate of closures as in 1993 and end of the century. However, this time China’s firms took significant market share from their global rivals, both inside and outside the country.

The WTO and the world economy

Marshalling huge amounts of capital year after year would not on its own have allowed the huge wave of profitable expansion. It also required large reserves of cheap labour to exploit. The integration of China into the capitalist world market and the subsequent rapid rate of urbanisation have massively increased the supply of labour that can be exploited by world capitalists.

After joining the WTO in 2001 about 150 million Chinese joined the global workforce to produce international traded goods on the cheap. Some 97 million Chinese, two-thirds of the US labour force, have moved to urban areas since 2001. Manufacturing and services have gained 88 million workers at the expense of agriculture, which lost 47 million people.

Table 1: World labour supply (millions)

Year	Global	Asia	China
1980	218.7	66.1	24.7
1990	326.0	187.6	108.7
2000	609.9	339.5	171.3
2006	862.2	524.2	316.5

Source: IMF, CEIC, Merrill Lynch estimates

The urban population has increased from 36% of the total population in 2000 to 44% in 2006. The transformation of subsistence farmers into workers is the key to explaining the significance of this shift. It is not just the growth of the workforce that counts, but the proportion that is now involved in capitalist production. This year per capita output in sectors like industry and services is US\$5,299 per worker compared to US\$954 per worker in agriculture, and much of this agricultural output is non-traded subsistence farming, given only a notional value for comparative purposes.

The benefits of this super-exploitation for and by imperialism cannot be underestimated. It has massively raised productivity and so reduced inflation worldwide. A Federal Reserve study suggests that China lowered inflation by as much 1% a year in the US.¹⁰

Chinese imports lowered the cost of the reproduction of labour power worldwide and so raised the world rate of profit. For while the value of wages fell, rises in productivity meant that the value of the commodities purchased by workers fell faster, so raising living standards, even while incomes in the US barely grew.

These trends were so strong that although raw material prices began to rise from the late 1990s onwards, the price of manufacturing production continued to decline until August 2007¹¹

The left's myopia

For the majority of leftist commentators on economics China's significance is a bubble which is about to burst. The schema essentially goes like this:

The world economy is stagnant, suffering from chronic over-capacity in manufacturing, with low rates of profit, investment and output. Since the end of the dotcom boom in 2000 US consumer borrowing on the back of rising house prices allowed strong consumer demand to temporarily power US growth. In turn this enabled China to grow by exporting consumer products to the US.

But, they continue, with the ongoing collapse of the US housing market and credit crunch, borrowing and spending will come to an end and as a result China's exports will stop shipping. Since China has been responsible for 20% of global growth in the last five years, sucking in the world's exports, we are set to experience the deepest crisis in decades. And so, they conclude, global crisis reminiscent of the 1930s Great Depression will wrack world capitalism.

Socialist Worker's Joseph Choonara claims that:

"China, seen by some as the 'saviour' of the system, depends on US consumers . . . If the US is removed from the equation China is a net importer of goods, many of them parts produced elsewhere in the region, which are assembled in China and re-exported to the US. Recession in the US will impact across this region."¹²

Lynn Walsh of the Socialist Party says that the credit crunch "marks the end of the recent phase of globalisation, which has been dominated by finance capital and a frenzied short-term drive for profit. For a few years, this promoted rapid growth in China and to a lesser extent the US, the binary axis of the world economy. Now it has turned into its opposite, with a recession in the US that will drag China and the rest of the world down with it."¹³

Walsh determined to prove the catastrophe is ever just around the corner asserts that:

"The rapid growth of the Chinese economy over recent decades has been structurally dependent on export growth, using the foreign currency revenue from exports to finance investment and the purchase of raw materials. The switch to dependence on internal demand would mean a painful readjustment, which could only take place over a considerable period of time."¹⁴

But does Chinese capitalism "depend" on US consumers or exports in general for its expansion? Does a decline in the export-import dynamic between China and the USA inevitably mean world recession and the end of globalisation?

The headline figure for China's exports is that they are equivalent to 37% of GDP, up from 15% in 1995 and 3% in 1970. Harman, following Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul

Burkett of Monthly Review,¹⁵ claimed that in 2002 exports accounted for 70% of China's growth,¹⁶ based on the very high proportion of Chinese exports relative to GDP.

But the export/GDP ratio is very misleading because it compares two incompatible concepts; exports are defined in terms of turnover while GDP is measured in value-added terms.¹⁷ Once the imported component of exports is accounted for and an adjustment made for the amount of new value added in their production in China, a better estimate is probably around 9% of GDP.

This suggests that exports have been responsible for

Does Chinese capitalism "depend" on US consumers or exports for its expansion? Does a decline in their export-import dynamic inevitably mean world recession?

around 2-3% of total annual GDP growth on average in the last decade (i.e. a quarter or less of total growth).¹⁸

Even if we take the headline figure for China's exports - 37% - most of these exports do not go to the US. Europe and the rest of Asia are more important and growing in importance with each year. Exports to the US account for 19% of the total last year, less than the EU and much less than the 31% share going to Asia-Pacific countries (minus Japan).¹⁹

As China's exports have slowed to the US they have been re-directed particularly to the emerging markets of Brazil, India and Russia:

"China's growth in exports to America slowed to only 5% (in dollar terms) in the year to January, but exports to Brazil, India and Russia were up by more than 60%, and those to oil exporters by 45%. Half of China's exports now go to other emerging economies."²⁰

Moreover, history shows the likely impact of a US recession on Chinese exports and the effects of any decline in turn on China's overall growth. The bureaucracy is terrified of the repeat of a Tiananmen Square uprising - and so, when in 1997 and 2001 export growth collapsed the economy did not, and "a key reason is that counter-cyclical government-led capex [capital expenditure] was able to largely offset the weaker exports such that overall economic growth remained robust."²¹

The 2001 dotcom recession is revealing in that China - like India, Indonesia and Japan with large domestically oriented economies - escaped relatively lightly, while small export economies such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan went into sharp recession.

Table 2: China gross fixed capital investment

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007e
GDP %	33.8	34	34.1	34.4	36.3	39.4	40.7	42	42.7	41.6
US \$ bn	344.4	368.2	408.9	455.8	527.8	646.6	786.3	943.7	1133.3	1369.1

Source: Deutsche Bank Research Bureau May 2008

This is not to underestimate the impact of the last two crises on China's exports:

"During the Asian financial crisis [1997-98], China's export growth plunged from a peak of 30%YoY in May 1997 to -11%YoY in November 1998. After the internet bubble burst, China's export growth dropped from a peak of nearly 40%YoY in March 2000 to barely zero growth in October 2001."²²

The underlying structural cause of China's prolonged expansion remains the huge supplies of capital and labour that have been mobilised over several decades.

But this demonstrates that, despite these falls, the effect on China's economy overall was marginal; GDP slowed by about 0.5 in 2001, despite a very large negative export shock, a shock that was larger than most commentators are suggesting China will experience in the next two years.²³

And the same pattern appears to be happening in this cycle. When adjusted for the rise in the value of the Yuan, export growth in 2007 was at its lowest level since 2001, yet growth powered on.²⁴ And this was because 95% of China's 11.2% growth for the year up to the start of Q4 2007 came from domestic demand.

In short, the exceptional export surge since 2001 is largely cyclical and rests on the back of historically high global growth. The underlying structural cause of Chinese capitalism's prolonged expansion remains the huge supplies of capital and labour that have been mobilised over several decades.

Infrastructure spending

Reflecting its origin in a Stalinist bureaucracy and keenness to maintain its cohesion and dampen social opposition to it, an overriding concern of the Chinese government is to ensure a pace of growth which is rapid enough to provide enough jobs to absorb the estimated 10-20 million workers who swell the urban population each year.

As The Economist noted recently: "... less than 15% of China's investment is linked to exports. Over half is in infrastructure and property."

But past investments pale into insignificance compared to the state-backed spending on infrastructure undertaken in the last five years and planned for the next decade or more.

In February The Economist reported that between 2001 and the end of 2005 more was spent on roads, railways and other fixed assets than was spent in the previous fifty years. Between 2006 and 2010 \$200 billion is expected to be invested in railways alone – four times more than in the previous five years.²⁵

It is the same story with roads. Since the 1990s China has built an expressway network that is second only in

length to the US's interstate highway system. By the end of 2007 some 53,600km of toll expressways had been built. The government also plans to build 300,000km of new rural roads between 2006 and 2010, an increase of nearly 50%.²⁶

The US highway construction programme after World War Two was a pivotal factor in laying the basis for the post-war boom in the US, since it massively cut the costs of continental transport and communication for capitalist industry – something the Chinese plan to emulate.²⁷

In the past couple of years investment in rail has grown considerably. The Economist says:

"This year's target is \$42 billion, compared with a total of \$72 billion in the preceding five years. World Bank officials call it the biggest expansion of railway capacity undertaken by any country since the 19th century."²⁸

China had 78,000km of track at the end of last year. By 2015 they plan to increase this to 120,000km which, if realised, means laying 60% more track in the next eight years than was built since 1978.

Finally, the government announced in January this year that it planned to add another 97 airports by 2020 to the 142 China had at the end of 2006.

These capital investments – amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars (see table 2 below) naturally provide a considerable source of demand for both Chinese industry and overseas firms in heavy industry and the capital goods sector. And given the bureaucracy is sitting on top of \$1.7 trillion worth of foreign reserves and huge budget surpluses, it clearly has what it needs to "prime the pump" should domestic growth levels fall so far as to impede job creation.

And the government has another "advantage" when it comes to taking its plans off the drawing board and bringing them to fruition; it is a brutal political dictatorship that has not hesitated in the past to uproot dozens of villages and thousands of residents that get in the way of "development" plans.

But despite the scale of these infrastructural developments they are by no means the main source of dynamism for Chinese capitalism. State spending only amounts to 5% of overall capital spending in China. Over the last decade or two state outlays are estimated to have contributed only about 1% a year to GDP growth,²⁹ the majority of investment being financed by firms' retained earnings and bank loans.

China's banks

Another recurrent theme of leftist China commentary is that China's banking sector is insolvent, weighed down by bad debts and non-performing loans. Chris Harman claims that high rates of fixed capital investment mean that:

"The result is a relatively low rate of profit which is compensated for by the willingness of the banks to lend to enterprises at low rates of interest – and by a parallel willingness not to push loss-making enterprises into bankruptcy, so that the banking system is owed vast, probably unrepayable debts. The official estimate for the 'non-performing loans' of the banks is 20% of all loans – an unofficial estimate suggests 45% of GDP."³⁰

Harman's description of a Stalinist bureaucracy unwilling to push firms into bankruptcy could not be a less accurate description of China from the mid-1990s onwards. And just as he underestimates the ruthlessness of the bureaucracy so he seriously misestimates the health of the banking system.

Since 1998 the government has spent nearly US\$500 billion to write down bad debts and replenish bank capital, and removed an even larger amount of nominal loans from banks' balance sheets into state-owned asset management companies. The vast majority of the bad loans made during the 1990s boom-bust cycle have either been cleaned up already or will be dealt with finally in the very near future. From an average level of 25% non-performing loans or more at the beginning of the decade, the BOC, CCB and ICBC – three of the four main Chinese banks – now report ratios under 4%.

The re-capitalisation of the banks was preparation for their privatisation from 2004-05 onwards. Partly as a result of China's accession into the WTO, this included the sale of a proportion of banking assets abroad. As of mid-2007 total foreign direct investment in the Chinese banking system exceeded US\$20 billion. Three of the "big four" state commercial banks are now roughly 20% owned by foreigners, although the largest bank the CMB remains wholly Chinese owned. The average market holding among all listed banks is on the order of 30%.³¹ As late as 2001 the figure would have been zero for every bank in the chart. The government still imposes a 25% total foreign ownership cap on all banks, with no more than 20% by a single outside investor. Nonetheless the origin of Chinese capitalism in the Stalinist central plan, means that China's domestic capitalists and their state capitalist overseers retain overwhelming control of their domestic banking system and this will be critical as China seeks to develop its financial power abroad in the immediate future.

China's consumer demand

Chris Harman has previously excluded the possibility of China's domestic demand offsetting any decline in export rates as he believes the working class and peasantry are too poor and the middle class are too small.³²

The Socialist Party's Lynn Walsh agrees:

"The idea that China could rapidly switch to stimulating domestic demand is fanciful. Low wage levels and huge inequalities mean that domestic purchasing power is extremely low."

So what's the truth?

Consumer spending in China has remained steady over the last decade or more as a proportion of GDP – around 4-5% – with wages falling as a proportion of GDP even while living standards have risen quickly. Consumption expenditures remain dwarfed by capital investment.

There is much debate over the size and spending power of the Chinese urban classes, but even the most conservative estimates say there are about 100 million urban middle class consumers (growing at about 12-15 million a year), with a spending power of about US\$250 billion a year.³³ This is confirmed by shifts in the consumption pattern of Chinese society.³⁴

Take, for example, the number of consumer goods per 100 households. TVs rose from 4 out of 100 in 1984 to 94 out of 100 in 2003. Washing machines went from 1 to 59 out of 100 and fridges from none to 46 out of 100.³⁵

Or look at the consumption of foodstuffs:

"By the end of the 1990s, China's average level of daily per capita calorie intake fell only 10% short of the level of developed countries . . . Aggregate meat consumption

Consumer spending in China remained steady over the last decade or more with wages falling as a proportion of GDP even while living standards have risen quickly

has grown by more than 50% over the past decade. Per capita meat consumption has also grown considerably, mainly due to a higher demand for pork and poultry, the consumption of which has risen by about one third over the past decade."³⁶

Imports of food products have grown from \$4,130 millions in 1992 to \$9,435 millions in 2000. In 2006 it reached \$23,634 millions. This is an increase of 472% in just 14 years.³⁷ As UBS notes, "there has been a visible acceleration in household expenditure over the past three years, with no sign of slowdown to date,"³⁸ mainly as a result of the growth in rural incomes. On the back of very rapidly rising food prices in 2007 these incomes grew faster than the urban sector for the first time in decades. But, in addition, wages in urban collectives rose at an average annual rate of 13.6% in 2002-06 – up from 9.8% in the preceding five year period – underpinning a rise in retail sales.

In fact already this year China has readjusted its output towards domestic consumer demand:

"We estimate that domestic demand contributed 11% to overall GDP growth in 1Q. Consumer demand, as reflected in retail sales, grew 20.6%Y in 1Q (+21.5% in March). After adjusting for higher inflation in the period, retail sales gained 12.3% in real terms, similar to that in 2007."³⁹

And this change is reflected in the growth of imports and their composition. Imports related to export have declined while capital goods for the domestic market have increased:

"China's merchandise imports rose 44.3% through February, far outpacing the sequential trend growth in exports. This is a significant change in the previously persistent trend of lagging import growth in the past three years and is consistent with the solid domestic demand trend in China . . . The import data by end use also show that domestic demand-related goods are behind the latest surge, while imports for export-related production have slowed."⁴⁰

Clearly, while large, this level of final demand cannot be a substitute in the short or medium term for business investment. Industry will remain industry's best customer for some time ahead. But it does provide a growing outlet



for both Chinese and overseas multinationals which confront saturated markets in Europe and North America or a range of consumer goods.

China and the world

China's economic prospects are critical to the fate of globalisation. But this is not because China's dependency on US consumers is about to bring it low, or that its exposure to exports in general is fatal to its expansion.

Rather, China increasingly powers the world economy.

China's economic prospects are critical to the fate of globalisation. But this is not because China's dependency on US consumers is about to bring it low

As one report notes: "emerging economies' trade with each other has risen faster and now accounts for over half of their total exports. Emerging markets as a group now export more to China than to the US."⁴¹

The growth of China has been critical to the continuing growth of the so called "emerging markets" that are disproportionately dependent on the export of raw materials. Over the last four years not only has the absolute proportion of imports consumed by China risen, so has their impact on world demand, as is clear from Table 3 from JP Morgan:

China's internal capital accumulation, based on huge surplus profits and capital investment, combined with increasing internal consumer demand (and increasingly also with foreign investments⁴²), props up a growing number of countries. To put it bluntly: the world depends on China, not the other way around.⁴³

Capitalist accumulation is certain to slow down. In the short term, the recession in the US and slower growth in

the rest of the world will have some impact on China as exports decline. But as we have explained this is not likely to derail the factors that lay behind China's three decade expansion: reserves of labour, abundant capital, high productivity and profits. China has very significantly offset the impact of the US slowdown on the world economy and inside the US itself, and will continue to do so.

However, over the next decade or so China's advantages will be eroded. First take labour. The Chinese labour force will peak around 2015 due to the one-baby policy adopted in the 1970s. Total available labour increased by about 10 million per year in the 1990s and the first half of this decade, it has now fallen to only 6 million each year and between 2010 and 2020 the net figure will be around zero, as deaths equal births.

More importantly even, the rapid pace of urbanisation is slowing and in the foreseeable future could halt. Some 100 million rural migrants already work in factories, drawing in a sizeable portion of the younger rural population. Merrill Lynch estimates "45-50 million young surplus workers remained in the rural areas as of end-2006. Assuming a migration rate of 12-15 million a year, the well will run dry in 2009-10."

In China export manufacturers now routinely complain about the difficulties in finding cheap, available workers. This decline in the reservoir of super-exploitable workers is already having an impact upon productivity, with wages rising as a consequence of this "tighter" labour market. Chinese business's unit labour costs have begun to rise after declining at a rate of 4.5% annually between 1994-2004. In 2005 labour costs rose by 1.5% and in 2006 by 2.9%. In turn some Chinese firms will not be as competitive as they were in certain (mainly labour-intensive) lines of industry, losing market share to other Asian countries such as Vietnam.

Future investment

Is there over-investment in China? At 51% of GDP it could appear to be the case. Yet profit rates are rising and suggest otherwise.⁴⁴ Part of the answer is that in recent years 10%⁴⁵ or more of this investment has been in residential housing,⁴⁶ a consumer durable rather than a capital value-producing investment.⁴⁷ Questionable Chinese GDP statistics⁴⁸ and disputes about the price of land, a nationalised asset available to the state at very low prices, add further doubt to the true cost of Chinese investment.

What's more, asset inflation in housing is starting from a very low base. There was no housing market at all in China before 1996 and, while prices are rising, they are falling as a proportion of incomes, as wages increase even faster. This may lead to problems, but the underlying expansion of productive capacity has not yet led to a cyclical bust, as it did in the mid- and late 1990s.

This is because as Chinese output has expanded it has moved up the value chain into higher technology goods, which have maintained profit rates and meant that Chinese firms have gained an ever increasing market share in markets outside of their traditional strongholds in low price consumer goods, and also in a burgeoning domestic market.

Table 3: China and the global commodity market

		2004	2005	2006	2007
Steel	% of global demand	28.0	31.4	35.3	36.8
	% of global growth	41.6	81.7	105.7	68.8
Iron ore	% of global demand	38.3	45.0	50.0	53.3
	% of global growth	75.4	107.1	86.1	71.2
Aluminum	% of global demand	19.8	21.3	25.4	31.3
	% of global growth	32.7	57.3	69.4	85.2
Primary nickel	% of global demand	11.3	12.2	18.9	21.6
	% of global growth	33.7	34.0	56.8	94.0
Copper	% of global demand	21.1	22.7	22.7	24.6
	% of global growth	40.4	61.8	26.9	67.9
Coal	% of global demand	27.3	28.1	28.6	na
	% of global growth	27.6	102.8	43.3	na
Oil	% of global demand	8.2	8.2	8.6	8.7
	% of global growth	33.7	31.2	51.9	30.0

JP Morgan Economic Research Global Data Watch April 4, 2008

The effect of a decline in investment rates is debatable. Most bourgeois analysts suggest it will lead to the rate of growth in GDP slowing to 7-9% over the next 10 to 20 years.⁴⁹

Irrespective of the likelihood of this or not, as China's dependence on imported raw materials encourages it to revalue the Yuan, which has risen 18% against the US dollar since its float, its financial power will begin to match its industrial strength. On present trends China's nominal dollar GDP will surpass Germany in 2008 and Japan by 2010.

Conclusion

The left has wilfully underestimated the historic, and in many ways unique, consequences of capitalist restoration in China – the world's most populous country – and the effects of its step by step integration into the world market in an era of unprecedented globalisation.

ENDNOTES

1. Minqi Li, "The Age of Transition: the United States, China, peak oil and the demise of neoliberalism", Monthly Review Press, April 2008 p20
2. Under-consumptionism is the idea that capitalism cannot sell its output because the working class cannot buy, i.e. consume, enough.
3. Chris Harman, "China's economy and Europe's crisis", ISJ 109. At the 40th anniversary commemoration of May 1968 in London, Harman compared the recent growth in the world economy to the short-lived upsurge of 1972/73. Harman can only concede the possibility of capitalist advance when he thinks it's over.
4. A full percentage point higher than the next most successful performer (Taiwan). The consensus among academics who doubt government statistics in China suggest this figure is 9%, still higher than any other country.
5. "US recession? Who would be next," Wachovia, Jan 08.
6. Other "Asian" miracles (Japan, South Korea, etc) have mobilised huge savings and invested them in this fashion, but none on this scale and for as long. Between 1965 and 1995 the Asian high-growth nations reported average gross domestic saving and investment rates of just over 30% of GDP; for Japan in 1955-85 the figure was 33% of GDP.
7. "... the share of output going to workers declined from 24% in 1998 to 17% in 2005. In other words, enterprise profits increased its share of a very rapidly growing pie." World Bank, "A Note on Saving, Investment, and Profits of China's Enterprises" 2006.
8. UBS, "How to think about China", Part 1 (2008 Edition) 10 January 2008.
9. Goldman Sachs, Global Economics Paper No:146 p3.
10. "Is China exporting deflation?", International Finance Discussion Paper No 791, Federal Reserve Board, January 2004.
11. Prices for US imported goods from China rose 0.7% in March 2008 and are now up 4.0% over the past year. Prices throughout the Pacific Rim, which account for one third of US imports, rose 0.6% and are up 3.0% year on year.
12. Joseph Choonara "Shocking instability that is built into capitalism" Socialist Worker 22 March 2008
13. Lynn Walsh, Socialism Today, No 115 Feb 08
14. Ibid
15. Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett, "China and socialism – Market reforms and class struggle", Monthly Review Press, 2005
16. Chris Harman, "China's economy and Europe's crisis". ISJ 109
17. "In order to arrive at the actual role of exports in the economy,

Left commentators have insisted on China's fatal vulnerability to the, hitherto larger and more powerful, imperialist economies, failing to detect the major underlying shifts in the balance of global economic power.

The key levers of economic growth – of capital accumulation – in China are its massive reserves of labour and capital mobilised by a powerful native ruling class. In recent years these long term structural characteristics have been supplemented by equally powerful cyclical factors.

In the last 20 years, domestic capital boom and bust cycles have hit China and stalled or slowed growth – indeed far more than the internationally generated recessions of 1997/98 and 2001, or 2007 did.

But the ability of China to ride out the effects of the US credit crunch will burst the left's schema, based as it is on the ongoing stagnation of the world economy and its dependence on a series of bubbles.

we need to strip out associated import content to find out how much of export revenue actually accrued to the domestic economy; this gives us a measure of external demand as a share of overall effective final expenditure. And next, we want to convert that domestic content share into value-added terms by subtracting input purchases from other domestic sectors. Our most recent estimates suggest that the domestic content of Chinese exports is around 45%, i.e., that 55% of the total value of export shipments represents imported raw materials or manufactured components. If we apply this ratio to the headline export/GDP ratio, we find that domestic export content accounts for 14% to 16% of GDP. According to official data, industrial manufacturing accounted for 43% of GDP in 2006 on a value-added basis . . . Thus, if we take the 43% industrial share of GDP and multiply by the 18% export share in industrial manufacturing, we end up with a 'true' export share of 7.8% of GDP. But this is just for goods exports, of course. If we add in our guess at value added from trade services and other income, we come out with a likely final ratio of just over 9% of GDP."

UBS, How to think about China, part 6 p30.

18. UBS How to think about China, part 6 p30 Indeed in the first quarter of 2008 exports actually subtracted from Chinese GDP.

19. Hart Landsberg and Burkett claim that "In short, China is taking up a rising share of an increasingly stagnant total of regional exports." (China and Socialism – Market Reforms and Class Struggle: Monthly Review Press p88) In fact the growth of world trade has accelerated over the last five years, nearly doubling since 2000, while intra-regional trade in developing Asia has risen from 22% of exports in 1980 to 40% in 2004. This is still lower than North America 46% and Europe 64%. While China is certainly a major competitor with other local Asian rivals, far more important has been the rise in China's own imports by 323% between 2000-06 and the growing proportion of Asian imports in them.

20. From Economist.com "Emerging markets; The decoupling debate", 6 March 2008 www.economist.com/daily/news/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10808782&top_story=1.

21. Morgan Stanley, Greater China Economics Issues in Focus p6, 5 March 2008

22. Morgan Stanley, When Exports Weaken, Government Capex (capital expenditure) Steps In, March 08

23. "... the correlation between US import growth and growth in Chinese industrial production is quite low . . . Although American import growth plunged in 2001 as the US economy slid into recession, growth in Chinese industrial production barely budged. More



recently, US import growth has been weakening, but Chinese IP [industrial production] growth has strengthened. There must be much more to Chinese economic growth than simply exports to the United States . . . A downturn in the US economy surely would cause the overall rate of Chinese GDP growth to slow, but it would not lead to a collapse of the Chinese economy, as recent history demonstrates." Wachovia op cit.

24. According to World Bank estimates, a decline in US consumption of 1% would cause a slow down in Chinese GDP growth of 0.5%. To put this in perspective, the largest fall in US consumption in any recession since 1960 was in the very deep 1980 recession when it fell -1.2%.

25. "China's infrastructure splurge" The Economist, 14 February 2008

26. World Bank China Quarterly Update, January 2008 http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCHINA/Resources/318862-1121421293578/cqu_jan_08_en.pdf

27. Logistics costs in China amount to 18% of GDP in China compared with 10% in America. The massive investment in roads and especially rail aim to cut this margin.

28. World Bank, op cit

29. See UBS, How to think about China, part 5, 2008 p29s

30. Chris Harman, "China's economy and Europe's crisis", ISJ 109 February 2006 <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=160&issue=109>

31. Our previous PR9 estimate of Chinese domestic bank ownership of 95%+ was evidently a bit out, based as it was on slightly older Deutsche Bank figures.

32. "But [the middle class] is not big enough to absorb the burgeoning output of Chinese industry profitably." True, but the trade off between final consumers and exports is a false way of posing Chinese capitalism's dilemma.

33. The upper class (that is the layer that enjoys a lifestyle at or above a middle class family in today's G8 countries) may number 25 million or 2% of China's total population.

34. "A rise in per capita income from low levels is associated with an increase in per capita food consumption and a shift in the composition of household expenditure away from primary products, particularly food, towards manufactures, such as textiles and clothing, wood and paper products, machinery (e.g. electrical household equipment), and chemicals (e.g. pharmaceuticals). Household demand for services also increases, particularly for transport (especially personal transportation), electricity and housing (including furniture and consumer appliances)." UNCTAD Trade and Development Report 2005

35. OECD Economic Survey China 2005

36. UNCTAD Trade and Development Report 2005

37. Asian Development Bank, Key Indicators 2007

38. UBS op cit

39. Denise Yam, Qing Wang and Katherine Tai, "China Imported Soft Landing in Sight", Global Economic Forum, Morgan Stanley, 17 April 2008 Hong Kong www.morganstanley.com/views/gef/archive/2008/20080417-Thu.html

40. JP Morgan, Economic Research Note "China's import strength buffers global economy", 4 April 2008. Also "Urban fixed asset invest-

ment actually accelerated in March, contrary to our expectation, bringing 1Q up 25.9%Y (+24.3% in January-February)." 41. Wachovia op cit. Morgan Stanley says: "within Asia, China has become the growth engine, replacing the US." MS Research Asia Pacific 1 May 2008

42. In the first quarter of 2008 China's foreign direct investment (FDI) has already surpassed that of the whole of 2007.

43. "Asian domestic demand, based on thirteen volume indicators, is now larger than the US. Asia current dollar GDP is 59% of the US size, but its true size is masked by cheap currencies and labour costs. Asia's large domestic market reinforces our view that Asia is now less dependent on the US than ever before, and capable of a soft decoupling from the US downturn. Drivers of Asian domestic demand, and particularly China, are now at least as important as global factors." "China The Engine!", Morgan Stanley Asia Pacific Strategy Asia No 1, 1 May 2008

44. "We think the over-investment issue reflects data quality problems rather than a true underlying problem. The reported investment-to-GDP ratio looks alarming, but it is significantly overstated due to an over-estimation of investment, under-estimation of consumption and under-estimation of GDP. Data on corporate earnings suggests a very different picture of the health of investment, showing that retained earnings are a key source of investment financing and that the return on investment is not only high but has been rising since the start of the decade.", Goldman Sachs, "China's investment strength is sustainable", Brics and Beyond, November 2007 <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/book/BRICs-Chapter4.pdf>

45. "With completions at 477 million square metres in 2007, at an average 90 square metres per unit, we estimate China completed about 5.3 million units." Or five times US production. Morgan Stanley, "China The Engine!", Asia Pacific Strategy Asia No 1, 1 May 2008

46. "One final note concerns China's slums - or, more accurately, the lack of them. Visitors to Mumbai, Jakarta, Mexico City, Lagos and virtually every other large city in the developing world cannot help but notice the uncontrolled growth of 'slum' areas, often involving millions of relatively destitute and marginalised people in informal housing without access to clean water, sewage or electricity. However, travel to Beijing and Shanghai and you won't find anything similar; the city centre leads to more or less orderly residential areas, which then fade out into farmland." UBS, How to think about China, part 6, March 2008

47. Capital investment has been consistently around or slightly above 35% of GDP for a long time.

48. When Chinese regional GDP figures are added together they are consistently 2-3% higher than the national GDP figures.

49. "Subtracting 13% of GDP from today's domestic savings just brings the ratio back down to 38% of the economy - i.e. exactly the level that kept real growth at 9.7% y/y on average for the past few decades . . . based on current trends China could afford to lose nearly half of its national savings over the longer term and still maintain one of the fastest growth rates in the world." UBS, op cit p40



DAVID WALTERS REPLIES

The workers' movement and nuclear power

IT IS good to see groups on the left, Marxists ones in particular, start to not only address climate change and energy issues, but nuclear energy in particular. Thus, this reply to the recent article on nuclear energy in Permanent Revolution 8.

I write to take issue with the tone and specifics of the two articles: The Workers' Movement and Nuclear Power and the box titled FAQs About Nuclear Power. I think both fall far short of what is expected from those that claim to base themselves in scientific socialism. Having said that, I think the bulleted programmatic points in the first article are an excellent beginning to develop a Marxist programme for the working class around energy issues. So I applaud PR for taking this up.

Specifically, the PR article focuses on Britain. I'm at a slight disadvantage in addressing this because I work as a power plant (natural gas) operator in the US. I've worked as a control operator for the last 24 years and have been a shop steward in my union for almost that length of time. Obviously I've been involved in energy issues.

The British have had singularly the worst nuclear industry in the world. Yes, even compared to the Russian experience and Chernobyl. The structure of the British nuclear industry was built around a very poor design, the MAGNOX gas-cooled reactor. In addition to being a "unique" design built almost exclusively in Britain, and thus not being able to draw from other examples, it was extremely expensive to build, more so than any other design in the world. It was designed not as a civilian nuclear reactor, but as a producer of weapons of mass destruction: for weapons grade plutonium. Secondly, decommissioning was simply an afterthought: MAGNOX reactors are ten times more

expensive to decommission than comparably sized reactors in the US or anywhere else. Thirdly, there was zero financing of these decommissioning costs built into the nuclear industry project, so that it has to be dealt with as a very expensive afterthought.

This was not the case in any other nuclear industry where cheaper, quicker and self-financed decommissioning was built into the plans to develop nuclear energy, even in the chaotic US capitalist energy market. Therefore, it's scientifically and politically irresponsible to look at nuclear energy based mostly on the British experience.

Secondly, using Greenpeace as a source of expertise on nuclear energy is like looking to Zionists as a source of expertise on Palestinian self-determination. Greenpeace is a petit bourgeois and reactionary organisation that prefers coal to nuclear. They profess opposition to coal but if given the choice, they prefer coal. Coal, as noted in many

Socialist are for workers' control and a planned, economy. That means we have to look at what will work for humanity not which simply "feels good"

places, is the single largest stationary source of both particulate and CO₂ emissions. In the US alone it is responsible for over 30,000 deaths "a year". It is the single largest source of mercury pollution in the world today and is a major source of other heavy metal contamination such as uranium and thorium. In fact, coal plants today produce more background radiation than nuclear plants do. Greenpeace doesn't care. They are religious fundamentalist opponents

of nuclear energy.

Socialist are for workers' control and a planned, democratic economy. That means we have to look at what will work for humanity and not which simply "feels good". Solar and wind both "feel good" but neither can supply the needed base-load (the actual 24 hour, 7 days a week generation needed to keep the grid running in any region or country). This is why wind and other "renewables" advocated by Greenpeace and their ilk cannot replace coal and natural gas: none of them are base-load capable. The Danes have the highest wind energy implementation in the world today. They claim "20% capacity" of wind to other forms of energy. The reality is that because wind only blows about 30% of the time, the Danish grid is backed up by: Norwegian and Swedish hydro-power and Sweden's massive nuclear grid. The Danes, because of their investment in wind (which means paying off the turbines even when they are not turning making electricity), pay the highest rates for power in Europe.

In the FAQs on Nuclear Power several errors, even out right untruths, are stated.

The FAQs states: "But most of the gas we use in Britain is for heating and hot water, for homes and for

industrial use. Nuclear power, which can only supply electricity, therefore cannot replace that energy." First it should be obvious that if nuclear power can't provide this energy, then neither can wind, solar or burning garbage. But the premise is wrong. So wrong as to almost make it a lie. It is a huge gaff by the writer; in each of the areas that gas is used it can be replaced by plentiful nuclear energy. In the US many houses are "100% electric" as natural gas prices continue to





climb, following both oil and coal prices. Secondly, nuclear can even provide district heating as it does in Russia as well as process steam for industry. So this "86%" is a made up number with no basis in fact. A real workers' government would work to replace all industrial and residential gas use with electricity

Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear organisations have no proposals to deal with "waste". Spent nuclear fuel doesn't go away if we stop building nuclear plants

produced by nuclear energy! That is "energy security".

Elsewhere in the FAQ, the issue of dealing with spent nuclear fuel is flippantly dealt with by arguing that no one has any "acceptable" means of dealing with it.

Firstly, spent nuclear fuel is being dealt with in the short term currently by safe on-site storage. No one, anywhere in the world, has died or even become ill from safely stored nuclear "waste". Even under the worse of Stalinist mismanagement in Russia or profit driven capitalist systems.

Secondly, more and more spent fuel is being reprocessed back into fuel. Both France, Japan, China and the US are building reprocessing centres to extract the 97% of the energy that remains after use from used nuclear fuel rods. It's expensive and there are certainly safety issues, but it's a plan that actually reduces high-level waste, as opposed to Greenpeace's perspective that sees no solution and therefore prefers to bury its head hoping the problem will go away.

This is a major flaw in Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear organisations. They have no proposals to deal with "waste" (it's only waste if you want to get rid of it.) The issue of spent nuclear fuel doesn't go away if we stopped building nuclear power plants. It's still there. What to do? Pro-nuclear activists (as distinct from industry touts) argue that it needs to be used.

By using currently existing advanced heavy water reactors, we can actually burn all of it up in a form of recycling known as DUPIC.

Secondly, as we move onto more advanced reactors, such as the Liquid Fluoride Thorium Reactor, we can not only continue to burn up the worlds stock of nuclear

"waste" but these reactors themselves only produce 0.1% of current reactors' high-level radioactive waste stream. This is a good thing that socialists ought to fight for, not oppose. We can get rid of the amount we have and produce less of it with more reactors.

Are reactors safe? Well even Greenpeace has given up on the "Chernobyl" scenario since the industry clearly addressed this issue world wide. But the German study, the one cited in the article about an increase in leukaemia, has yet to be peer-reviewed to my knowledge. It is a serious study but is still fraught with method error: for example, it is in contradiction to the literally hundreds of other studies around the world that not only show nuclear power plants to be safe to live near, but in some cases actually have lower cancer rates. This is because the average nuclear plant

has less radiation than say, large granite buildings in big cities or coal plants, all the latter of which discharge raw uranium into the air and in the form of ash on a regular basis.

In the German case, as we wait for reviews of this study, the authors have not proposed how cancer rates have increased. There is no "causal effect" of the plant showing where a cancer causing element occurred.

We should also compare studies of people living around or even down stream from a coal plant. These plants regularly kill people now. Compared to coal, I would rather live in a nuclear power plant than within 100 miles of a coal plant.

The program of PR that is proposed is basically good. I would make some changes, or really, only one: fusion power is only a theoretical possibility. It has been "50 years off" for the last 50 years. There is a real, intermediate yet long term, and proven technology already around: the above mentioned Liquid Fluoride Thorium Reactor, which doesn't even use uranium, using 100 times less fuel per weight than a current generation light water reactor, produces 1/1000ths the amount of waste and whose fuel, thorium, is four times as abundant as uranium. The plants are not only 100 times as safe (they are not pressurised but run at one atmosphere) but are three times cheaper to build.

Comradely,
David Walters
left-atomics.blogspot.com

The hidden history of Moscow workers

REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION: CLASS STRUGGLE IN A MOSCOW METAL FACTORY

Kevin Murphy
Haymarket / 2007 / £00.00

▶ KEVIN MURPHY'S inspiring book is a must have for any militant interested in the Russian revolution. Murphy a supporter of the British SWP, uses the "hidden transcripts" of archive material, opened up since the 1990s but little used until recently, to recreate a picture of the Russian revolution as a period of tremendous excitement and mass participation, with workers actively discussing all matters, voting for and recalling delegates through workers' council democracy, making collective decisions and acting on them. It brings alive the issues of real men and women involved and stands in stark contrast to the view of historians such as Pipes and Figez who see the masses as putty in the hands of sinister and manipulative revolutionaries.

Source material is arranged to show how revolutions are the confluence of social crises and years of painstaking preparatory work of focused propaganda, agitation and intervention by organised groups of revolutionaries. Thus the period is rich in lessons for how to organise, not as a blueprint on how to act now, but as an example how Russian revolutionaries connected particular localised conditions and grievances to the national and international class struggle.

Finally, it shows that the revolution's descent into barbaric dictatorship, the negation of all the revolution stood for, was not a smooth process proceeding inevitably from its outset (the "continuity thesis", p2) but one actively contested by the organised working class who were defeated

through a combination of exhaustion, economic ruin and ruthless political suppression.

Murphy uses archive material from one strategic metal factory the Guzhon, later renamed the Hammer and Sickle, in Moscow. In pre and post revolutionary Russian the factory served as much more than simply a place for making hammers and sickles. In fact the "Soviet factory acted as the community-organising centre for food and housing distribution, as well as the workers' leisure activities." And therefore, it represents in microcosm the developments in Russian and then Soviet society itself.

The Guzhon metal factory was the largest in Russia, making more than a million roubles profit a year and enjoying massive expansion in orders, up to 40% during the war. It

A turning point in the political organisation of the factory, and indeed the class struggle nationally, was the Lena massacre of 1912

was also wracked by strikes, political and economic, occupations and lock-outs, leading Lenin to rebuff the bosses' claim to have imposed class peace, writing in March 1913, "You are wrong you gentlemen who own the factories! Even in the economic sense, to say nothing of the political, the workers' gains are terrifying!"

The early part of the book traces the fluctuations in shop floor activism and the components of the workforce. It indicates how membership of political organisations varied. The Bolsheviks were at first quite weak in the factory with many workers

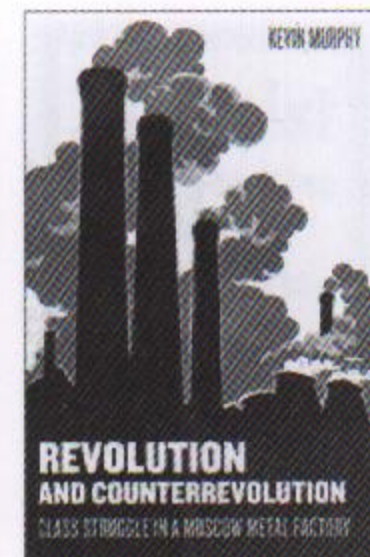
following the Zubatov secret police union which, in order to retain its credibility with the workforce, was forced to fight and was later supplanted by both Bolshevik and Socialist Revolutionary (SR) delegates. This section also graphically illustrates how revolutionaries brought in political issues around the rampant sexism of the shop floor where young women workers were often raped by supervisors and subject to harassment and abuse by fellow workers.

A turning point in the political organisation of the factory, and indeed the class struggle nationally, was the Lena massacre of 1912 where hundreds of striking gold miners were shot dead on the orders of the Tsar.

Between this incident and the end of 1916 Guzhon workers struck 19 times. Of these eight strikes were overtly political. (p35) As political strikes became more frequent the tactic of occupation was used. "We were Italian strikers!" wrote one participant of the eight day strike in September-October 1916. The workers elected delegates to

negotiate with the owners and refused to leave the factory (p34).

In the heady days of February 1917, 3500 metal workers walked out after lunch with workers running "from shop to shop shouting down with the Tsar... and then everyone like an avalanche, advanced through the main gate towards the city centre" (workers' account, cited p44). The "noisy growing crowd" surged over the bridge, joining more demonstrators, shouting "Hooray!" After one worker was shot another Guzhon metal worker "threw the police officer into the Iauza river". Another account describes how "the head of





the gendarmes and his assistant were thrown from the bridge into the lauza. The remaining police seeing that they were powerless, fled.”

Throughout 1917 workers' demands became more inclusive of previously marginalised parts of the workforce and direct action was used to implement the 8-hour day and other agreements. In June management complained of

Throughout 1917 workers' demands became more inclusive of marginalised parts of the workforce and direct action was used to implement the 8-hour day

workers using the “most violent measures against management... dragging them out in wheelbarrows and other insults.” (p49) Political and cultural discussions flourished with demands for a “permanent workers' committee... general factory meetings, lectures and other cultural-educational events” (factory committee strike demands June 1917, p50).

Following the Bolshevik revolution of November 1917 the factory committee and local soviet proceeded to introduce workers' control especially as a response to the economic chaos during the civil war. The following years saw a high degree of worker participation in debates and actions with 800 out of 1100 workers attending a meeting in 1918 on the “critical flour situation” and to organise aid for families of deceased workers. (p68) Workers constantly used their right to recall workplace delegates and in 1919 the SRs successfully won the factory committee election. A 1918 general meeting donated 1,000 roubles to an Anarchist newspaper, indicating at least elements of a vibrant workers' democracy.

This continued into the early years of the New Economic Policy (NEP) where two-thirds of delegates were non (Communist) party members. (p91) The workers were still confident and organised as late

as 1926 when workers berated party officials reminding them that “Reports should be connected to real life” and to remember the “words of Lenin” and expel officials who do not pull their weight on the shop-floor. (p92)

During 1926 considerable aid was raised in the factory for the British general strike with workers making political points against the incipient party bureaucracy under

Stalin. They complained that the party speaker “talked beautifully and splendidly about these... vermin traitor... English leaders while our ragamuffin Soviet leaders, who are worried about workers there, but do not have the same worries about our Soviet workers” or “Can you tell us how it is on one hand you put anarchists in jail, while at the same time our union conducts protests against the execution of [American anarchists] Sacco and Vanzetti?” (p85)

The painstaking work of research carried out by Murphy is invaluable. Of course any researcher is selective but it lends far greater weight to his political analysis of the triumph of Stalinism as a defeat forced on a vibrant working class revolutionary movement. At times, perhaps as an inevitable side effect of being published as an academic monograph, Murphy's connecting prose between vignettes is somewhat dry but the vividness of the workers' accounts more than makes up for this - if anything I could have coped with more quotations from the marvellous transcripts.

Another weakness, perhaps again due to its academic nature, is failure to sufficiently address how and why the revolution was defeated. However, there are lots of clues such as the exhaustion of civil

war and the lack of a political and organisational expression of opposition. To quote a police account from 1913 “to have any organised events, appropriate agitation is necessary... [requiring] some kind of underground party organisation.” (p23)

Whilst the partial suppression of workers' democracy during the civil war - the banning of factions and proscribing of political parties is not referred to (and this is an omission) it is clear that these mistakes were not just confined to the Bolsheviks but enjoyed some support amongst some sections of organised workers. Murphy's account also effectively demonstrates how the later suppression of workers' opposition and Trotskyism in the late twenties was a break from the earlier revolutionary traditions.

Any militant today wanting to uncover our class's revolutionary heritage, to read first hand accounts from participants, to try to creatively apply the formulas to today's very different world, but one still structured by mass misery and elite privilege, would do well to read this book. It provides real insight into a world and a revolution which is either ignored or traduced today.

Jason Travis

In defence of Marxist history writing

MARXIST HISTORY WRITING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Chris Wickham (ed)
OUP / 2007 / £14.99

HISTORY AND REVOLUTION: REFUTING REVISIONISM

Mike Hynes and Jim Wolfreys (eds)
Verso / 2007 / £17.99

IN THE 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx wrote "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please". The last few decades show that this is as true of historiography as it is of history itself.

Thirty years ago, Marxism was a common language in university history and sociology departments. Today that has changed utterly, the class struggle is quaint and old-fashioned compared with popular culture, sexuality, gender or race.

This is partly a question of academic fashion – historians have historically made a career by trashing the approaches of their predecessors – but something far deeper has been taking place, which is obviously linked to the world-shaking political and economic changes that have taken place over the last 20 years or so.

So what better than a Marxist critique of just why Marxism is so generally marginalised? And two recent collections of articles, *Marxist History-writing*, based on a conference held in 2004 to examine the usefulness (or not) of Marxist historiography, and *History and Revolution*, aim to counter the reactionary views of the history of revolutions that have recently been revived in both academia and popular history writing.

Chris Wickham argues in *Marxist History-writing*, that the decline of Marxism can be traced back to the receding European radical tide of the 1960s and 70s, and not just to the collapse of Stalinism since 1989. This key event

meant that not only have the old certainties been swept away – particularly amongst the once-substantial layers of Stalinist intellectuals – but young people have not been inspired by mass class struggles to view the past through Marxist eyes.

Instead, the rise of national and religious struggles and the trivia of the western media's obsession with celebrity have reinforced the flight from class.

Andrea Giardina in her chapter on Roman history in *Marxist History-writing*, discusses the hypocrisy of those who dismiss Marxist history as teleological, by highlighting the tendency of stridently anti-Marxist modern historians to look for the "roots" of modern features in the past. As she accurately says, "Its teleology is far

The rise of national and religious struggles and the trivia of the western media's obsession with celebrity have reinforced the flight from class

more insidious than that blamed on the concepts of 'mode of production' and 'transition', because it is apparently based on common sense." The next time you see Simon Schama waving his hands and talking about the "roots" of this or that, you know what to shout at the TV.

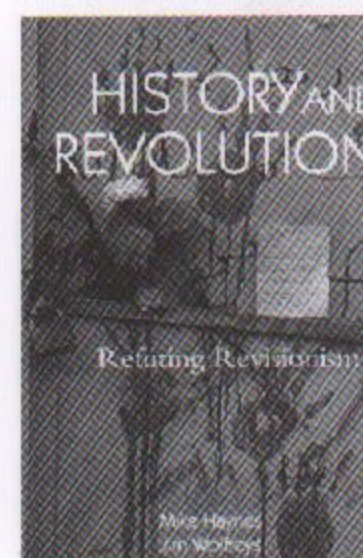
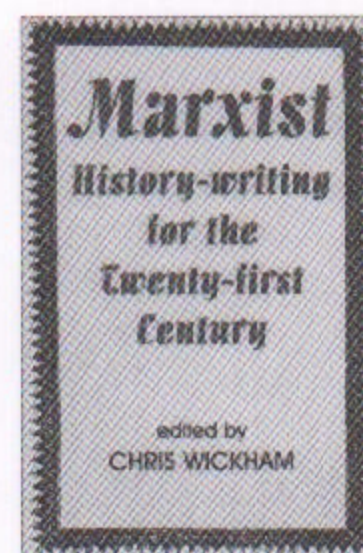
Some of the articles in *Marxist History-writing* are disappointing – worst is Gareth Stedman Jones' chapter, which is based on Marx's alleged decision to "abandon" writing *Capital* because he knew he could not come up with a description of the workings of communist society. As Stedman

Jones cheerily admits, Marx did this "without telling anyone", which is perhaps why it took 130 years and Gareth Stedman Jones to notice. Alex Callinicos starts well with a spritely discussion of Trotskyist history writing, but drifts off into a long polemic with Perry Anderson and a justification of the SWP's theory of state capitalism, neither of which are particularly novel or useful. While, Eric Hobsbawm's rambling piece, bizarrely claims that the modern understanding of human evolutionary molecular genetics "liberates us from the bogus debates on whether history is or not a science".

Surprisingly, only one of the contributions – Catherine Hall's "Marxism and Its Others" – takes head-on the modern emphasis on gender, race and power relations and examines the dialectic between a Marxist class-struggle approach to events and these alternative focuses. She takes an extremely short period – Britain from 1828-1833 – to study what light Marxism can shed on events and which vital parts of history remain unexplored

unless other interpretative frameworks are employed. Interestingly, hers is the only chapter in either book that provides any accounts from ordinary people of how they viewed earth-shaking events. Hall argues that a full understanding of her chosen period requires a focus on the roles of gender and of the importance of the colonies, both of which, she implies, are invisible to Marxism.

This raises the obvious question – not systematically addressed in either book – about what exactly Marxist history is. For Robert Brenner, in his extended chapter on the nature of feudalism, it





involves analysing the political economy of a given period. For most of human history, this in turn implies developing Marxist theory in order to have appropriate analytical tools. Brenner does not believe that there is a strict link between economic interests and the behaviour of individuals or classes. Against the kind of crude reductionism which was the stock in trade of many Stalinist

As Marx and Engels put it at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"

historians in the past and it continues to be the argument used by many modern historians determined to reject a Marxist approach.

A more general view would be that Marxist history has to be based on class analysis of events. As Marx and Engels put it at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". Even here, however, there are problems.

Most of the authors in Marxist History-writing refer admiringly to Marx's 18th Brumaire, (which, as Alex Callinicos points out, was not written as history but as a guide to the present, which is partly what makes it so thrilling to read) but none of them explore the successes and limits of Marx's approach, or its mixed legacy in less able hands.

Marx was able to powerfully dissect the deep class interests underlying the political tendencies during the French revolutionary events of 1848-1851, and to periodise the swings of the struggle. But could our view of this period be qualitatively enriched by introducing the insights from a modern interest in gender or the voices of the voiceless? This would have been a more convincing approach for Catherine Hall and a more effective test of the strengths

and weaknesses of Marx's historical method.

On the other hand, such a deep class analysis is not necessarily useful for studying every past event, nor, as Chris Wickham explains in his essay on medieval history, is it necessarily what every historian wants to focus on, no matter what his or her politics. Not every political difference or historical event can be explained in

terms of deep class interests, and an emphasis on periodisation may substitute for a more profound analysis of the factors involved. The trap of over-interpretation has been hilariously explored in Carlo M. Cipolla's untranslated spoof essay "Pepper, the motor-force of history", which demonstrates that the Crusades, the Hundred Years war and the Renaissance were all caused by the aphrodisiac effects of pepper. Some of that kind of self-deprecating understanding would have spiced up these contributions.

As Big Brother's Party slogan has it in George Orwell's 1984: "Those who control the past, control the future: who controls the present controls the past". The revival of liberal "revisionist" accounts of revolution from the ilk of Simon Schama, François Furet and Orlando Figes is the most acute expression of the decline in Marxist historiography.

In *History and Revolution* a series of contributors albeit lower on the academic ladder than the Oxbridge, UCLA and London Professors who feature in Marxist History-writing, take on the main "revisionist" accounts – although disappointingly, Robert Service is not dealt with in any detail. But what the contributors lack in academic kudos they make up for with the more overtly political

perspective that informs their writing. Most of them are around the British SWP or the French LCR, and convincingly show that the revisionists are in fact merely re-treads of contemporary reactionary descriptions, from Edmund Burke in the 18th century to any number of politicians in the 20th.

Jim Wolfreys, Marc Ferro and Enzo Traverso take up cudgels against Furet and Stéphane Courtois, who have presented self-consciously revisionist – and infuriatingly lightweight – accounts of the history of French revolution and of Communism, respectively. But these are relatively well-behaved rebuttals, with none of the savagery that their targets deserve. Florence Gauthier's rich chapter on the rise and fall of the democratic programme of the French Revolution does not even explicitly engage with, far less "refute", revisionist accounts of this period. Despite the subtitle of the book (*Refuting Revisionism*), there are disappointingly few polemics.

Geoff Kennedy's chapter on the English revolution makes an excellent crib-guide to recent debates and shows the weakness of the liberal vision based on contingent or psychological factors rather than class forces. Probably the most original contribution is Lars Lih's description of how War Communism looked from the inside. Based on a close analysis of Trotsky's writings from 1920, Lih's chapter shows how, when faced with civil war and invasion, the Bolsheviks were extremely sober about their situation. There is no evidence to support the anti-Marxists' claim that the Bolsheviks were so out of touch that the USSR was a kind of "theatre of the absurd" in which dreams were taken for reality.

Mike Haynes addresses one of the implications of the "revisionist" accounts of revolutions that the revolutionaries were the "baddies", while the "goodies" were the liberals, by tracing the failure of liberalism in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and showing how they were not out-manoeuvred by the wily and anti-democratic

Bolsheviks, but rather that they made wrong political choices based on a false understanding of the forces in motion. Were the revisionist historians to step into the Tardis and turn up in Petrograd, even with the wisdom of hindsight they would make the same mistakes and experience the same failure. Like their past political counterparts, they are destined for the dustbin of history – TV tie-ins and all.

And funnily enough while the contributors to both collections are well able to analyse the weaknesses of their contemporary opponents, they too are unable to escape the confines of the historical period from which they emerged.

Part of the reason for the marginalisation of Marxism in contemporary social life and academia is the inability of Marxist historians and social theorists to bring it alive for a modern audience. This is surprising given that “history is the new black” in the publishing world (including in the magazine industry), and – in UK schedules at least – TV programmes about history are even more prevalent than those about cooking or property. Faced with this public appetite for history, the Marxist historians writing in these volumes seem simply to have passed by on the other side.

What would a modern popular Marxist history look like? Would it be carefully didactic, strictly interpreting selected events in an orthodox framework, like Gordon Childe’s *What Happened in History?* Or would it be positively unpreachy, focussing on inspiring class-struggle moments, providing eye-witness accounts and allowing the reader to draw the necessary conclusions, like Paul Mason’s recent *Live Working or Die Fighting?* And how would it cope with the recent trend to “micro-history” – what would a Marxist analysis add to Mark Kurlansky’s *Cod* or Dana Sobel’s *Longitude*?

By turning their attention to popular perceptions of history, they could undoubtedly satisfy both the public’s desire for gripping, personal stories, and demonstrate

the power of Marxism by underlining the importance of putting those events into a political, class-based context. Any one of Simon Schama’s books could have been written a hundred times better by a Marxist, and should have been. The problem is not only the attitude of publishers; it also lies in the imagination of Marxist historians. They need to reach out and provide the next generation of

historians – in particular school-students and undergraduates, as well as the general public – with rousing examples of class-based writing, which explain the past, cast light on the present and show us a different future.

Matthew Cobb

Matthew Cobb lectures at the University of Manchester. His book on the French Resistance in World War Two will be published in 2009

The journey of an anti-Zionist Jew

IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF

Mike Marqusee

Verso / 2008 / £16.99

WHEN MORE than one hundred Jewish anti-Zionists had a letter published in the *Guardian* recently stating that, for them, the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Israeli state was nothing to celebrate, they were assailed on all sides. The Israeli Ambassador to London called for their “ostracism”. One signatory, Haim Beresheeth, an activist in the Academic Boycott campaign received a Zionist post calling him a “kike” a virulently anti-Semitic term of abuse equivalent to “nigger” or “paki”.

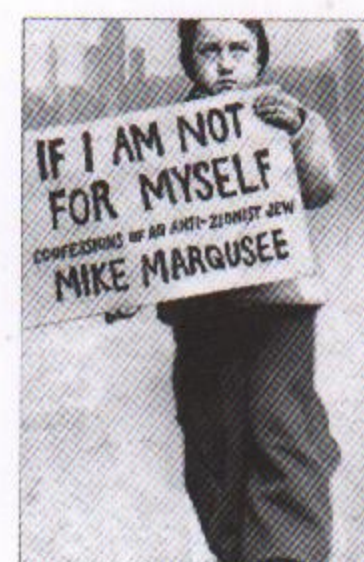
One of the most frequent questions Zionists ask Jewish anti-Zionists is ‘what makes you Jewish’ as if a precondition of being Jewish is either an attachment to religious superstition or an idolatrous, state worship. Mike meets this head on at the beginning of the book, “According to both anti-semites and Zionists, I am objectively a Jew and will be a Jew whatever I believe or practice. For this reason the Nazis would have marked me out for persecution and extermination, and Israel marks me out as a potential recipient of privileges, a rightful inheritor of others’ land and resources my Jewishness is far more than the sum of others’

perceptions. It’s a locale where the self intersects with history, past and present.”

This book is therefore more than welcome. When I first set out 40 years ago as a Jewish anti-Zionist there were no role models. I felt alone, except for a handful of revolutionary socialists, most of whom avoided the question of Palestine. One of the most gratifying things today is just how many Jews are rejecting Zionism and taking an active part in campaigns such as that for a Boycott of Israel.

That Jewish identity, far from consisting of the Zionist myth of 2,000 years longing to ‘return’ to Palestine was at various times an anti-racist and socialist identity. It was the identity of young Jewish activists, such as Mike’s father, who went to Mississippi in 1964 to provide practical solidarity with Black people fighting against the Jim Crow laws and segregation.

Jewish identity included the fight of the Bund – the General Jewish Workers Union of Russia and Poland – in their fight against the pogromists and fascists. As Mike points out, from 1881 to 1914, when two million Jews emigrated from the Czarist empire, just 2% (45,000), chose to go to Palestine. For most Jews the “Promised Land” was the United States of America not Palestine.





It is unfortunate therefore that the majority of the book is taken up by a biography of Marqusee's maternal grandfather, E V Morand. He is a good example of how a commitment to Zionism was in complete contradiction to socialism and working class solidarity. Morand was a labour activist who started off in the Tammany Hall wing of New York's Democratic Party and ended up as one of the founders and stalwarts of the American Labour Party, the most successful left party in the US since Eugene Deb's Socialist Party.

Morand was a committed anti-racist and militant anti-fascist at a time when Father Coughlin, the rabidly anti-Semitic Catholic priest was active. He was scathing about Bnai Brith (a Jewish community organisation) and its passive attitude to fighting anti-Semitism. Morand was also involved in campaigns such as the Scottsborough Boys, a group of young black men who became a cause celebre who were falsely accused of rape and who faced execution after being convicted by an all-white jury in Alabama.

Morand was also close to the American Communist Party. To the end he was a bitter opponent of McCarthyism, unlike the Jewish

just "another British ruse." (p.208) In the wake of the Nazi holocaust, the Palestinians had become "a Nazi-like enemy". To Morand, Jewish anti-Zionists "were the lowest of the low" (p.186).

Morand even argued that Israel "has the right to anticipate aggression and strike first to prevent a full-scale war" (p.191) anticipating its attacks against neighbouring states by half a century. Marqusee cites anti-Zionist Rabbi Elmer Berger who noted how his fellow Reform rabbis condemned the Vietnam War at the same time as they engaged in "the usual pretexts to justify Israeli militarism."

Marqusee also recalls how Tony Cliff, leader of the International Socialists who came from Palestine, described "the beating of Arabs, throwing of petrol on the products of the fellaheen (peasants) who dare to offer their wares to Jewish customers and similar acts are everyday occurrences." It could have been added that this was the action of the 'socialist' Zionists. Zionism, a variant of Jewish bourgeois politics, was capable of turning genuine radicals like Marqusee's grandfather into foaming bigots.

Unfortunately Marqusee doesn't make the obvious point that his

Zionist movement which vigorously opposed lowering the immigration barriers to Europe's Jews, both during and after the war, and which saw the fight against fascism as useless, seeing anti-Semitism as a product of Jewish 'homelessness'.

Marqusee's parents too were both left-wingers, former members of the Communist Party who buckled under the McCarthyite inquisition. One of the formative events in Mike's life was listening to a young Israeli soldier giving a talk and telling fellow pupils that Arabs went to the toilet in the street. Aged 14, Mike concluded that Israel too was a racist imperial state. But when he told his father this he barked out "enough already" and concluded that Mike had some Jewish self-hatred in him. Years later, after the massacre of two thousand Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut, by Israel's friends the Phalangists, his father phoned him to say that Mike had been right after all.

There is much to recommend in this book, such as its emphasis on the fact that Zionism is a passing historical phenomenon and not the culmination of Diaspora Jewry's existence. Particularly moving is his description of the attacks on anti-fascist Dorothy Parker, who could see no reason why, if she had opposed anti-Semitism, she should then turn a blind eye to racism simply because it came from Jews.

Likewise his description of the Prophets is well worth reading since Zionism prefers stories of Joshua and his slaughter of every man, woman and suckling child, to the prophets who "nearly all set themselves in opposition to the existing state, often not only warning of but wishing for its destruction."

The most amusing section of the book is where Marqusee describes the different responses of anti-Zionist Jews to the charge of self-hatred. The humorist Larry David would quip that he might hate himself, but it wasn't on account of being Jewish! Anti-Zionist historian Lenni Brenner's response was that his ex-lovers would testify that the

The most amusing section of the book is where Marqusee describes the different responses of anti-Zionist Jews to the charge of self-hatred

establishment. For him "Jewish identity had become a progressive essence, aligned with the cause of democracy, of America, of the Popular Front, of labor, of all victims of discrimination." But Morand, like so many American Jews, capitulated to Zionist chauvinism, supporting a Jewish Palestine, oblivious of its effect on the indigenous population. Indeed when concern began to be expressed about the Palestinian refugees, Morand described it as

grandfather illustrated the contradiction between being Jewish in a non-Jewish society, with social, political and economic interests of one's own and being a Zionist, i.e. accepting a priori that one didn't belong in non-Jewish society.

Morand was a passionate anti-fascist, he railed against immigration controls against Jews and demanded that the survivors of the Holocaust living in Displaced Persons camps be allowed to enter the US. Yet he was a supporter of the

last thing he could be accused of was hating himself, whereas an unnamed activist had a simpler response – “I don’t hate myself. I hate you, you fucking bastard.”

The chapter on Diasporic Dimensions and the Moroccan Jewish community is well worth reading, as is his analogies between the dilemmas of the early Jewish

were only a nation in so far as Apartheid divide and rule allowed and promoted it. Mike forgets the words of one of the leaders of the French Revolution, Clermont-Tonnere that he quotes, that “everything must be refused to the Jews as a nation and everything granted to them as individuals.” (p.72).

of Garibaldi was democratic, but 50 years later that same Italian nationalism threw up Mussolini. This is in the nature of nationalism. Its progressive phase is very short-lived as the property interests of the bourgeoisie surface.

The chapter on Diasporic Dimensions and the Moroccan Jewish community is well worth reading as are his analogies between the dilemmas of the early Jewish communities in the USA and Britain and that of British Muslims today. But the book suffers from a lack of rigorous analysis. It may be considered offensive by some to have a placard making a stark equation between the swastika and the Star of David but it’s not anti-Semitic. Likewise Marqusee’s statement that “for 2000 years the Jews have been persecuted as the crucifiers of Christ.” is in itself part of Zionist mythology. In the words of Abram Leon, it is an example of the Zionist tendency to transpose anti-Semitism to all of history as a means of avoiding analysing its different forms and stages.

Mike writes with passion as when he excoriates “the blindness of the majority of American and British Jews to the criminality of Israeli behaviour toward the Palestinians”. (p. 271) But the book is too ambitious and falls between two stools. It is a book whose whole is rather less than the sum of its parts.

Tony Greenstein

It may be considered offensive by some to have a placard making a stark equation between the swastika and the Star of David but it’s not anti-Semitic

communities in the USA and Britain and that of British Muslims today.

But Mike also demonstrates that his reformist politics have influenced his anti-Zionist politics. He refers to the oft-repeated question “Why should Jews be the only people denied the right to national self-determination?” and he then embarks on a tortuous explanation as to why the Kurds and the Tamils should not be allowed to form a separate state because in so doing, it would create difficulties with those who live alongside them and therefore throw up “awkward questions.” He even points to the Afrikaners and Zulus as an example of nations denied the right to self-determination as a reason for denying Jews this self-same right.

The obvious response to the above question would be that the Jews, just like the Afrikaners and Zulus do not form a separate nation. How, other than on a metaphysical level, can British, Argentinean, Indian and Yemenite Jews be considered part of the same nation? They neither speak the same language nor occupy the same territory. Even their religious customs differ. Likewise the Afrikaners whilst having, like the Israeli Jews, certain national characteristics, formed their identity primarily as a result of the oppression of others. The Zulus

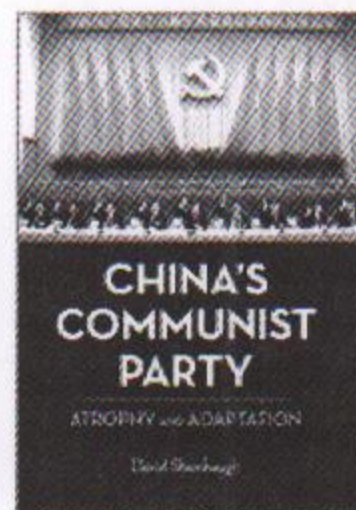
Marxists have always accepted that nations such as the Kurds and the Tamils do have the right to self-determination, including forming a state if they so wished. We do not encourage separation from other peoples, but to oppose the right to form such a state would be to advocate national oppression. Instead, Mike Marqusee argues that the right to national self-determination depends on what type of nationalism it is: “The measurement must be – as for all other nationalisms – the democratic content of the national demand and the national identity in question.” (p.29) But this is gobbledegook. Yes the nationalism

Adapting to survive, dividing to rule

CHINA'S COMMUNIST PARTY - ATROPHY AND ADAPTATION
David Shambaugh
UCal Press / 2008 / £23.95

DAVID SHAMBAUGH is a leading American academic Sinologist from the George Washington University and the Brookings Institute. China's Communist Party (CCP), Atrophy

and Adaptation, considers the CCP's prospects for survival by assessing the contradiction at its heart between atrophy and adaptation. The “atrophy” refers to the party's current politics compared with the idealistic days of its 1940s youth and its risk of following the road to collapse of its Russian and Eastern European counterparts. The “adaptation” refers to the party's





ability to learn and adapt to maintain its rule, to cope with the pressures of globalisation, the creation of a market economy, growing social stratification, inequality, corruption, unemployment, crime and unrest.

It might come as a surprise with a writer at the heart of the American establishment but this is no wild anti-communist rant of the kind penned by Will Hutton last year. Instead Shambaugh gives us a real critical look at Western intelligence and academic sources

“You do not ask a tiger politely for his skin – either you kill him or he will kill you! Revolution is merciless – if you do not overthrow him, he will overthrow you!”

(and they're often very nearly the same thing) and the CCP itself.

Shambaugh draws a distinction between “pessimists”, who believe that China faces imminent collapse and revolutionary change and “optimists”, who believe that China's CCP will be able to maintain its rule into the foreseeable future. Whether the labels are apt or not, he is firmly in the optimistic camp. Shambaugh recognises the possibility of collapse but notes that “This is not, however, to predict that all such parties will eventually implode and lose power.” (p5)

Shambaugh begins by making an assessment of “Western Discourse on Communist Party-States”, he does so in order to measure the accuracy of Western theorists predictions about the fall of the USSR. They were all very inaccurate. In fact according to Shambaugh only Zbigniew Brzezinski, the notorious cold war warrior and adviser to President Jimmy Carter, did so.

After the event of course, these theorists were able to arrive at an explanation, citing the stagnation of the economy, the decay of civil society, the alienation of the people from the Communist Party, the

decline of their coercive power, the over emphasis on military competition, racism and national chauvinism. But in reality the collapse of the Stalinist states took the world, including the US intelligence and academic community, by surprise.

This of course should serve as a warning to us today, abrupt and unexpected events are part of the everyday, as Shambaugh recognises himself, so what about the Chinese?

The Chinese Stalinists were horrified to witness the events of

Eastern Europe and Russia between 1989-91. They were disgusted at the flabby, weak and conciliatory attitude of the various Stalinist parties, which with the notable exception of Romania, refused to fight to defend their rule.

They contrasted this response most unfavourably with their crushing response to the Tiananmen Square uprising of 1989. Gao Di speaking on behalf of the Chinese Central Committee, savaged the Generals behind the ill-fated 1991 Russian coup, they, “should simply have arrested Yeltsin and Gorbachev before they did anything else, just as we did the Gang of Four . . . [the coup plotters] could never have achieved their ends by working within the framework of the constitution. You do not ask a tiger politely for his skin – either you kill him or he will kill you! Revolution is merciless – if you do not overthrow him, he will overthrow you!” (p.58)

The Chinese Stalinist will adapt to survive, but this is no toothless tiger.

But aside from their commitment to the use of the utmost extreme force to maintain their rule, the CCPs analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union and

Eastern Bloc centred around four themes:

- › The deterioration of the economy, high levels of debt and poor standards of living
- › Dictatorships' ruling parties divorced from the populace and a lack of local level party building
- › Unions that were not a bridge between the party and the working class
- › Peaceful evolution efforts by the Western countries.”

The legitimacy of Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe and the USSR had been fatally undermined by the alienation of the party from the masses. This when combined with the stagnation of the economy, falling living standards and western propaganda for “democracy”, built a fatal social combination, such that by the time Gorbachev (“a traitor like Trotsky” according to the CCP) attempted his reform process it was both too much and too little. It weakened the repressive potential of the state apparatus, but encouraged a restorationist alliance around Yeltsin which eventually overthrew Stalinist rule. It is this combination of circumstances which the Chinese are desperate to avoid.

Shambaugh goes into much more detail around the nuances of the various analyses, which show a sophisticated appreciation of the problems faced by the Stalinists in maintaining their dictatorship. They were summarised by one theorist Li Jingjie, “to concentrate on economic development, undertake political reform, uphold Marxism and strengthen efforts as party building” (p78), which together have clearly provided the inspiration for the policy of the CCP until the present.

This process of adaptation required a remoulding of the CCPs ideology, not least because with the restoration of capitalism in the mid-1990s, much of the media was now increasingly financed and run by business interests. This created tensions between the propaganda authorities and the journalists, publishers and editors who needed to write interesting stuff people wanted to buy.

Shambaugh uses three recent campaigns by CCP authorities to illustrate this process, Jiang Zemin's, the CCP's general secretary, "Three Represents", Hu Jintao's "Scientific Development" and "Socialist Harmonious Society" and a campaign in 2004-5 on the party's "Governing Capacity."

The Three Represents, asserted that the party itself should represent the "advanced productive forces in society", those in "modern culture" and also "the interests of the vast majority of the people." Leaving aside the mangling of Marxist categories, what's more important is what they meant for the practice of the CCP, which was the opening of the party to intellectuals from the private sector. In other words the CCP wanted to incorporate the rising private sector bourgeoisie and their representatives into its structures. How successful they were is moot. By 2004 according to the party's figures, of the 2.41 million new members just 894 were enterprise owners.

After succeeding Jiang, Hu Jintao's campaign for a "Socialist Harmonious Society", was an attempt to address the growing social stratification of Chinese society - inside the cities and between the urban and rural sectors, not least because of the growing rural unrest, as farmers were stripped of their land for development. Hu introduced a range of reforms to ameliorate these contradictions.

The "Governing Capability" campaign was an attempt to revive local party bodies and address corruption. (p.125) And this reveals the real social roots of the CCP, in 2007 it had over 73 million members and 3.6 million local level party organisations, (p134). Alongside this went a strictly limited and controlled process of internal democratisation, cadre training and promoting a new generation of leaders. This is an attempt to avoid the alienation of the party from society which sealed the fate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the late 1980s.

Shambaugh assesses whether the CCP can survive. Recognising the many similarities between it and its Stalinist counterparts in the former USSR and Central Europe, he thinks political breakdown is improbable, precisely because of the CCP's ability to adapt, he similarly rules out a return to Maoist central planning or a fascist type dictatorship. His conclusion is then that through an eclectic series of reforms the CCP can survive for the foreseeable future.

Shambaugh's book is a serious attempt to look at the CCP's rule, the contradictions which underpin it and the CCP's ability to adapt in order to maintain its rule. However, not surprisingly for a US academic,

he downplays the possibilities of a mass working class upsurge against the dictatorship. The workers' movement in China is now a mighty 300 million strong, a very different situation to the days of Tiananmen Square. A stalling of economic growth and rising prosperity could be the spark that unites the many grievances of town and country. Precisely because the CCP is a mass party, any real crisis and explosion of the masses will find its expression in the party itself. It has yet to be tested in a mass revolt similar to Russia in 1905 or even Indonesia in 1997/98. Speed the day.

Bill Jenkins

Delving into the heart of Connolly's life

**BETWEEN COMRADES
LETTERS AND CORRESPONDENCE**

Donal Nevin (ed)

Gill & Macmillan / 2007 / £24.99

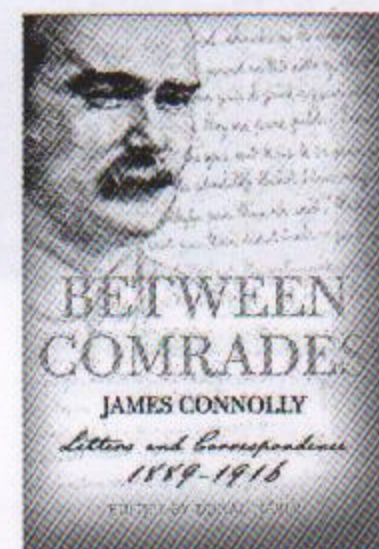
JAMES CONNOLLY is an icon on the Irish socialist and republican left. Connolly cut his political teeth in Scotland where he was involved with the Socialist Democratic Federation and the Scottish Socialist Federation before coming to Ireland in 1896. Following the failure of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) which he founded that year, Connolly spent seven years in the United States, returning to Ireland in 1910 when he worked with James Larkin and the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). After the 1913 lockout and the beginning of the First World War the following year, he was commandant of the Irish Citizen Army and joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He took a leading role in the failed Easter 1916 rising in Dublin against British rule and was executed in May.

Between Comrades, Letters and

Correspondence 1889 - 1916 is a huge tome. Once you get past the many letters of requests for payment for papers or pamphlets, once you get into the heart of the volume, in particular the longer letters, the book is unputdownable. The frank exchanges between Connolly and Carstairs Matheson, editor of *The Socialist* in Scotland, which Connolly also co-founded, are riveting. At one point Matheson says he wishes he possessed Connolly's "manly brutality". At another, he refers to his "confoundedly disagreeable integrity and incorruptibility".

And Connolly's "manly brutality" is certainly in evidence in his vitriol against those who provoked his ire. He was a man who didn't suffer fools gladly.

His grievance at the Irish comrades who he held responsible for his having to leave Ireland with the failure of the ISRP in 1903 is in evidence here, "Handicapped as I am with a large family, it is not an easy thing to move about the world. And at any rate I regard Ireland, or at least the socialist part of Ireland





which is all I care for, as having thrown me out and I do not wish to return like a dog to his vomit.”

He vented his spleen against De Leon, leader of the US Socialist Labor Party, a left wing group in the Second International, at every possible opportunity, for the American's sectarianism – a running theme right throughout the book.

Laced through the letters is evidence of his abject poverty. In Connolly's exchanges with William

Ireland was inevitable and that the best the working class could do was fight for reforms and socialism through parliament. When the war broke out he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and threw himself behind the nationalists, hoping that England's involvement in the European war would prove Ireland's opportunity to break free.

There was a burning need for the total Connolly picture and *Between Comrades* is very welcome in this

Comrades are explored in depth in the IWG's *Connolly, A Marxist Analysis* (available at www.permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=352).

So for example, we learn that on the debate on women's oppression in the Second International Connolly was on the one hand uninformed, as evident in the many letters excoriating Bebel's book on women to be found in this volume. But seriously entrenched opposition to the developing consensus in the left of the international socialist movement stemmed from Connolly's concessions to religion, which he claimed should be left as a sphere outside of politics.

On the national question, Connolly, decided in 1896 that any form of bourgeois national independence was impossible and that freedom from British rule would inevitably see socialism in Ireland. This seriously and fatally underestimated he need for a serious fight to break the working class from illusions in the nationalists who would otherwise use independence to merely enlarge their own exploitation of the Irish working class.

After the trade unions were defeated in the 1913 Dublin lock out, and with the shelving of Home Rule and the threat of partition, Connolly was impatient to use England's war as Ireland's chance to strike against imperialism.

To this end he joined the IRB. Connolly's much acclaimed slogan "The cause of Ireland is the cause of labour, the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland" far from being a leap forward for Marxism in Ireland, in reality embodied a profound confusion. As a slogan it serves to liquidate the political independence of the working class into revolutionary nationalism. That has been the fateful legacy of Connolly to the socialist movement in Ireland.

But *Between Comrades* let's us in to the soul and heart of Connolly, a true giant of 20th century Irish and indeed world socialist politics. Captured by the British, gravely wounded and knowing the firing

Connolly's much acclaimed slogan "The cause of Ireland is the cause of labour, the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland" in reality embodied a profound confusion

O'Brien written during his stay in the USA, we learn how the comrades in Ireland are looking for a leader and there are many requests for Connolly to come home again.

But Connolly is adamant he will not go back to living in the slums as he had had to do working for the ISRP. He emphatically states that unless he has some way to satisfactorily settle the problem of how to live – nothing less that £2 a week will do – he will not venture back to Ireland.

"I did that once before when they (his children) were very small, and some of them not yet born, and you know that the result was not very satisfactory. It makes me shudder even yet when I think of the hard grind of those poverty stricken years, of the hunger and the wretchedness we endured to build up a party in Ireland. And you know the outcome." The many letters asking, pleading, pestering people to honor payments for pamphlets or papers are clear evidence of the dire straights he was in for most of his life.

On returning to Ireland in 1910 he worked for the Irish trade union leader "Big Jim Larkin" and founded the Irish Labour Party in 1912. Connolly thought Home Rule for

regard. But this book lacks context. On its own it in no way explains for example why Connolly is so vehemently against the German Marxist Bebel's book on women, which explains their oppression and champions their political and social emancipation.

Was there a connection between Connolly's position on women and his religious sentiments? In joining the IRB in 1914 in the run up to the Easter Rising why did he "lower the red flag to the green"?

The answers to these questions are not to be found in the *Letters and Correspondence*, nor could they be. Nevertheless any reader who wants to gain a full understanding of Connolly's political ideology and connect the dots will want to know more.

After reading *Between Comrades* I sought out the only book I know that answers all the questions that the *Letters* provoke: *Connolly, A Marxist Analysis*. Co-written in 1990 by Andy Johnston, Jim Larragy and Eddie McWilliams, all comrades in the Irish Workers Group, it is the most thoroughgoing, and a truly Marxist analysis of Connolly's politics. These two books make excellent companion pieces. All the questions that arise on reading *Between*

squad awaited him, Connolly writes to his wife, "Don't cry, Lillie, you'll unman me". "But your beautiful life, James," she says, "your

beautiful life". To which Connolly replies, "Hasn't it been a full life, Lillie? And isn't it a good end?"

Maureen Gallagher

High Jinks – the varied cinema of '68

IN THE autumn of 1967 as students returned to their colleges in Paris the latest Jean-Luc Godard film, *La Chinoise*, was released at the Cinémathèque and in the arthouse cinemas of the Left Bank. Six months later, De Gaulle's government dismissed Henri Langlois, founder of the Cinémathèque. It was the latest abuse of civil liberties by a vicious, authoritarian government.

For students on the left the cinema espoused by Langlois and the filmmakers of the "Nouvelle Vague" was a direct expression of their frustration and aspirations, especially when a protest march packed with film directors and producers was brutally broken up by police. They took this latest instance of state thuggery very personally. Indeed it was to prove one of the trigger point for the riots that followed later that year.

It is odd to reflect how these riots, which gave rise to a general strike that almost toppled the government and sent shock waves across Europe, should have their roots in an event barely noticed beyond the confines of the Latin Quarter. It is typically French that the sacking of a cinema manager should help to plunge the country into wholesale civic strife.

Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* presages these events very accurately. Its sole focus is on five students, holed up in an apartment reciting Maoist ideology to one another and contriving their own response to the injustices of the world around them. There is no attempt here to link into a wider movement, to seek strength in numbers, to root their discontent in

the concrete realities of the poor and dispossessed.

The apartment, stripped of most of its furniture and brimful of "little red books", is the only world these students need. Godard simultaneously mocks and admires his young revolutionaries. He highlights the parochialism of their machinations – many of their pronouncements owe less to Mao than to a naïve poetic sensibility, as the students dream wistfully of a red sun that never sets. But Godard is entirely sympathetic to the energy with which these young people labour to forge out of this imported ideology a way forward for themselves. He sees this energy as enough of a justification for their actions.

Godard, a child of the Second World War, uses *La Chinoise* to align himself entirely with "The Young". Whatever the shortfalls of their immature perspective on the world, the energy and drive they bring to

For students on the left the cinema espoused the filmmakers of the "Nouvelle Vague" was a direct expression of their frustration and aspirations

their cause is reason enough to back them. Yet the ad hoc, ill-considered pursuit of their goals and the solipsism that lurks behind their revolutionary rhetoric becomes of real issue when they resolve to take their cause beyond the walls of their apartment by assassinating the visiting Soviet Minister of Culture.

With the stakes raised, Godard puts the young revolutionary appointed to this task (played by Anne Wiazemsky, shortly to become Mrs Godard) in front of the philosopher Francis Jeanson, playing himself. Jeanson had been the head of a network that supported Algerian resistance fighters and had stood trial in 1960. Wiazemsky encounters Jeanson on a train and tells him of her plan to kill the minister. Jeanson needs no script with which to present a counter-argument to this drastic course of action.

A rather hesitant Wiazemsky (her lines fed to her by Godard through an earpiece) counters that what she proposes to do is no different to the female bomber Jeanson supported in Algeria.

"But there is a difference" counters Jeanson, "that woman had a whole country behind her."

I do not know what the contemporary audience for *La Chinoise* made of these debates or if they fully appreciated the satire behind Godard's depiction of their peers. Whatever, unrest grew palpably over that winter and by the close of 1967 Godard had renounced conventional cinema





Channel for his study in rebellion, if..., set in a public boarding school.

The atmosphere here is not parochial, it is stifling – the privileged sons of diplomats and bankers are imprisoned in a highly reactionary regime and are prey to the whims of whips and prefects given carte blanche by feckless house masters to terrorise the boys in any way they choose. The school is a lawless Hades – a metaphor for a repressive state.

Anderson was no revolutionary – he believed in capital punishment and read the Daily Telegraph – but he was an iconoclast, a peculiarly English type of anarchist. Just as it's the manner of the French middle classes to launch a revolution from outside a cinema, their English counterparts take their call to arms at the gates of a public school. In neither case does it have much to do with the workers, but I suppose they all believe they have Brecht on their side.

The spirit of Brecht is evoked to explain why half of the film is shot in black and white, although the real reason, as usual, was a lack of money. From a distance of 40 years, if... is a more dated work than *La Chinoise*, the work of a less accomplished filmmaker, a more conventional work, and with much less of the energy both films espouse. Still, the dull monotony of school life is beautifully captured in the muted tones with which the film is shot.

Malcolm McDowell's first major role was as Travis, the young sixth former who leads his small band of rebels to the film's thrilling dénouement – letting loose a volley of bullets upon the rabble of masters, boys and assembled dignitaries from the tiles of the school's roof.

That scene has freshness enough to survive the passing of years, as does the one in which a beating is meted out to Travis and his chums by the prefects – an act of such gross and unwarranted violence that it hastens the bloodbath with which the film concludes. Far

more shocking films had been made before if... and many more would follow it, but at the time

Paramount, duped into funding it, refused to release it on the grounds that it might incite a riot. If only.

The bosses of Paramount had less cause to be worried by a low-budget British film than by the movie pitches they were getting from the young and gifted of Hollywood by the late 1960s. The tide of rebellion across European cinema was washing up on the shores of LA. When Warren Beatty persuaded

tells an old farmer to keep his hard-earned cash, the gang only wants what is in the hands of the bank.

This may all be a distance from Maoist ideology, but Bonnie and Clyde are really no different from the young protagonists of Godard's film or from Travis and his pals tearing down the walls of their school. They are two rebellious spirits raising havoc and now given centre stage by a new wave of

The French middle classes launch a revolution from outside a cinema; their English counterparts take their call to arms at the gates of a public school

Warner Brothers to give him \$200,000 to make *Bonnie and Clyde* with a failed director, Arthur Penn, at the helm, the studio had little reason to expect such a radical picture would emerge from their back lot. Unlike the European films featured here, *Bonnie and Clyde* had its story rooted firmly in the lives of the poor – in this case the rural poor of 1930s America.

But the film doesn't soberly document the travails of these people, as does work from an earlier era, such as John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Instead, it zeros in on two young rebellious free spirits and has them let rip across the south, hotly pursued by the law. From the moment Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) lays her hand on Clyde's gun (in a perfectly pitched performance from Beatty), she is freed of the confines of her small town waitressing life, to ride high on danger and adrenalin.

The two young robbers are genuinely hurt when ordinary civilians, poor like them, take umbrage at their enthusiastic and amateur attempts to rob them. Clyde sees himself as a man on the side of the people; he proudly lets a man, dispossessed of his home, use his gun to fire holes into the sign erected outside his house by the auction company and in one of the many banks they hold up, Clyde

filmmakers fully sympathetic to their anguished frustration and boredom.

From our perspective, then, we haven't travelled such a long distance from the flowerings of youthful cinema in the 1950s, still exemplified by Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*. The rebels of '68 may espouse a cause they only partially understand, or they may strike out in no higher cause than their own. Either way, the films of this era are most certainly not offered as direct indictments of the injustices of the world. America's introspective angst about its war in Vietnam was yet to play out across its screens.

In Europe, the spontaneous outburst of violence we see in if... came to pass hard on the heels of the film's completion, much to the surprise of its own makers, who were no more prepared for it than anyone else. But it was a brief explosion of youthful exuberance. A more systematic campaign of violence by an extreme group as presaged by *La Chinoise* is to be found only some years later in the 1970s. In 1968 it's still just high jinks.

Dave Boyer

1968



Friday 27 June (evening)

Room	6.30-7.00	7.00-8.00	8.30-9.00	9.00-10.00
3E	Registration	1968: year of revolution 'Let us be realistic and demand the impossible' Stuart King	Paris '68: poster art 'Imagination has seized power' Warren Carter	The French general strike 'The economy is suffering – let it die' Tina Purcell

Saturday 28 June

Room	10.00-11.15	11.45-1.00	2.00-3.15	3.45-5.00
Upper Hall	Barack Obama and US labor Jack Heyman of US longshoremen's union ILWU and Kim Moody, US labor activist and author	'Live working or die fighting' – workers' struggles in China Paul Mason expands on his recent book	Is the party over? Hilary Wainwright and John McDonnell debate whether parties have outlived their usefulness	Feminism versus socialism 1968-2008: does the debate matter? Helen Ward (PR) and Feminist Fightback

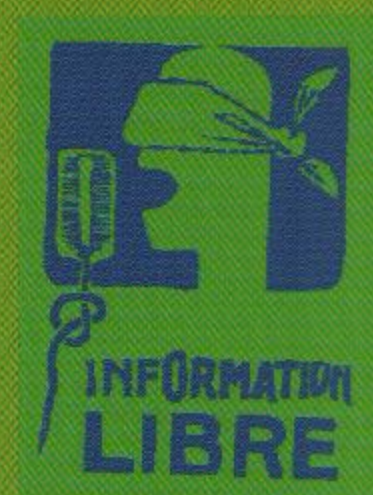
Sunday 29 June

Room	10.30-11.45	12.15-1.30	2.15-3.30	3.45-4.30
3E	Is the BNP still fascist? Debate: CPGB, PR	Climate change: how do we stop it? Roy Wilkes (SR) and Plane Stupid	Workers' struggles in Venezuela – eyewitness report Wlodek Flakin	Plenary: 1968-2008 Can the left put revolution on the agenda again? Kirstie Paton, Mark Hoskisson
2C	Lighting a fire: what would socialist education look like? Kate Ford	Iran: solidarity and criticism Hands Off People of Iran	Credit crunch: world recession or slowdown? Bill Jefferies, Costas Lapavistas	

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2008



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