Workers ACTION

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Rebellion in the South

Let's bury New Labour along with Blair *Iraq after three years of occupation* Hands off Iran *Abortion rights under attack* Abolish all faith schools *Respect in Tower Hamlets* Bolivia: on the crest of an anti-imperialist wave *Milosevic and the collapse of Yugoslavia* Sierra Leone's civil war assessed *Workers and workers' parties* Socialists and the Second World War

Workers ACTION

No. 30 **August 2006**

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About Workers Action

Workers Action is a Marxist current in the labour movement.

Workers suffered a series of heavy defeats under the Tories from 1979 onwards. The Labour movement is only now beginning to show signs of recovery both in terms of the level of strike action and the election of left-wingers to leading trade union positions. But the Labour Party leadership is resolutely pro-free market and pro-business, and has yet to see a real challenge to its authority inside the party.

Workers Action believes that the most important task at the moment is a struggle to renovate the existing labour movement, politically and in the workplace, so that it can fight effectively in its own interests.

This requires a struggle in the Labour movement as it is, with all its problems and weaknesses. Workers continue to support the Labour Party far more than any other party in elections and by union affiliation. At present, attempts to get round this political fact by mounting electoral challenges to Labour are, in most cases, futile and sectarian, and are likely to lead to greater demoralisation. Most importantly, they represent an abandonment of any serious political struggle against the Labour leadership. Workers Action supporters are therefore active in the Labour Party as well as the trade unions and political campaigns.

Capitalism condemns millions to exploitation, poverty, disease and war, so that when its leading international bodies meet, they have to do so behind lines of police. However, Workers Action believes that the relative importance of the anti-capitalist movement over the last few years is a sign not of the strength of the left, but of its weakness and marginalisation. The new free market world order is based on 20 years of defeats for the international working class. Protests outside the conferences of organisations such as the WTO are a positive development in that they show that there is opposition, but must not be a substitute for building a socialist leadership in the working class.

Workers Action supports all progressive national struggles against imperialism, without placing any confidence in the leaders of such movements. Neither bourgeois nationalism, nor petty-bourgeois guerrillaism, nor religious fundamentalism can advance the interests of the oppressed workers and peasants. We are for the building of a socialist leadership on an international scale.

The collapse of Stalinism in 1989, compounded by the move to the right of the Labour Party and the European Socialist parties, has resulted in an ideological crisis for the left. Some, like the SWP, deny that such a crisis exists – indeed, they claim that at the moment there is a realistic possibility of a serious electoral challenge to Labour. Others question whether the socialist project, fought for by the working class and its allies, is still viable. Workers Action believes that it is, but that to rebuild a fighting left relevant to the concerns of workers means rejecting the methods of sect-building and self-proclaimed vanguardism.

However, Workers Action has a non-dogmatic approach to this crisis of the left. We see it as an opportunity to evaluate critically many of our previously held conceptions in the light of experience. Marxism is a critical ideology or it is nothing. Socialists cannot march into the 21st century with their programme frozen in the 1920s.

If you are interested in joining us or discussing further, write to us at PO Box 7268, London F10 6TX or e-mail us at workers.action@btinternet.com.

New Labour: towards oblivion or reincarnation?

Tony Blair's ability to relinquish the premiership at a time, and in the manner, of his choosing has been seriously compromised in recent months by May's English local election results and by a series of scandals, culminating in the arrest of his chief fundraiser, Lord Levy, over the 'cash-for-honours' affair. In the local elections, Labour lost a net total of 320 seats, relinquishing control of 19 councils, and won only 26 per cent of the vote (on a 37 per cent turnout) – well behind the Tories and roughly level with the Liberal Democrats. Before, during and after the elections, New Labour's long-term electoral liabilities (not least over Iraq) have been compounded by a series of public embarrassments, which have been gleefully exploited by the media and the other parties. These have ranged from the trivial matters of John Prescott's intimacy with his secretary and (slightly more seriously) a US casino magnate to the erroneous release of foreign prisoners, the aforementioned 'loans for honours' scandal and the financial and staffing crisis in the NHS.

The 'foreign prisoners' issue has occupied headlines out of all proportion to its real significance because it has been seized on by those pursuing reactionary agendas on crime and immigration. As for Labour's procurement of funds from multi-millionaire businessmen – allegedly on the promise of peerages – this is unedifying but hardly shocking, given the previous record on this score (cf. Bernie Ecclestone); the most politically significant aspect of the issue is the fact that one of those involved was Ron Aldridge, executive chairman (now resigned) of Capita, which has been one of the principal beneficiaries of 'outsourcing' in the public sector. This illustrates the incestuous relationship between the government and the corporate privateers who are carving up public services – a relationship that has also played a part in the most serious of the recent 'scandals', the crisis in the NHS. It is a stark illustration of the political degeneration of the Labour leadership that Patricia Hewitt had the brass neck to declare to a Unison health conference that the NHS had been enjoying its best ever year when Trusts had just announced 7,000 redundancies due to deficits surpassing £600 million; and when her department was already under fire for proposing to hand over primary care in England to the private sector. The silent hostility she provoked on this occasion was spectacularly surpassed by the relentless barracking she received from the normally docile Royal College of Nursing at its own subsequent conference. This reaction accurately prefigured the drubbing that her party was to receive at the polls a few weeks later.

The local elections and their aftermath mean that Blair's all-redeeming virtue in the eyes of party loyalists – 'at least he gets Labour elected' – no longer holds; it looks increasingly unlikely that the party will secure an overall majority at the next election. The prospect of another Tory government at Westminster – almost unthinkable even a year ago – is now a realistic one. Until very recently, the unattractiveness of the Tories as an alternative party of government has been one of Blair's greatest assets. David Cameron's attempts to re-brand his party have undoubtedly helped them seem less like the swivel-eyed bigots and grasping plutocrats that most of them clearly are but the descent of New Labour ever deeper into corruption and hypocrisy has made almost any alternative seem worth a shot to many people. A recent *Guardian*/ICM poll of voting intentions put the Tories on 38 per cent of the vote, four points ahead of Labour, while the Liberal Democrats trailed behind with 24 per cent. Some derive crumbs of comfort from the fact that Labour held an even greater poll lead over Thatcher's Tories midway through the 1987-92 parliament, which did not prevent John Major from securing a fourth Tory victory when the country actually went to the polls.

Despite the media frenzy about palace coups and backbench revolts after May 4, the fabled letter urging Blair to do the decent thing never materialised and few MPs were prepared to state on the record that it was time for him to go. Nevertheless, the longer he clings on, the greater are the chances of his parliamentary colleagues allowing their self-preservation instinct to overcome their usual spinelessness and force him out. In doing so, they would unquestionably be defending the interests of their party, in contrast to Blair, who seemed quite unabashed about relying on Tory votes to secure the passage of the Education Bill, rather than attempting to address the concerns of his 'own' backbenchers. Left activists must actively work to bring about a leadership contest as soon as possible.

Even if the expected assumption of the party leadership by Gordon Brown proves sufficient to restore Labour's popularity, however – and this is not borne out by the ICM poll – the damage has already been done at local level, with Labour having lost overall control of most of its former municipal strongholds, and similar problems threatened next year when Scotland and Wales hold their own general elections. In Wales, in particular, a poll defeat occasioned by Blairite unpopularity would be a bitter irony for an administration that has steered a course away from New Labour.

Leaving aside electoral calculations, there is an obvious political objection to the idea that Gordon Brown can somehow rescue Labour from the mess it is in: he is himself the co-author of the New Labour project. The neo-liberal agenda on public services – including PFI, foundation hospitals, pension 'reform' and 104,000 civil service job cuts – has been driven by Brown as much as (if not more than) Blair. Even those policies which seem to owe more to Blair's idiosyncratic view of 'moral purpose' – most importantly, of course, the war on Iraq – have enjoyed Brown's acquiescence and public support. The blood of more than 100,000 Iraqis and countless Afghans is therefore on his hands, as well as on Blair's. Nevertheless, some in the party, citing the two men's different styles and political backgrounds, claim that the chancellor would distinguish himself from the policies of his predecessor if given his head. But, while Brown may have begun his political career, unlike Blair, with some genuine socialist convictions, he has not allowed these to encumber him on his road to power; all he now retains is the ability to address the labour movement in its own language. And, while a leader who cites Hardie and Bevan is superficially more appealing than one who hectors his audience with a mixture of management-speak and self-righteous moralising, it makes little difference when both proffer the same failed, right-wing policies.

The greatest danger inherent in the current situation is that Brown might seduce a sufficient portion of the centre-left to enable him to secure the leadership with the backing of a broad section of Labour's membership, thereby stabilising the situation in the party. It took a lot of unpleasant experiences to convince many Labour supporters that Blair had not, after all, had his metaphorical fingers crossed behind his back when he foreswore 'old-fashioned tax and-spend policies' in 1994-97. Similarly, today, a nod and a wink to the left from Brown – even while he publicly assuages any (unwarranted) suspicions on the part of the bourgeoisie and its apologists in the media – could buy him enough goodwill to revive 'the Project'. It is up to the left to ensure that New Labour dies with the political career of its principal founder.

It is therefore vital that there is a real leadership contest – and not simply one between Brown and a rival prophet of the true New Labour faith, such as Reid or Milburn. Even if the outcome of an election is a foregone conclusion, the contest itself should provide an opportunity for the left to open up the debate about Labour's political direction and to make the case for an alternative to the present neo liberal orthodoxy. John McDonnell's announcement of his candidacy on July 14 has created an opportunity for such a debate. McDonnell is probably the most articulate and unflinching socialist critic of New Labour in the House of Commons. As chair of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), he has driven forward the development of a socialist policy programme, setting out both an alternative election manifesto and an alternative budget. The LRC conference on July 22 will no doubt endorse his candidacy. McDonnell may well not be the only 'left' contender in this election, however. Moreover, the LRC represents only a fraction of Labour's centre-left; if it, and its chair, are to make the most of their intervention, then they need to work together with the broadest possible alliance of forces: all those grouped under the banner of the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance, as well as others who may not presently be part of the organised left. There needs to be as inclusive and democratic a debate as possible on the strategy and tactics of this contest – both to make a significant impact on the election itself and to ensure that the Labour left emerges strengthened and more united for the struggles ahead.

Some on the left will, of course, cite New Labour's current predicament as further evidence of the futility of attempting to 'reclaim' the party from the neo-liberal right. They will continue to insist, instead, that socialists join their own preferred 'political alternative to New Labour'. Despite the evident disillusionment with the government, however, there is little sign of a positive political break with Labour, at least on the evidence of the local election results. Respect won 16 council seats, 12 of them in Tower Hamlets, where they are now the second-largest group. As in the general election last year, however, Respect's electoral successes are almost entirely confined to areas with large concentrations of Muslim voters: while the party has won recognition for its opposition to the 'War on Terror' from those communities that have suffered most in that 'war', it does not present a credible solution to the crisis of working class representation. Other left parties made significantly less impression and, meanwhile, the odious BNP won 32 seats, including 11 in Barking and Dagenham, making them the second largest party – a sobering reminder that working class voters need not look to the left when they feel abandoned by Labour.

In place of the supposed short-cuts offered by Respect and their like, the battle for a political break with the New Labour project must continue to be fought within the mass organisations of the working class – the trade unions and the Labour Party. The events of recent months have provided further illustration of the bankruptcy of Blairism; the left must seize the opportunity to rid the labour movement of this parasitic outgrowth and step up the fight for an alternative programme that addresses the needs of the working class. The coming months will be crucial in determining whether New Labour is renewed or superseded. **WA**

Israel out of Lebanon!

As we go to press, Israel's invasion of the Lebanon is proceeding with lethal force, and has already resulted in many civilian deaths. Southern Beirut and other Lebanese cities have been attacked, and the possibility that the Syrian capital of Damascus will be targeted looms steadily larger. Iran has stated that it would view such an attack as an attack on the entire Muslim world, and, given the rising tension between the United States and Iran, the potential for the conflict to spread is self evident.

Along with the leaders of Russia, France and Italy, Tony Blair has made the usual noises warning of a 'disproportionate' response, while accepting the Israeli default position that it is reacting to acts of terrorism: the kidnapping of soldiers in Gaza and Lebanon. Meanwhile, George Bush has made it clear that the US opposes calls for a ceasefire and sees the crisis as an opportunity to deal once and for all with Hizbollah and to intimidate its sponsors, Iran and Syria.

Yet Israel's invasion – as in 1982 – shows all the signs of having been pre-planned. Ever since Hamas won elections in the Palestinian territories, Israel, backed by the US, has ratcheted up the tension, pouring 9,000 high explosive shells into Gaza since its supposed withdrawal, most notoriously when it killed nine members of a wedding party on a beach on June 13. Some see its evacuation of settlers and settlements as a tactic to create a free-fire zone.

Israel is aiming at nothing short of redrawing the political map in the region, by destabilising Lebanon and removing Hizbollah as a political and military threat. War also serves a number of subsidiary purposes. For the first time in decades, neither the prime minister, Ehud Olmert, nor the defence minister, Amir Peretz, are senior military figures, so the Israeli military has the opportunity to take the lead. At the same time, Israeli public opinion, which only weeks ago had been leaning towards negotiations and a prisoner exchange with Hamas, is now firmly behind the use of force. The invasion also aims to remind the US, while it sinks ever deeper into the Iraqi quagmire, that Israel is a strategic asset rather than a liability.

Hizbollah, too, hopes to redraw the political map. It is increasingly well trained and well armed, and while it cannot hope to confront the Israeli army in conventional warfare, any prolonged occupation will reprise the conditions which led to Israel being driven out of Lebanon six years ago. But many Lebanese people, while opposing the invasion, also hold Hizbollah responsible for giving Israel the pretext to attack and set the country back two decades.

There are no quick or good solutions in the short term. We must demand the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from both Lebanon and the Occupied Territories, and the release of the 9,000 Palestinian and Lebanese hostages held by Israel. In addition, we must step up the campaign for sanctions, disinvestment and a trade boycott of Israel. **WA**

Iraq

Three years of occupation

Even by the US-led coalition's own standards the occupation of Iraq must be judged a disaster, says **Simon Deville**

It is three years since the invasion of Iraq and it is difficult to see how it can be viewed as a success on any level. While many predicted that the invasion would be a disaster, few could have foreseen just how inept the 'coalition of the willing' was capable of being, and just how spectacularly its strategy could go wrong.

Three years on, the occupation has failed to establish law and order, most people have electricity only a few hours a day, and what water is available is polluted. Criminality and kidnapping are rife, living conditions have not significantly improved since the stranglehold of UN sanctions, basic safety nets such as food rationing are being dismantled and market shock therapy has meant the conditions of the poor and the middle classes have plummeted. On top of this, widely publicised human rights violations such as at abu Ghraib may have shocked many in the West, but in Iraq they have simply affirmed how most Iraqis already viewed the occupying forces. The massacres of at least 23 civilians at Haditha and at least 11 at Ishaqi are just the tip of the iceberg, exceptional only in that they have been reported in the Western media due to irrefutable evidence like the video footage of events at Haditha. Indeed, the US originally reported the deaths at Haditha as having been caused by a roadside bomb, only initiating an internal investigation when the video evidence was produced proving that the civilians were all killed in a revenge rampage by US troops within hours of a US soldier being killed by a roadside bomb. While British forces have tried to claim that the areas they oversee are different, that lie has been nailed with the video footage of British troops beating Iraqi youths, and has resulted in the breaking off of relations between the local Iraqi authorities and the British.

Is Iraq descending into civil war?

Since the destruction of the al-Askari shrine there has been much talk of Iraq slipping into civil war. Indeed, the number of bodies at the Baghdad morgue showing signs of being tortured before being killed by death squads (reported to be 1,100 last July alone) indicates an extremely dangerous situation. The lack of credible, independent reporting from outside the green zone, however, makes an assessment of this situation extremely difficult.

There needs to be a great deal of caution in accepting arguments about civil war - firstly and most importantly it isn't at all clear who is carrying out the terrorist attacks on civilians. It would not be without precedent for the US to be carrying out covert operations either to take out key opponents of the occupation, or to create sectarian strife as a divide-and-rule tactic and to justify keeping troops in place as 'peacekeepers' as has happened with almost every military occupation in the last 50 years. Nor would it be beyond the realms of possibility that there genuinely was sectarian and criminal violence as different groups and factions jockey for position in a post-Saddam Iraq, or indeed that a combination of these factors was contributing to such a situation. While many within the anti war movement assert that prior to the invasion there was little or no religious sectarianism, it is clear that Shias tended to be excluded from the middle classes, and religious sectarianism could grow rapidly. The US certainly didn't need to invent the existence of religious reactionaries such as al-Zawqari, though they almost certainly exaggerated his importance and attempted to conflate it with the hatred of the occupation felt by ordinary Iraqis. It is a safe bet that the death of al-Zawqari will prove to be yet another false turning point in the occupation, since the violence is caused first and foremost by the occupying forces, and over 70 per cent of attacks reported by the coalition, far from being sectarian attacks, are actually attacks on the coalition forces. Some within the US administration may well welcome a 'limited civil war', as one blogger who supports the occupation and who claims to be a Baghdad based Iraqi referred to it. But the problem with civil wars is that once they are started there is little chance of them remaining 'limited'. Many of the attacks are carried out by militias and death squads that are part of the government and are paid for by the occupation. George Bush has claimed that the US is opposing this, but it isn't at all clear how.

Few people can really be said to benefit from the current situation. If the US is responsible for the attacks as many Iraqis believe, it certainly hasn't left them in a more stable position. The instability in Iraq has left the US dependent on support from Iran and the Shia parties with close ties to Iran on the one hand, and Moqtada al Sadr on the other. The Shia groupings with ties to Iran tend to support a breakaway Shia region which would not only be even more closely tied to Iran, but would also have control of the southern oil fields. While the US may publicly be ratcheting up the pressure on Iran over the development of its nuclear capability, in reality it is not in a position to do anything about Iran and is already over-stretched with the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Earlier demands on Syria, where the US was said to be negotiating for that country's co-operation over Iraq in return for not calling for it to be brought before the UN over its alleged interference in Lebanon, have been

quietly dropped. Having said that, it would be a mistake to under-estimate the arrogance of the neo-cons and rule out totally the possibility of an attack on Iran, either by the US or by Israel acting as its proxy. An attack on Iran could either take the form of bombing raids that would have little effect on the country, but would make the Iranians far less ready to co operate over Iraq, or something more sustained which would increase US overstretch and risk destabilising the whole region and leaving the US forced out in a humiliating defeat.

Moqtada al Sadr has called for unity between Shias and Sunnis and supports a united Iraqi nation, which the occupying forces might have welcomed. Unfortunately for the US, however, he wants Sunnis and Shias to unite to drive out the foreign occupiers. Despite this, and the fact that previously the US has had a number of armed confrontations with the Mehdi army and has tried to arrest al-Sadr for the murder of another cleric, the US has been forced to work with him out of necessity and as a bulwark against those advocating the federal break-up of the Iraqi nation.

It's hard to imagine that any of the above scenarios would have featured prominently in pre-invasion plans at the White House. To understand how they got here takes some unpicking of the litany of failures and bungles by the US and British governments.

Blair's reasons for going to war

It's worth reviewing some of the Blair government's claims and how they have collapsed, simply because it's easy to lose sight of the contortions they have gone through to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Having been judged by most people to have made a historic blunder over Iraq, Blair has tried to sidestep criticism by claiming that god will judge him. Prior to that, Blair had claimed that history would be his judge. Perhaps Blair has realised that three years on things still aren't looking too good and his imaginary friend might be a bit more lenient than history.

The stated aims of Blair of disarming the Ba'athist regime of its weapons of mass destruction was never much more than a sophistry intended to give a fig leaf of legality to what most people saw as an illegal act. A large section of the population was always sceptical of the claims about such weapons. Of those who believed there were WMDs, many saw through the hypocrisy of this being used as a pretext for war when the government appears quite happy for other regimes to have WMDs when they are 'our' allies, whether they be democracies or brutal dictatorships. The WMD claims very quickly descended into farce as the government was shown to be covering up all reliable sources of information or legal advice, and to be resorting to crude cut-and paste plagiarism to support its case.

The WMD argument having lost all credibility, the fallback position for many Blairites is that they have removed a dictator and freed the Iraqi people. The problem with this argument is that, in addition to having to forget any previous arguments put forward by supporters of the war, it is abundantly clear that most Iraqis don't have much in the way of freedom. In addition to facing curfews, random arrests, torture and killings, most Iraqis have also been impoverished by the occupation. It is hard to sustain an argument that war against Iraq was justified in order to put Iraqis in their current condition.

Regime change

For the neo-cons, WMD were never an issue, as George Bush had stated from early on that his aim was regime change. The Blairites have tried to encourage the impression that by remaining publicly 'shoulder to shoulder' with the most right-wing president in a generation, behind the scenes Blair could become a moderating influence on the Bush regime. If Blair has had any influence on Bush at all, it appears to be simply that he convinced Bush to go through the motions of trying to get a second resolution from the UN Security Council, even though Bush had already made the decision to go to war. In other words, the only restraining influence Blair might have had over Bush has been convincing him over tactics as to how best to start a war and allow Blair to sell it to the British public. Even with this minor level of influence, Blair, who up until that point viewed himself as being a master at judging opinion and of convincing people of his ideas, failed to sell the war to either the UN Security Council or the British public.

The neo-cons' project

There are a number of reasons why Bush and the neo cons were intent on war with Iraq, none of them to do with weapons of mass destruction. When Bush was elected, a number of his key advisers were involved in the 'Project for the New American Century' right-wing think tank. Many had been involved in government under Reagan and were concerned about the decline of US global dominance. They believed that the Reagan administration had influenced world affairs to such an extent that it had toppled what they saw as world communism, and that since that time there had been a crisis of leadership in the US that meant that it might lose its position as the world's only superpower. With the decline of the US economy worldwide, they argued that the US could regain the initiative by re-asserting its overwhelming military pre-eminence, achieving 'full-spectrum dominance'. The US would maintain such a technological/military gap between itself and any potential rival on sea, air, land or in space that it would crush any upstart nation before it could accumulate sufficient weaponry to pose a threat. For the neo-cons, to paraphrase Mao, hegemony comes through the barrel of a gun. A key proposal from the 'Project for the New American Century' was that the US would fight and decisively win two simultaneous wars to assert its military authority on the world stage, with limited ground troops but demonstrating the overwhelming superiority of the high-tech US military hardware.

Alongside this strategy was a desire to deal with unfinished business from the first Gulf War, to deal with what was seen as the main threat to Israel in the region, and to control diminishing supplies of oil at a time when access to Saudi oil appeared to be threatened by the growing unpopularity of the dictatorship.

September 11 gave the neo-cons the opportunity to try out their fantasies, and it is precisely the arrogance of believing that they could use the globe as the testing ground for their right-wing lunacy that has compounded the problems caused by the invasion. The 'Project for the New American Century' describes itself as an 'organisation dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; and that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle'. Throughout, it displays a naive certainty that people will welcome 'American leadership' if only they could be forced to accept what's good for

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them. Thus Donald Rumsfeld believed that all that was needed was a 'shock and awe' bombardment in which the Saddam regime would be toppled with a minimal troop involvement, and that grateful Iraqis would then welcome them with open arms.

The ham fisted attempts at installing US-friendly Iraqis such as Ahmed Chalabi or Iyad Allawi, who usually hadn't lived in Iraq for decades prior to the invasion and who had virtually no base of support in Iraq, have also failed, leaving the US forced to deal with the pro-Iranian, anti-occupation Shia parties to survive. Almost as inevitably, the US will also be forced to do deals with the insurgents in predominantly Sunni areas. It seems certain that at some point in the not too distant future the US will be forced to negotiate a withdrawal from Iraq, as an indefinite occupation is unsustainable. It's inconceivable that US strategists haven't considered this, and aren't looking at ways of preparing for a withdrawal on terms that best protect US interests.

While the neo-cons' project may lie in tatters, unless the US is driven out of Iraq it is difficult to see it leaving the country to decide its own fate for the simple reason that the US is dependent on imported oil and needs to control the Middle East as a whole. Those with more foresight in the US administration may realise that a detested occupation cannot continue and try to ensure ways of protecting US interests whilst handing over the day-to-day running to a compliant Iraqi administration. Platform, the social and environmental justice organisation, highlighted the attempts to set up Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs) in its report *Crude Designs* last year. Under such agreements, multi-national corporations establish long-term contracts (usually 25 to 40 years) in which they get a major share in oil profits in return for developing the industry. Such agreements would be backed up by guarantees that any future Iraqi government would not be able to re-negotiate them.

The anti-war movement

In the United States the anti-war movement has been slower to establish itself than in Europe, because the drive for war was launched on the back of widespread revulsion at the September 11 attacks. However, it has coalesced around Cindy Sheehan's peace camp and opposition to Bush has gained further ground because of domestic issues, particularly Hurricane Katrina last year, which continues to be an issue. Support for Bush has gone from all-time highs to record lows over the last three years.

In Britain the anti-war movement reached its peak prior to the start of the war and maintained a number of enormous mobilisations for some time after. While the mobilisations have not been sustained over the last couple of years, public opinion has settled with a majority being opposed to the war. However, this has not led to sustained pressure on the government as opinion on what to do about the occupation has been far more confused. The Lib Dems dropped their opposition to the war as soon as it started, but have retained some political capital from their original opposition.

The Stop the War Coalition has struggled to regain the initiative as anti-war mobilisations have receded. Whilst it has correctly supported and encouraged Military Families Against the War, and has made useful links with Iraqi opponents of the occupation, much of its focus has been concentrated on going over arguments that have already been won, and where opinion has already hardened, such as on the lies of the government and the legality of the war. This has often been at the cost of downplaying more difficult arguments needed to explain the nature of the occupation, and of systematically building up a withdrawal movement. In particular, too little attention has been paid to developing and co ordinating opposition within the ranks of the labour movement, with the coalition being too ready to accept affiliations and support from general secretaries as a reason for not needing to win over the membership. The attention paid to parliamentary opposition has been even weaker. Little has been done even to involve the usual suspects in ongoing anti-occupation work, never mind trying to put pro-occupation MPs under any pressure or attempting to win new supporters. The coalition has relied far too much on just a handful of the most vocal opponents of the war and occupation. If the anti-war movement is to contribute to bringing an early end to the occupation this situation needs to be turned around. There was a good turn-out for the March 18 demonstration, but the real task that the Stop the War Coalition needs to face is developing a strategy over the next couple of years that can build a movement that helps drive Britain and the US out of Iraq. To have built the largest demonstration in British political history is a tremendous achievement for the coalition, and the movement has had a significant and tangible influence in changing public opinion, but where it has been weakest is in understanding how to use the levers of power to change government policy. While demo-weariness has had some effect on the ability to mobilise the anti war movement, this is offset by the movement having been proved absolutely right on so many issues, and by the emptiness of the government's continual proclamations of yet another new turning point, only to be followed by yet more atrocities. The government is stuck in precisely the quagmire that many in the anti war movement predicted, and a continuation of the occupation is likely to tip the balance further in our favour. It is unlikely that a withdrawal of British troops will happen under Blair - we should be campaigning both for an end to Blair's leadership of the Labour Party and for his successor to withdraw British troops, however much that might upset the alleged special relationship with the US. **WA**

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Hands off Iran!

Darren Williams provides some theoretical ammunition for socialists to use when opposing the build-up to war with Iran

At the time of writing, there is something of a lull in the diplomatic stand off between Iran and the so-called 'G6' (the five permanent UN Security Council members, plus Germany). The Iranian government is considering the offer of technical assistance and diplomatic concessions presented on June 6 in a bid to secure the termination of its uranium enrichment programme. For its part, the United States's agreement on May 31 to participate in talks represented a significant climbdown from its renewed rejection of negotiations less than a week earlier. Nevertheless, there are strong indications that the Bush administration remains committed to a military attack on Iran, with the possible acquiescence of the British government. US aggression against the Islamic Republic has seemed a real possibility ever since Bush included Tehran, together with Baghdad and Pyongyang, in the so-called 'Axis of Evil' in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002. In recent months, US rhetoric directed against Iran has become increasingly strident and its persistent, wide-ranging accusations disturbingly recall the build-up to war in Iraq in 2002-03. The danger that Iran, like Iraq before it, may be subjected to the might of US imperialism is ever present. Readers of *Workers Action* will hopefully not need to be persuaded of the imperative to oppose any military attack but it may nevertheless be useful to address systematically the arguments being presented in support of US intervention, to assist in building the opposition to war over the coming months.

1. There is no clear evidence that Iran is seeking to produce nuclear weapons

It is important to spell this out, as the constant accusations and insinuations, coupled with the general demonisation of the Iranian government, are likely to promote the idea that there is 'no smoke without fire'. Iran *may* be seeking to develop nuclear weapons, but we should not assume this to be the case simply because the US and its allies say so. Iran announced on April 11 that it has enriched uranium to 3.5 per cent – slightly more than the level necessary for energy purposes but a long way short of the 85-90 per cent required to produce weapons-grade uranium. The rigorous inspection regime applied by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to which Iran voluntarily submitted in December 2003, has failed to turn up any hard evidence of a weapons programme. The US government has questioned why a country with so much oil needs nuclear energy but the Iranian population has doubled since the 1979 revolution, increasing domestic demand, and it is estimated that the country will become a net oil *importer* in less than 20 years if current consumption trends continue.

The Iranian nuclear programme actually predates the Islamic Republic, having begun under the Shah in the 1950s with technology provided by the United States. Subsequently abandoned by Ayatollah Khomenei as 'un-Islamic', it was later recommenced, initially in secret. It was only this failure to report that the programme was underway that represented an infringement of Iran's international obligations. Uranium enrichment itself is explicitly allowed by Article 4 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran is a signatory, which allows states to develop nuclear power if they agree not to acquire nuclear weapons, or to take steps to give up those they already possess. (Iran did voluntarily suspend its right to enrichment in December 2003 and again in November 2004, in an agreement with Britain, France and Germany that it abandoned when the latter backtracked on their side of the bargain.) Of course, the nuclear weapon states that have signed the NPT have, so far from giving up their weapons, regularly re stocked their arsenals – the latest example being Britain's plans to replace Trident. The hypocrisy of Iran being cajoled and threatened over its nuclear programme by states with their own nuclear weapons – including Israel, which has not even signed the NPT – surely does not need to be underlined.

2. Even if Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons, this is not in itself evidence of aggressive intent

Iran has a reasonable desire for self defence – surrounded as it is by nuclear powers (India, Pakistan, Russia, China and Israel) and by US bases in Qatar, Iraq, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. It has also suffered the effects of foreign intervention in the recent past: the United States and Britain engineered a coup that overthrew the country's first democratic government in 1953, initiating the dictatorship of the Shah. It sustained hundreds of thousands of casualties in the 1980-88 war with Iraq, during which the Reagan administration supported Saddam with arms, destroyed almost half of the Iranian navy and shot down a civilian passenger plane.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hostility towards Israel is cited as evidence of aggressive intent – in particular, his supposed threat last October to 'wipe Israel off the map'. In fact, as Jonathan

Steele has pointed out in the *Guardian*, after consulting experts on Farsi, what Ahmadinejad actually said was: 'the regime occupying Jerusalem must be wiped from the page of time'. As Steele concludes: 'He was not making a military threat. He was calling for an end to the occupation of Jerusalem at some point in the future.'[1] In response to UN Security Council criticism of Ahmadinejad's statement, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said: 'Iran is loyal to its commitments based on the UN charter and it has never used or threatened to use force against any country.' Ahmadinejad has denied promoting 'A fight between Judaism and other religions', and explains that conflict in the Middle East 'will be over the day a Palestinian government, which belongs to the Palestinian people, comes to power; the day that all refugees return to their homes; a democratic government elected by the people comes to power'.[2]

By contrast, both the US and Israel have openly threatened to attack Iran and, given their past record, these threats should be taken seriously. In January of this year, for example, US vice-president Dick Cheney said that Iranian nuclear advances were so pressing that Israel '*may be forced to attack facilities*', as it did in Iraq in 1981. In March, the US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, gave visiting members of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee a detailed description of the form that military action could take.

3. There is no imminent danger to other countries

The handling of the Iranian nuclear issue by the US and other 'G6' members has imparted a sense of imminent crisis. In March, the UN Security Council gave Iran 30 days to end its enrichment programme; when it failed to comply with this (non-binding) deadline, the Security Council discussed – albeit inconclusively – a resolution that would have insisted on a mandatory suspension of the programme. Now the US is demanding an urgent Iranian response to the offer currently on the table – no later than the G8 summit in St. Petersburg in mid-July, whereas Iran intends to give its answer on August 22. The US offer to negotiate is contingent on the suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment. The impression created by all this is that every day is precious as diplomats struggle to prevent an Iranian acquisition of WMDs, which could – it has been stated in some quarters – happen 'within months'.

This alarmism is at odds with all the expert assessments of the timescale – including the US government's own. In August 2005, the *Washington Post* reported that a major US intelligence review, presenting the consensus view of all US intelligence agencies – the first on Iran since 2001 – concluded that Iran was unlikely to be able to produce a sufficient quantity of highly enriched uranium to produce nuclear weapons until 'early-to-mid next decade'.[3] A paper produced for the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in January estimated that 'Iran could have its first nuclear weapon in 2009' at the earliest and acknowledged that several analysts considered it more likely that technical difficulties would cause further delays.[4] The ISIS authors anticipated an early completion of the enrichment process, consequently their timetable may be considered unchanged by the Iranian announcement of April 11.[5]

4. The US government's actions suggest that it has an ulterior motive for pursuing a confrontation with Iran

Throughout its supposed membership of the 'Axis of Evil', the Iranian government has consistently been willing to negotiate over contentious issues; not so the Bush administration. In May 2003, according to Flynt Leverett, then a senior official in Bush's National Security Council, Iran proposed an agenda for talks to resolve all its bilateral differences with the United States – including WMDs, a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the future of Lebanon's Hizbullah organisation and co-operation with the UN nuclear safeguards agency. The US refused and reprimanded the Swiss diplomat who conveyed the offer. A year later, the EU and Iran agreed a temporary suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment programme, in exchange for European assurances of no US/Israeli attacks on Iran. Europe withdrew under US pressure and Iran renewed its enrichment processes. More recently, Ahmadinejad's open letter to Bush was also an invitation to dialogue, albeit one couched in somewhat elliptical terms. The US recently agreed to hold direct talks with Iran for the first time since 1979 – but only about Iraq, refusing to discuss the nuclear programme, as Iran wanted – then, on May 24, withdrew its agreement to talk to Iran at all. Finally, it agreed to negotiations, together with Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China, but only on condition that Iran suspend its nuclear programme – and still refused to rule out a military attack.

Meanwhile, the US government has taken measures that suggest that its bellicose language is not empty rhetoric. In the summer of 2004, Congress passed a resolution authorising 'all appropriate measures' to prevent the Iranian weapons programme. More recently – on April 27 this year – the House of Representatives passed the Iran Freedom Support Act, making permanent US sanctions against Iran under the 1996 Iran Libya Sanctions Act, unless there is a change of government in Tehran. Democratic congressman Dennis Kucinich, who opposed the bill, argued: 'this is a stepping stone to the use of force, the same way that the Iraq Liberation Act was used as a stepping stone.'

An article in the *New Yorker* (April 17) by the veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, based on interviews with senior figures in the US military and political establishment, claims that the White House is set on the use of force, not just to wipe out Iran's nuclear facilities, but to secure 'regime change' in the country.[6] 'Current and former American military and intelligence officials' told Hersh that:

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'Air Force planning groups are drawing up lists of targets, and teams of American combat troops have been ordered into Iran, under cover, to collect targeting data and to establish contact with anti government ethnic minority groups.'

A former defence official explained that the administration believed that 'a sustained bombing campaign in Iran will humiliate the religious leadership and lead the public to rise up and overthrow the government'. The use of tactical nuclear weapons ('bunker-busters') is even being considered, to destroy underground installations. The US government has recently allocated $75 million to promote 'democracy' in Iran by broadcasting propaganda, funding NGOs and promoting 'cultural exchanges'. US officials have also reportedly been working covertly with the armed Iranian exile group, the Mujahedin e Khalq (MEK; ironically, once a Marxist group), and leading neo cons have been lobbying for the MEK to be taken off the State Department's list of terrorist organisations.

'This is much more than a nuclear issue,' a high-ranking diplomat told Seymour Hersh. 'The real issue is who is going to control the Middle East and its oil in the next ten years.' Iran is OPEC's second largest oil producer and holds ten per cent of the world's proven oil reserves. It also has the world's second largest natural gas reserves (after Russia). The United States has not purchased Iranian oil since the Revolution and Iran's principal customer is now China – the main economic competitor to the US in the long run. Iran also plans to establish a new International Oil Bourse on the island of Kish in the Persian Gulf, trading oil priced in euros (rather than dollars, as in all other markets). If successful, this could strengthen the status of the euro as an alternative oil transaction currency and cause a major currency flight from the dollar to the euro, threatening the status of the dollar as the world's reserve currency and causing major economic problems for the US.[7]

A shorter-term consideration is the fact that the worsening disaster in Iraq and the deaths of more than 2,500 US military personnel have seriously damaged Bush's domestic support; an apparently 'successful' strike against a popularly-reviled external 'threat' could boost his popularity in time for November's mid-term elections.

5. The British government has failed to distance itself from US belligerence

Britain has echoed US condemnation of Iran, albeit while promoting a negotiated settlement more assiduously. While Blair has sought to discourage speculation about military means, his commitment to the 'Special Relationship' and his track record in Afghanistan and Iraq suggest that British forces might well be involved in any attack. In April, Jack Straw dismissed the idea of military action against Iran as 'inconceivable' and said that any nuclear attack on the country would be 'completely nuts'. His subsequent replacement as foreign secretary by Margaret Beckett has prompted speculation that Blair was seeking to assure Bush of continued British support for US policy. Certainly, Beckett refused to rule out military action quite as emphatically as her predecessor when asked to do so after a meeting with UN Security Council colleagues. (The furthest she would go was to say: 'No-one has the intention to take military action. That was not discussed, it's not an issue.') The revelation that in July 2004 British officers took part in a US war game aimed at preparing for a possible invasion of Iran hardly eases concerns.

6. Any military attack on Iran would be disastrous for the Iranian people

The death toll resulting from any aerial bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities would be in the thousands, with 'many hundreds' of civilian casualties, according to a report produced in February by Prof. Paul Rogers for the Oxford Research Group. His conclusions were based on the fact that most of the facilities are in densely populated areas and the likelihood that the US would launch a surprise attack, leaving no time for evacuations or other precautions. Rogers's estimate may even be conservative, since he cites a relatively small number of likely targets, whereas a US military analyst who taught at the National War College told Seymour Hersh that 'at least 400 targets' would have to be hit.

While a military attack would undoubtedly cause chaos and suffering, the idea that it would precipitate a popular rebellion seems an example of neo-con strategic thinking being clouded by ideological delusions. One might imagine that the experience of Iraq would have taught them that they cannot expect to be treated as liberators when they lay waste to cities and slaughter civilians – but apparently not. Iran, although facing significant economic problems (including an unemployment rate unofficially estimated at around 25 per cent), is in nowhere near as desperate a state as Iraq in 2003. Moreover, it is far more ethnically and religiously homogeneous than Iraq. And, while there is widespread popular opposition to the authoritarianism and repression of the Islamic Republic, that opposition would be weakened, rather than strengthened, by a military attack, with most Iranians putting aside their differences in defence of their homeland. Already, Ahmadinejad has seen his popularity boosted by the resolute stance he has maintained in the face of diplomatic bullying and threats. An opinion poll conducted in Iran in February showed that 85 per cent of those surveyed supported the continuation of the nuclear enrichment programme, and 75 per cent would do so even if it meant Security Council sanctions.

How should socialists balance their duty to oppose imperialist aggression with the need to support progressive forces in Iran, which currently face repression by the Islamic regime?

Clearly, there can be no weakening of our defence of women's rights, our opposition to official homophobia, our condemnation of human rights abuses or our support for the (illegal) workers' organisations, whose resilience was demonstrated in December by the strike by 3,000 bus drivers in Tehran. The Islamic Republic is fundamentally reactionary – born out of the eradication of the progressive forces in the 1979 Revolution. Any real political progress on the part of the Iranian working class and its allies will involve a frontal challenge to the present theocratic state. The class struggle is also, however, played out at the global level, *between states*. Any political destabilisation that might result from external pressure – whether military, diplomatic or economic – would surely deliver no lasting benefits to the Iranian people. It would more likely strengthen US hegemony, by weakening Iranian autonomy and promoting US proxies within Iran or

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among its neighbours. Moreover, it would represent a victory by imperialism over *all* the subaltern states of the so-called 'Third World'. To the extent, therefore, that Ahmadinejad is playing an anti-imperialist role, by facing down the threats of the US and its allies, he deserves the support of socialists and progressives around the world.

It should also be said that the political character of Ahmadinejad's government is by no means clear. His election last year provoked alarm, not just in the seats of government and the stock exchanges, but among liberals and the left; he was widely portrayed as a dangerous, reactionary demagogue, in contrast to his main rival, the 'moderate' and 'pragmatic' ex-president Hashemi Rafsanjani. Much of Ahmadinejad's support comes from the poor and the unemployed, however, and was secured by promises to ensure that Iran's oil wealth is more equitably distributed. Rafsanjani, on the other hand, was seen by many as a corrupt plutocrat (he is the country's richest man) who promoted the IMF agenda of privatisation and deregulation during his previous two terms in office (1989-97) – as, to a lesser extent, did his reformist successor Mohammed Khatami. As the US-based Iranian writer, Rostam Pourzal, explains:

> 'To millions of voters of modest means, Ahmadinejad symbolises resistance to the anti-democratic global free-trade elite with whom the relatively secular reform movement has aligned itself.'[8]

Ahmadinejad has angered the Iranian establishment by sacking senior ministers, officials and diplomats and replacing them, in many cases, with former comrades from the Revolutionary Guard. He has criticised privatisations set in motion by his predecessors and boosted economic support for Iran's most impoverished regions. And, while he remains a religious and social conservative on most issues, he has sought to allow women the right to attend football matches (only to be overruled by the clerics). Ahmadinejad's increasingly friendly relations with left-wing, anti-US leaders like Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez is also significant. While it seems a gross exaggeration to call him, as some left-wing commentators have done, 'Iran's Chávez', Ahmadinejad shares with the Venezuelan leader a nationalist populist approach to the economy, based on a determination that the people should benefit from their country's natural resources, rather than allowing them to be looted by global capitalists. It is to be hoped that his association with the progressive, anti-imperialist forces in world politics will exert a positive influence on Iranian domestic politics.

Speculation about the future direction of Iran must, however, be secondary to mobilising opposition against an imperialist assault. While the immediate threat may have temporarily receded, it would be over-optimistic to imagine that the US government will desist from its attempts to impose its will on the country. The growing charge-sheet should set off alarm bells about US intentions: in addition to the nuclear issue, Iran has recently been accused of being the leading state sponsor of international terrorism, of stirring up the 'cartoon' protests in Denmark and elsewhere and of providing weapons and bomb training to anti-US insurgent groups in Iraq. Many of these claims have as little substance as the accusations of links between Saddam Hussein and al Qaida and of his supposed attempts to obtain uranium from Niger, etc. Nevertheless, they are likely to be pursued as vigorously as the US pursued its war drive three to four years ago.

In this context, socialists need to be actively building the campaign to prevent another war, through the Stop the War Coalition and Labour Against the War. We should be winning the backing of trade union bodies and demanding that Labour MPs give assurances that they will vote against any moves to deploy British military force. Finally, we should be building links, especially at a local level, with individuals and organisations in the Iranian community in Britain. We need to assure them that the left will work to prevent any attack on their country, while also supporting their aspirations for democracy and civil rights.

NOTES

1. J. Steele, 'If Iran is ready to talk, the US must do so unconditionally', *Guardian*, June 2, 2006. The translation cited by Steele was challenged by other commentators, leading him to seek confirmation from a range of sources, the results of which he recounts in a further article, 'Lost in translation' (June 14), on the *Guardian*'s *commentisfree* website (http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html). The consensus appears to be that 'from the page of time' is more accurate than 'off the map', although 'must be wiped off' or 'wiped away' is closer to the Farsi than 'must vanish' in the translation that Steele originally used.
2. Cited by Eli Stephens in his blog, *Left I on the News*: http://lefti.blogspot.com/2005_10_01_lefti_archive.html#113006891058325659
3. D. Linzer, 'Iran is Judged 10 Years from Nuclear Bomb', *Washington Post*, August 2, 2005 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/01/AR2005080101453.html).
4. D. Albright & C. Hinderstein, 'Iran's Next Steps: Final Tests and the Construction of a Nuclear Enrichment Plant', ISIS, January 12, 2006 (http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/irancascade.pdf).
5. A point made on the website *Arms Control Wonk*: http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/1032/collected-thoughts-on-iranian-leu
6. S.M. Hersh, 'The Iran Plans', *New Yorker*, April 17, 2006 (http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/060417fa_fact).
7. The significance of the planned oil bourse, in terms both of Iran's intentions and its likely impact on the dollar, is controversial among left-wing commentators. William Clark, among others, argues that it is 'the real reason' why Iran is being targeted (www.globalresearch.ca/CLA410.html), while William F. Engdahl disputes this (http://www.engdahloilgeopolitics.net/print/Why_Iran's_oil_bourse_can't_break_the_buck.htm).
8. R. Pourzal, 'Market Fundamentalists Lose in Iran (For Now)', *MRZine*, August 3, 2005 (http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/pourzal030805.html).

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Abortion rights under attack

Britain's limited abortion rights are again under attack and must be defended. But what's also needed, says **Charli Langford**, is improved education and full freedom of choice

Once again, the limited rights to abortion that women have in Britain are coming under attack. Last year Laurence Robertson (Tory MP for Tewkesbury) tabled a private member's bill to prohibit abortion unless the life of the mother is at risk or the conception was due to rape. The Impact Report for the bill estimated that the number of abortions carried out each year in Britain would drop from 185,000 to 150 if the bill were passed.

But if Robertson's bill was a direct assault on the 1967 Abortion Act, there are other more subtle attacks as well. One such is the fact that the government is considering whether health workers should be required to inform police or social services about underage sex. This is ostensibly to improve child protection, but it has an immediate effect on the availability of abortion advice to young people. Brook (which offers sexual health advice to under-25s) found that 74 per cent of under-16s would be less likely to seek advice if confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Paul Tully, general secretary of the extremist anti-choice organisation SPUC (Society for the Protection of Unborn Children) lets the cat out of the bag when he says 'while it is not always necessary for professionals to inform other authorities if advice was given, a distinction should be drawn when it came to treatment such as abortion'.

Robertson's bill was an extreme measure from the anti-choice forces and should be seen as little more than a stalking horse. The far more likely, and far more dangerous, attacks will be those that seek to erode little by little the current limited abortion provision. Just before the 2005 general election, the leaders of the three largest political parties were interviewed on their attitude to abortion rights in *Cosmopolitan*. Michael Howard said he believed that the upper limit for legal termination of a pregnancy should be lowered to 20 weeks. Howard and Kennedy have histories of opposing pro-choice legislation and supporting all attempts to lower time limits. Tony Blair supported pro-choice legislation even though he has said that personally he is against abortion. However, an article in the *Daily Mail* (June 14) has him agreeing with Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien that the time limits need looking at again.

The Roman Catholic Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor immediately seized on the *Cosmopolitan* article, describing Howard's policy as 'one that we would also commend, on the way to a full abandonment of abortion'. He went on to comment that in the past Catholics, as predominately working-class people, had supported Labour and then said, 'Now I'm not so sure that would be quite so true today.'

Rights of women ignored

What is so worrying about the debate is what has *not* been said. Howard's argument is that abortions should not be permitted once the foetus is viable (i.e., can survive outside the womb), and he notes that with current medical technology a foetus is viable at 20 weeks. The *Independent* (March 16, 2005) asks what it calls 'the key question': 'When is the foetus a sentient being?' – and in effect comes up with viability as the answer. The terms of the debate are being defined, and they are being defined in terms of 'foetal rights'. The question of the rights of the woman carrying the foetus has been excluded. Since all women can potentially become pregnant, this means that the rights of all women are ignored.

This is not a small question; the oppression of women is oppression of over half of all humans and has been a feature of almost all human societies. The basis for this oppression lies, in the final analysis, in the different reproductive roles of men and women, and in the need for a man to segregate 'his' woman in order that he could identify which children were biologically his. Historically this role difference has been used to point to the 'superiority' of the male; more recently this view has moved to 'equal but different'; this has allowed challenge and some measure of success in the areas – notably pay and opportunity – where women are clearly not equal.

Abortion rights, unfortunately, fall into the area where men and women are different, and this makes it impossible to argue parity, the simplest anti-sexist argument, directly. The indirect argument, however, is that now we have the ability through technology for women not to be enslaved to their biology we should do so, to give equality with men, so that both sexes have similar autonomy. This is not just an argument supporting a woman's choice on abortion; it also puts a case for readily-available contraceptives and for information and education.

Foetal rights?

Rights are what oppressed groups organise to demand and as such, it makes no sense to say that foetuses, animals, or even mentally incapable humans have rights. The question should be whether we – conscious sentient humans with the ability to make ethical choices – have responsibilities towards them. A fox cornered by a pack of dogs or a mouse between the paws of a cat will make little progress claiming rights because dogs and

cats aren't intellectually equipped to grant them. Most people, however, would accept a general responsibility to alleviate pain and suffering even among animals. There's not much we could do for the unfortunate mouse but we did manage to help the fox.

So, do we have a responsibility for maintaining the life of a foetus carried inside a woman? The question implies there has to be consideration of the rights of the woman as well as any responsibilities, and it follows that the rights of an existing person are higher than responsibility towards a potentiality. On this basis abortion, up to and including full term, must be allowed. Indeed, we generally put a person's rights to bodily autonomy ahead of responsibilities to other humans – there is no legal compulsion for a person to donate duplicate organs to a relative who would otherwise die, for example.

That does not mean we have no responsibilities. Campaigners against choice on abortion say that at a certain stage of development a foetus will be able to feel pain. While pro-choice counter arguments are far more plausible – for much of pregnancy the foetal central nervous system is insufficiently developed to feel pain, and that a foetus *in utero* is unconscious and therefore anaesthetised against pain – nevertheless, there remains a faint possibility that the anti-choice side are correct. This does not mean that a foetus has a 'right to life', any more than an animal that can feel pain has. But it does mean that either the foetus should be painlessly killed or else anaesthetised before any actions that might cause pain are undertaken.

Sentience and viability

The earlier *Independent* quote says that the key issue is when the foetus becomes sentient. Unfortunately, the article below this headline gave no answers beyond plugging Professor Stuart Campbell's book *Watch Me Grow*, which purports to show 12-week foetuses 'jumping off the sides of the womb like a trampoline'. Instead it discusses time limits and viability. The implication is that a foetus becomes sentient when it becomes viable. This is clearly false; in 1900 a foetus was viable at around 30 weeks but now it is viable at 20 weeks or so. This is clearly due to advances in medical technique rather than any difference in foetal development.

But even if we leave out the fact that it ignores the overriding consideration of the rights of the woman, foetal sentience would not confer a right to life. Dictionary definitions of sentience ('responsive to stimulus, capable of sensation') are satisfied by life forms as primitive as bacteria. Any such appeal would founder on the basis that many animals will show more of whatever quality is selected than a foetus – or even in some cases more that a two- or three-year old human – yet have no 'right to life'.

Neither is the fact that at some stage a foetus becomes viable a valid argument for forcing a woman to continue to carry it. There are two separate arguments against: first, 'viability' refers to the ability of the foetus to survive *outside* the womb, not inside. Clearly it is not logical to say 'because it can survive outside, therefore is must stay inside'. Second, because something is viable (that is, that it *can* be done), it does not follow that it *should* be done. In the light of these fairly obvious points it seems odd that so many in the debate think viability is the key issue.

The proponents of the 'viability' argument fall into three groups. The first are those that basically haven't thought it through at all and accept the argument at surface value. The second – which is unfortunately where those from the first group often revert to when forced to think – are those with one of a whole series of attitudes based around the idea that women shouldn't be having abortions, even though those attitudes can't logically be justified or would make the holder sound unfashionably illiberal. Often their views come from the confusion that because a foetus has the potential to become a full person, it therefore already is a full person and should have corresponding rights – although being permitted to live a completely dependent existence inside someone else's body and against their will isn't normally seen as a human right.

The third group, of course, are those that are completely against abortion and for whom the question of viability is purely a propaganda device for drawing the second group towards themselves. Their interest in viability and the 20-week figure – despite the fact that already the number of abortions at 20 weeks is tiny – is that if they can establish viability as a criterion, this means that there is an implicit acceptance that the foetus has rights, and these rights then act as a counterweight to women's rights. If this can be established, they can then abandon viability – probably using the same inside/outside argument as we do here – and claim that logically the foetus has the same rights at 20 weeks as at 12, or four, or even earlier. This becomes an argument against any form of abortion including the 'morning after' pill and even the IUD (this is of course the position of Murphy-O'Connor and the Roman Catholics, but very few other anti abortionists are as extreme).

An obvious response to the 'viability at x weeks' argument is that rather than have an abortion, the woman should give the viable foetus over to technicians to be grown in whatever artificial surroundings medical technology is now able to provide. For one who supports women's rights, there are clear objections to this whole idea – should a woman be compelled to undergo a medical procedure that would be at least as invasive as abortion? But the question has never been raised and the reason is obvious – it would be hugely expensive. This gives the lie to many viability arguments: preservation of foetal life is not an absolute question if taxes will go up.

The anti-choice movement

So far, we have treated the arguments of those opposing abortion as honest. No doubt there are people who genuinely believe that all potential human life should be maintained, even at the cost of continued oppression of women. These we should continue to argue with – they are likely to be our allies in many other questions. But we have to insist that it is an argument about persuading people. We are not seeking to impose our views by force of law and neither should they. And if anyone quibbles that this is a resolution in which they are constrained while we give up nothing, we smile sweetly and invite them to contemplate the moral superiority of taking the non-coercive position.

But many – particularly in the United States, where they have far greater support – have a clear right-wing agenda. Their

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so-called 'pro-life' position seems only to apply to foetuses. The 'pro-life' movement did not feel they should oppose the Afghan and Iraq wars, though these have cost the lives of nearly 200,000 people. They did not oppose the sanctions which led to the death of a million people in Iraq, half of them children. They took no position on the question of universal provision of drinkable water (as was agreed as a priority in the Johannesburg earth summit) even though the world's biggest killer of babies and small children is dehydration caused by diarrhoea, which in turn is due to impure drinking water. They are generally not in favour of increasing welfare provision. President Bush has made US aid for organisations abroad conditional on them opposing abortion; since most of these would also offer medical and nutritional advice it is very likely that their demise will directly cause more deaths. For them, life begins at conception and ends at birth.

The anti choice forces are also deeply dishonest in how they approach the question. They don't believe in reasoned argument. Their policy is to apply pressure and guilt-trip the woman. In Minnesota in the United States, for example, by law a woman seeking an abortion must receive a lecture from a doctor informing her of the 'alternatives to abortion', together with state-provided materials which refer to the foetus as an 'unborn child', information on foetal pain, and listing alternatives to abortion. The major anti-choice organisation, LIFE, also funds research designed to show connections between abortion and conditions such as breast cancer. Other researchers, without the obvious vested interest that LIFE has, have failed to confirm connections.

The argument about what terms should be used in the abortion rights debate is very important, because of the strong propaganda value the names have. The debate is whether women should have the freedom to choose an abortion or not; it therefore makes sense to refer to the views as 'pro-choice' and 'anti-choice'. The terms 'pro abortion' and 'anti-abortion' are not appropriate – it is possible to be pro-choice and at the same time anti-abortion; Tony Blair is currently an example of someone holding this position. More generally, while it is possible to be pro-abortion in a specific situation it is extremely unlikely that anyone could be generically pro-abortion; such a position would be ludicrous – it would mean being against any pregnant woman, anywhere, ever having a child. The anti-choice supporters' attempt to describe their view as 'pro-life' collapses completely because – as previously shown – they have no concern for non aborted ex-foetuses.

Attacks on abortion rights

At a world level, the most effective spearhead of attacks on women's rights come from the Christian fundamentalist right wing in the United States.

In November 2004, anti choice legislators slipped a last minute amendment into the US budget to make all healthcare providers eligible for state funding. Previously there was a requirement for providers to offer a full range of health care to obtain funding. The effect of this will be to allow funding of agencies that refuse to provide abortion services. Since the budget is – within limits – fixed, this means that pro-choice agencies will receive less funding. What is particularly galling with this amendment is that the question of which providers are eligible for state funding has been raised several times in the US Congress and the de facto position taken in the budget bill has always been defeated.

The key legal decision which legalised abortion in the US was Roe v. Wade in the US Supreme Court in 1973. Until recently the stated views of the Supreme Court judges supported the decision in Roe v. Wade by a 5-4 majority, but there have been two change over the past two years and both represent further moves to the right, which makes Roe v. Wade vulnerable. An overturn of this ruling would open the way for individual states to ban abortion and a majority would probably do so. Tens of millions of women in the US would be affected and anti-choicers world wide would be boosted by such a victory.

Abortion provision in Britain

Current abortion law in Britain is based on the Abortion Act (1967) as modified by Section 37 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990). Abortion is legal at up to 24 weeks of pregnancy if continuing with the pregnancy involves greater risk than termination to the physical or mental health of the woman, or of her existing children. Her personal and social situation can be taken into account in this decision. It is also allowed if there is risk of serious foetal abnormality. Abortion is legal later for more serious risks.

This means that there is no automatic right to abortion; a woman has to convince two doctors that continuing her pregnancy would have a worse effect on her than having an abortion. While this can usually be done, the problem is that some doctors will be opposed to abortion and may be obstructive, so it can take some time to get the two signatures.

Legally, the abortion has to be carried out by a doctor and in a government-approved hospital or clinic. Generally, the procedures are simpler, quicker and cheaper the earlier they are done. Unfortunately there are various factors that delay the process; some women are slow to realise they are pregnant (which can often be traced back to inadequate sex education), some may have social or family problems, some may suffer late referral due to obstructive doctors. Whatever the cause, their late arrival means they will take more resources which means less available for other women. Despite the legal 24-week limit most NHS facilities refuse to perform abortions after 18 weeks.

Many of the problems in getting an abortion are due to inadequate funding of the health service. It is quite possible for a woman to jump through all the hoops of the system but to fail to get an abortion because there are too many other women chasing too few beds. Abortion centres are often not seen as a priority by local health authorities, which are often struggling because of inadequate funds. There is often a moralist presumption that the woman's situation is her own fault and that she is somehow less deserving than other cases.

As a consequence, about 25 per cent of abortions in Britain occur in the private sector, but it varies from 10 per cent in some areas to 40 per cent in others. Some health authorities have even quoted these figures to support a view that women in their area are more affluent since they can afford private abortions, and hence have cut down NHS abortion funding. With a private abortion costing on average £500,

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effectively the poorest and least educated women are those that have the most problem obtaining an abortion. The most vulnerable women, slow to organise themselves, maybe less able to generate a suitably convincing reason for the initial referral, and without money to pay, are the most likely to go past the time limit and be denied an abortion.

No return to the back streets!

The final option for those who cannot obtain a safe, legal abortion has always been the neighbourhood abortionist. Mike Leigh's film *Vera Drake* is the story of one such. Harrowing as this film is, it presents a very sanitised version of what really happens. Vera is a supportive, friendly pillar of her community; many abortionists were vile money grabbers preying on women in distress. Like most others, Vera does not have the facilities or the knowledge to offer safe abortion and it is a measure of the desperation women felt that they went to people like her at all. The World Health Organisation estimates 80,000 women die each year from unsafe abortions.

The very basic fact is that the alternative to safe, legal abortion is not more happy women with beautiful new-born babies, as the anti-choicers claim; it is unsafe, illegal abortions leading to septicaemia, sterility and death.

Future developments

The current attacks on abortion rights in Britain have already been described. There are a number of factors coming together that suggest the attacks will increase in the relatively near future. The technological trend towards earlier viability and the propaganda rise of 'foetal rights' will be seen by anti-choicers as benefiting their cause. 'Faith groups' (generally anti-choice) have increased their influence in British politics. Meanwhile the Tories are likely to see the issue as one they can use to harass Blair. There has been increased activity from anti choicers: a year ago vicar Joanna Jepson brought a case against two doctors for aborting a foetus due to a cleft palate at 28 weeks; more recently she has been trying to refer a case of abortion due to club foot. Reading between the lines here, it is likely that the real reasons for these abortions were the mothers' requests and the stated reasons were medical excuses, but the examples show the weakness of the present situation and the need to work for genuine choice rather than humane legal avoidance by sympathetic doctors. Last January, Sue Axon went to court to seek a ruling that she must be told if her daughters go to a doctor to seek an abortion – and she will be supported by all kinds of reactionaries on grounds of parental rights and 'a girl's best friend is her mum' – though one has to wonder what sort of friend would attempt to use the law to destroy a girl's right to confidentiality. And Labour MP Geraldine Bell has an early-day motion to review (downwards) the current abortion time limits – this motion has support from Ian Gibson, chair of the Commons Science and Technology committee, which is alarming as it is further evidence that viability, rather than women's rights, is a major concern in this debate.

However, surveys suggest that less than a quarter of the population believe the status quo is too permissive. While Murphy-O'Connor may have been the catalyst that initially forced the issue onto the front pages, Britain is a far less religious society than the US and the pronouncements of religious figures have far less weight. Indeed, while the gay marriage issue may have loomed large in the US presidential election, the crisis over gay bishops in the Church of England, which now looks like producing a split in Anglicanism, seems to have had next to no resonance among the British public. It may even be the case that Murphy O'Connor's intervention motivated the 75 per cent who oppose restriction of abortion rights to vote for the party least likely to restrict them.

At the moment, pro-choice forces are not particularly well organised. It is some time since we have needed to mobilise against attack. The National Abortion Campaign and the Abortion Law Reform Association have merged; unfortunately this merger was generated more by the weakness of the two organisations than a recognised need for unity. That said, the issues and arguments remain the same and many of the old activists are still around. Two generations of women have grown up under the present regime, and statistics show that around 30 per cent of women in Britain will have an abortion at some point in their lives. It is unlikely that these women will tolerate an attempt to restrict abortion rights and – given adequate time to organise – a very strong defence campaign could be built.

In these circumstances, more complex possibilities arise. A compromise may be offered – the requirement for two doctors to agree that a woman should receive an abortion could be abandoned in return for a reduction of the normal time limit to 20 weeks. That would give a legally backed but limited form of abortion on request. There is no point at this stage on speculating how we should respond to this. We would need to see what is actually on offer first.

The socialist response

Abortions – even the earliest and least invasive – are unpleasant and should be seen as a last resort. Our tactics should be first as far as possible to avoid unwanted pregnancies, and second where there is a need for an abortion, to make it as early and as minimalist as possible. However, at the same time we have to recognise that the fundamental right here is that of the woman to be in control of her fertility, and therefore we have to recognise that instances may occur when a woman will want a late abortion. These, too, we have to minimise. To achieve this we need:

- A well-funded system of sex education, operating through schools and organised so that all students are sure to receive all the information.
- A well-publicised support system for sex education where people can go for confidential discussion.
- Adequately funded centres to provide contraceptives and contraceptive advice, freely and confidentially.
- Adequately funded centres to provide abortion advice and referrals, freely and confidentially.
- Adequately funded and confidential abortion facilities.

Our needs can be summed up by three demands from the first days of the abortion rights campaigns:

- Free abortion on demand.
- A woman's right to choose.
- As early as possible; as late as necessary.

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Abolish all faith schools – fight for secular education!

Andrew Berry takes issue with supporters of Respect

One of the cornerstones of socialism is that an education system should be comprehensive, mixed and secular. We stand against an education system divided on lines of class, religion, race, sex, sexual orientation or disability. There is nothing more important for fighting racism and other discrimination in society than the education system.

While it is understandable that some Muslims, suffering racism generally and Islamophobia in particular, might want dedicated Muslim schools, if we allow the education system to become segregated on religious, and ultimately ethnic, grounds it would be a massive step backwards in our defence of a cohesive multicultural society and our struggle for a socialist society. Accepting the ghetto – self-imposing it, in this case – is an abandonment of the anti-racist fight. The argument is particularly relevant against Muslim schools today but applies equally to Hindu, Sikh and Jewish schools. And while they don't have the same element of racial oppression, the same anti-segregationist argument also applies to Church of England and Roman Catholic schools.

The current policies of Tony Blair are deliberately to create a market in education, first through academy schools and now through trust schools. There are organisations waiting to take over the running of schools if we let them. These organisations fall into two main categories, business and faith. The way things are going, the main danger clearly lies in more new trust and academy schools being run as faith schools, because big business is vulnerable to bad press and scandals (for example, the recent peerages affair) which can expose self-interest and corruption. Faith organisations care a lot less about publicity and are less likely to buckle under the pressure of a campaign – this does not mean we cannot stop them but it does make it harder. Faith schools are potentially more dangerous as well, because although business-run schools are likely to promote uncritical pro-capitalist attitudes and specialise in the particular subjects business currently wants, they do have some basis in reality. Faith schools are far more prone to teaching the particular views of their faith rather than giving a more conventional, evidence-based education. Probably the clearest examples of these in Britain are Reg Vardy's fundamentalist Christian schools in Middlesbrough and Gateshead, where creationism is taught as if it were a science and in consequence the whole scientific method of fair testing and falsification comes under attack because creationism is an untestable and therefore unscientific theory.

When this view was raised in Unison and in Unison United Left, it was denounced as anti-Muslim and Islamophobic. These denunciations are mainly made not by Muslims, but by supporters of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). This issue was not debated at Unison national conference because the Unison left fought shy of prioritising a good motion in order to avoid debating an amendment about faith school expansion. Similar issues arose at the National Union of Teachers conference. These tactics come about from current political accommodations made by the SWP due to their involvement in Respect, and are extremely dangerous because they represent an intentional ignoring of a major danger in order to attempt to make an immediate tactical gain.

Winners and losers

In fact, the tactic of supporting faith schools won't work anyway. The consequence of the Blair vision is that we will see organisations competing against each other to run schools and gain influence and profit. As in any market system there will be winners and losers and the winners will tend to be those who have the biggest backing and financial resources. In the world of education those will be the likes of the City Of London or Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), which are international financers, but it will also be the Church of England – under the guise of its front organisation United Learning Trust – or the Roman Catholic church. It is unlikely that Muslim organisations would stand any chance of competing against them, and as a result while the absolute number of Muslim schools may increase, the proportion of Muslim schools against those of other faiths would decrease.

The new education bill will widen the current class divide in schools. The interplay between parental choice and schools' ability to select means that those schools perceived as even slightly better will attract and select children with more developed academic abilities and more parental push – i.e., the children of the middle class – while other schools, taking less developed children, will 'fail'. Faith schools in the bill are given a far more blatant right to decide which children they will not take, but again the existence of a selection mechanism means these schools end up being the schools where the so-called middle class children go. Failing to deal with the issue of faith schools head on will mean trying to fight the bill with not just one hand, but an entire arm and leg tied behind your back!

Discrimination

By campaigning for secular schools we are not trying to make schools atheist, or even anti-religious; we are simply opposing running schools on a religious ethos. In faith schools it is not just the children who have to follow the religion or the rules of that religion but also often the staff. There have been instances where schools have not wanted to recruit gay or lesbian staff – indeed, church organisations are currently lobbying the government for church schools to be exempted from legislation that would ban discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. Union officials are also aware of situations where staff have been asked to leave faith schools because they are doing something the religion frowns upon – such as having a sexual relationship with someone currently married to someone else.

Socialists must campaign for a comprehensive state education system that is fully inclusive and we must ensure in doing so we campaign against any organisation bidding to take over schools, whatever their motives. But we most also campaign for all schools to become secular to maintain the goal of the kind of society we want to bring about. This does not and should not mean we are in favour of closing schools, but of changing faith schools into community and secular schools. Without this element we could rightly be called hypocritical as we would be defending the current dominance of Christianity in British education. But moving further in the wrong direction is not a solution and we must campaign against the expansion of faith schools that will happen as a result of the bill. Since the bill will now almost certainly become law, we must take the fight to local communities and build campaigns (like Islington Campaign against Academies) that endeavour to defend comprehensive education and see off these faith and business organisations. Such campaigns are likely to start by opposing one particular academy or trust, but we should try to get them to work together and be mutually supportive, and to link up nationally though the likes of Campaign for State Education and Public Services not Private Profit with a view to overturning what will ultimately become very unpopular legislation. **WA**

Tower Hamlets

Respect profits from anti-war vote

Charli Langford analyses the May 4 council election results in the London borough where Respect won 12 seats

During the May council elections, the attention of lefties may well have strayed from time to time to Tower Hamlets where George Galloway is one of the MPs and Respect hoped to do well. If you follow the view that Labour has ceased to be the party supported by the British working class, the Respect results look very good – 12 seats (one held after a previous by-election gain), and every one was Labour in the last council elections in 2002.

Unfortunately, further analysis undermines this picture. The 2002 election result was a council of 35 Labour and 16 Lib Dems. Attrition over the intervening period meant that the pre-election council was 28 Labour, 16 Lib Dem, one Respect, one Tory, four Independents and one vacant seat (Respect and the Tory got in through by elections and the Lib Dems gained one seat from Labour; the Independents defected from their parties but saw no need to resubmit themselves to the electorate). The post-election council has 26 Labour, 12 Respect, seven Tory and six Lib Dem. Effectively for 2006 the losses were: Lib Dem 10, Labour two, Others five; the gains were Respect 11, Tories six. This shows that the major losers were the Lib Dems, while the gainers were both Respect and the Tories. The gains for the working class look far more meagre here.

Looking at individual seats, Respect won eight from Labour and three from Others, the Tories won six from Labour, and Labour won 10 from the Lib Dems and 2 from Others.

Probably the clearest analysis comes from looking at percentage voting in the various wards. There are 17 wards, electing three councillors each. Comparing results with those of 2002, in seven wards the main swing is from the Lib Dems to Respect; in one ward it is from Labour to Respect, in one ward both Labour and Lib Dem voters appear to be moving to Respect. In three wards the turnout increase appears to be the main factor favouring Respect. The Tories appear to have gained through turnout increase in one ward. The other four are unclear. It is worth noting that a move of Lib Dem voters to Respect may mean that Lib Dem votes drop to below those of Labour while Respect votes rise but not enough to beat Labour – so many of the seats Labour won from the Lib Dems could be through this mechanism.

Underlying political factors

But all this is mere psephology. Numerical trends may be important, but they just show the result of a complex mix of motivations. What are important are the underlying political factors.

Lib Dem history in working class areas is very variable. While the London suburbs of Richmond and Kingston and areas of south-west England may have enough affluence to maintain a Lib Dem administration, poor inner-city boroughs have a far more chequered history. The Lib Dems suffered a huge blow in Islington, probably due mainly to moves towards privatisation in education and to the well-over-the top traffic policy which has united the working class and the small (and medium) shopkeepers. In neighbouring Camden where there is no history of a Lib Dem administration, they took the council. In Tower Hamlets in the mid 80s to mid-90s, the Lib Dems in power attracted the kind of protest we normally saw against the National Front due to their racist housing policies (priority of places for sons and daughters of tenants, which discriminates massively against Bangladeshis, and definitions of Bangladeshi immigrants who had lost their homes in the huge floods in Bangladesh as 'intentionally homeless'). They also gained a reputation for philistinism when they ordered the destruction of the Rachel Whiteread sculpture 'House' – which would now be a nationally important work of art, given that it was a key precursor of her Holocaust memorial library in Vienna. Eventually the Lib Dems at national level publicly disowned them – they decided that the damage being done by their policies offset the kudos of having an inner-London council. The result of this history is that even now there is a suspicion of racism in voting Lib Dem in Tower Hamlets. The total collapse of the Lib Dem vote this election suggests that the Lib Dem vote was essentially an anti-Labour protest vote rather than from convinced Lib Dems, and it succumbed to an alternative protest party in Respect.

There is also historic eccentricity in voting behaviour in Tower Hamlets (as described previously in *Workers Action*), based on it having been a primary immigration area and hence reflecting the politics of the original lands of immigrants rather than the usual British views. During the 1939-45 war the local MP was from the Communist Party.

What is very new in Tower Hamlets, though, is the emergence of the Tories. They gained a foothold in an Isle of Dogs by-election – their first ever seat in the area – when the alternative vote was split between Respect and Labour. This presumably has been a development waiting to happen ever since the start of the building of the 'Wall Street on water' docklands development. However, even though the Tories of the area received their wake-up call in the by-election, in the wards where

they took all three seats the combined Labour and Respect vote would have beaten them. What is more worrying is that in the gentrified warehouse and marina area by Tower Bridge – where Respect was disbarred from standing due to a mistake on the nomination paper – one Tory got in and the other two came very close even without a Labour/Respect vote split. Here the Lib Dems crashed to below the Greens, so presumably their voters shifted to the Tories. Respect is contesting its disbarring here in the House of Lords at present. A rerun of the election is likely to produce three Tories and Labour will lose its overall majority on the council.

The election in Tower Hamlets was also marked by allegations of voting fraud to a total of several thousand votes, and two arrests for impersonation. Given that several candidates got in with less than a thousand votes and that margins of loss were often less than a hundred votes, this may well have affected the election in a big way. Respect has petitioned the electoral court over this issue in three wards, though the allegations cover more that that. At present, though, it does not look as if Respect will see any success in these areas.

The effect of ethnicity on voting

But probably the two most significant factors in this election were the decapitation of Labour and the very large effect of ethnicity on voting.

Respect candidates took the seats of five of the six councillors who formed the Labour leadership. The only person to keep her seat was Denise Jones – and she was in the ward where Respect failed to stand, so she may be removed by the judiciary. Basically the voters of Tower Hamlets have been so alienated from the council leadership that they have preferred to gamble on relative unknowns – whether from Respect, Labour or the Tories – rather than return the incumbents. The reasons for this decision will no doubt be different in the minds of different voters but prime causes are likely to be the Iraq war – where Labour's oppositional stance was so understated that it was effectively lost (and of course the incumbent MP of the time was allowed free rein to differ from the local party, which led to Labour's loss of the seat) – and also perceived Labour corruption (at least five councillors have been reported in the local press). The sacking of Eileen Short by the council officers for the crime of being too committed and effective in the 'Defend Council Housing' campaign at a time when the council was making strenuous efforts to sell off its housing stock became a local cause célèbre – unsurprisingly, since most council tenants were opposed to having their homes sold off. Crossrail – the proposed underground cross-London railway line – was also an issue, though here the problem is populist nimbyism by Respect, in response to insensitive handling of the issue by Labour.

There has always been voting on an ethnic basis in Tower Hamlets. In both the 2002 and 2006 elections, in the wards where a party stood both Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi candidates, the Bangladeshis tended to gain more votes. In 2002, in mixed candidate Labour wards the leading Labour candidate received on average 26 per cent more votes than the third placed, while for the Lib Dems the corresponding figure was 42 per cent. In 2006 the corresponding Labour figure is 40 per cent, while for Respect, the Lib Dems and the Tories the figure is around 55 per cent. In every case the leading candidate was Bangladeshi, the third-placed was non-Bangladeshi.

In 2006, nine wards returned councillors from more than one party; six of these wards are Labour/Respect, two are Labour/Lib Dem, and one Labour/Tory. Leaving out the Tory case, in the other eight all but two of the 24 candidates elected are Bangladeshi. In both cases where a non Bangladeshi candidate was elected, the unelected candidate for the same party was also not Bangladeshi – in other words, the election of a non-Bangladeshi candidate only happened when there was no other Bangladeshi candidate of that party to elect. While this ethnic factor has always been present, it has increased dramatically in 2006. A consequence of this is that all 12 of the elected Respect councillors are Bangladeshi.

It takes courage to raise this publicly; those who mention it are liable to be charged with racism. As one leading SWP member put it: 'You wouldn't be asking that question if it was white candidates winning.' But there is deep relevance in the question, because attitudes to the Iraq war are correlated to ethnicity, and because Respect has been promoting itself as 'the Party for Muslims' and is essentially formed from an alliance of Socialists and Muslims. The Bangladeshi population of Tower Hamlets would almost all consider themselves to be Muslim (even though some are in practice very secular Muslims). The local Mosques have tended to be either pro-Respect, or to have a friendly neutrality towards Respect.

An unstable situation

So what now for the second poorest borough in Britain? Local people can probably take some heart from the fact that they have at least got a council where Labour is in control. The prospects for a hung council – which most people thought would be the result prior to the election – would have been grim. Labour, Respect and the Lib Dems all despise each other; the Tories are too new to have build up a local history but are clearly the most right-wing party. However, the situation is still very unstable. Each party has a very high percentage of completely inexperienced councillors, which gives great advantage to unelected, unaccountable political advisors. All parties have councillors who stood not expecting to win and are likely to find that their new status and responsibilities put them under huge amounts of pressure. It has also in the past been quite common for councillors to resign from the party they were in when they were elected, but to retain their council places. With a single seat majority, any resignations or defections from Labour could have a major effect on the council. However, it is unlikely that any permanent oppositional alliance could be built and we would most likely see an administration that works on undocumented secret understandings, or one where voting is entirely tactical based on individualised attitudes to the matter under discussion. In either case, the possibilities for external influence and corruption are both very high. However, a more likely possibility after the unexpected Labour win would be councillors from other parties attempting to defect to Labour on the basis that that would be the only way they'd get a sniff of any power.

It will be very interesting to see who holds the upper hand in Respect in Tower Hamlets – the left, or the Mosque. The SWP member quoted earlier also said that Respect would have no problems in Tower Hamlets as it would be 'under George Galloway's moral authority'. It will be interesting to see how George chooses to exert any moral authority that remains to him. **WA**

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The latest 'socialist alternative' in Britain

Darren Williams is not impressed by the Socialist Party's latest venture, the Campaign for a New Workers' Party

If the success of a socialist party could be assured by the regular and vehement proclamation of its historic destiny, then the red flag would have been flying over the Palace of Westminster long ago. Few groups on the British far left can, these days, resist declaring that the time is right for a socialist alternative to Labour – and the most enthusiastic evangelists of the cause are the Socialist Party (née Revolutionary Socialist League, aka Militant tendency). Following its own withdrawal from the Labour Party in 1992, after burrowing away monomaniacally for almost three decades, the Militant/SP has renounced entrism with a vengeance – like an alcoholic falling off the wagon after protracted abstinence and throwing himself into a riotous, non-stop bender.

First, there were a few tentative electoral sorties under the name 'Real Labour', while the group kept one foot in the Labour Party. Next, the Militant leadership warmly applauded Arthur Scargill's announcement of a new Socialist Labour Party – only to find itself at the wrong end of a particularly lengthy bargepole. Not greatly daunted by this setback, Militant decided it didn't need the patronage of left bureaucrats after all and declared itself, with great chutzpah, *the* Socialist Party.[1] Rapidly discovering that this pioneering exercise in re-branding did nothing but accelerate its exodus of members, the SP began looking around for allies in the great work of providing a new leadership for the working class. Such allies were initially hard to come by, as this was 1996-97 and every class conscious worker worth his or her salt was actively seeking the expulsion from power of the Tories and the election of a Labour government – despite Tony Blair's gleeful abandonment of Labour's social democratic policy baggage. While the working class decided it was prepared to reserve judgement on New Labour for at least a year or two, sections of the far left became increasingly impatient with all this hanging around and the SP's welcoming embrace began to appear more enticing. The Blairites' increasingly draconian internal regime also provided a few recruits for a left regroupment project, by driving out of the party an increasing number of activists and a few big fish like the MEPs Ken Coates and Hugh Kerr. In addition, the Scottish Socialist Alliance was shaping up nicely by this time, and many English and Welsh lefties assumed they could cobble together something similar in short order – paying little regard to the specificities of Scottish politics.

Thus was born the Socialist Alliance – embracing, by the time of the 2001 general election, most of the 57 varieties of British Trotskyism and a few mainstream left Labourites, and brimming with confidence that the electoral fruit of New Labour betrayal would fall into its lap. Alas, it was not to be. Moreover, the SP founders of the project discovered that they had been supplanted as its dominant force by the far bigger Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Skulking away in disgust, the SP concentrated on trade union work for a few years (with far greater success – particularly in PCS), standing a few election candidates under its own colours and sniping at the SWP's mismanagement of the 'new left party' project. Before long, however, the time seemed right for the SP to have another go: the SWP's launch of Respect marked a significant turn away from the original conception of the socialist alternative and left trade union leaders (this time in the RMT and the FBU) were, once again, cutting their ties with Labour and talking about the need for a new workers' party.

Unhappy

On March 19 this year, therefore, the founding conference of the Campaign for a New Workers' Party (CNWP) was held at the University of London Union. Some 450 activists attended – most prominent among them, of course, being the SP itself, along with other far left groups similarly unhappy with Respect, such as Workers Power and the CPGB-*Weekly Worker*. Further, smaller-scale launch meetings are being held all over the country and a petition for a new workers' party has gathered over two thousand signatures (the combined membership of the SP and the other far left groups involved probably account for a third of this number). Keeping in mind the proverb about tiny acorns, it would probably be unfair and unwise to draw any firm conclusions at this stage as to whether the CNWP is on course to meet its target of providing a socialist alternative to New Labour. A more fruitful approach would be to look at what the CNWP is *seeking* to achieve and determine whether it represents a robust strategy for the establishment of a new mass party of the working class. Conveniently, the SP's thoughts on the matter are available in the pamphlet *Join the Campaign for a New Workers Party*, written by its national secretary, Hannah Sell, with a foreword by Coventry councillor and former Labour MP Dave Nellist.[2]

Needless to say, the pamphlet contains much that any serious socialist would find uncontroversial:

> 'New Labour has taken the country to war . . . has widened and deepened privatisation and increased the role of business . . . [in] health, education, welfare and other services. And, as Labour's

> agenda has become more right wing, the party internally has become more sclerotic . . .
>
> 'Tony Blair has seen his role as . . . destroying any vestiges of independent political representation for the working class . . .
>
> 'Gordon Brown may become leader of the Labour Party, but he has made it clear that his leadership of the party will not represent a "shift to the left". While the style may change, the substance of a Brown leadership would be basically the same as Blair's . . .'

We should even be able to agree, in principle, with Sell when she says, 'We need a new party that will actually fight "like tigers" in the interests of trade unionists and the working class.' The question is, of course, how can such a party be established? For Sell and her SP comrades, the answer is to give up any idea of 'reclaiming' the Labour Party, to break the link between Labour and its (currently) affiliated trade unions and establish a new party whose 'great idea' will be 'to fight with determination on the side of the working class, the poor and oppressed against the giant multinationals whose profits are the driving force of our society and whose interests the mainstream parties loyally defend'. The SP will argue for this party to 'adopt a democratic socialist programme', but this will be left for the membership to decide because – crucially – the party will have an 'open and democratic approach which will ensure that [it] is attractive to trade unionists, community and environmental campaigners, and anti-war activists'. It is this 'open and democratic approach' that will allow the new party to avoid repeating the mistakes that characterised 'attempts to launch such new formations in the last decade, such as the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) . . .'.

Intriguing

This pamphlet does not, however, establish either that giving up on the Labour Party is necessary, or that breaking the link with the unions is a good idea, or, indeed, that a new party would be viable. 'Over the last 20 years,' declares Dave Nellist in the introduction, 'a fundamental change has been brought about in the Labour Party . . .', yet the nature of this change is left unclear. (Even the time-scale is more intriguing than enlightening: does it refer to the date when the members of the *Militant* editorial board were expelled?) The wretched state of the contemporary Labour Party is hammered home repeatedly throughout the pamphlet, mostly by reference to the undoubtedly awful policies of the present government. But, to establish that a 'fundamental change' has taken place, one needs a clear standard of comparison, and this is where things get a bit fuzzy. How, exactly, is today's Labour Party different from the party of Wilson, Callaghan, Foot and Kinnock, within which Militant supporters worked so tirelessly? In a heavier, more theoretical setting, the SP would no doubt argue that Labour was once a 'bourgeois workers' party' but is now simply a 'bourgeois party'. This, however, is a pamphlet aimed at the general reader rather than the experienced Marxist, and its attempt to put the argument in accessible language exposes the confusion at its heart.

The first attempt is made by Nellist:

> 'A generation ago, at a simplistic level, it was clear that there was a difference between Labour and Tory. There was a "them and us". In the main, Labour was seen to be on the side of workers and their families, and it was a party in which socialists were able to work. No such party exists today for working people.'

'*It was clear that there was a difference*' – but what was the nature of the difference? '*Labour was seen to be on the side of the workers?*' But does this mean that the party actually *was* on the side of the workers, or simply that this was a widespread misconception?

Confusion

Sell's later formulations confuse things even more. Labour was, we are told, 'founded at its base as a workers' party, even though the leadership had a foot in the capitalist camp'. It 'became a mass force which, however imperfectly, did provide a voice for the working class'; 'while it was undoubtedly a workers' party at its base, it was party of big business at the top' and 'repeatedly acted in the interests of big business once in office'. What is left unclear is whether, and to what extent, workers ever had the capacity to influence party policy and to secure meaningful gains. Did Labour simply provide them with 'a voice' – that is, a public forum in which to express their views and interests – or with something more? How was the Labour Party that 'repeatedly acted in the interests of big business' in the 1960s and 1970s fundamentally different from the Labour Party that does the same today? If the working class did not exert any real collective influence over the party, then what does it mean to say that it was 'undoubtedly a workers' party at its base' other than that its members and voters were predominantly working class, which is surely also the case today?

Sell gives one concrete example, which purports to demonstrate that 'In the past, Labour or even Tory governments could not so easily get away with the breadth and scale of attacks on the working class that New Labour have carried through':

> 'Although the tops of the Labour Party were wedded to capitalism even before Blair, they were constantly looking over their shoulders at the workers who made up the Labour Party's membership and answered attacks on their rights with mass resistance.'

Thus, when the Wilson government attempted to introduce the anti-union *In Place of Strife* legislation, it was 'forced to retreat' by 'a series of strikes'. But why, we are left to wonder, have the unions not maintained this degree of pressure in subsequent years? There is no acknowledgement here either of the objective defeats inflicted on the working class over the last 20-30 years, or of the role of the unions themselves (and particularly the 'new realist' leaderships of the 1980s and 1990s) in facilitating the rightward shift in Labour policy.

The unions presumably escape much criticism because the SP is keen to win left-leaning leaders and activists to its new project, once they have disaffiliated from Labour. Here, again, the argument does not stand up to much scrutiny. While it is fair enough to point out that the unions are not getting much for their money, one should ask what use they are making of the channels of influence that are currently open to them – such as the NEC (where their representatives have repeatedly voted against their respective unions' policies). The fact is that the affiliated unions collectively have at least some prospect of influencing Labour's direction at present; if they were to disaffiliate, the chances are that that potential strength would simply be dissipated, rather than being employed on behalf of the projected 'new workers' party'. Surely it is better to try to make the link work for union members, before breaking it altogether?

Outwitted

The process by which, it is suggested, Labour has undergone its 'fundamental change' seems to be one whereby Blair and his treacherous accomplices have cunningly outwitted the unions, the activists, the left MPs and the rank-and-file membership. It is the familiar story of leadership betrayal: the workers and their faithful socialist champions are all set to pursue the class struggle, only to be deceived, confused and generally undermined by a self-serving layer of bureaucrats. This conveniently sidesteps those awkward situations in which the workers are not ready for a fight or are unconvinced by the arguments of the left. Jim Mortimer is indignantly rebuked for saying that 'the Thatcherite heritage and values . . . still

have influence in Britain', thereby 'trying to spread the blame for New Labour's perpetuation of Thatcherite policies across society as a whole' – rather than pinning it all on a handful of 'misleaders'.

It naturally follows that, if all that has been holding back the militant workers has been the absence of the right (i.e., left) leadership, then there need be no serious concerns about the viability of the new workers' party: all that is needed is the political will. The recent electoral success of 'the new left party in Germany' is cited, as if the experience could simply be copied in England and Wales, without regard to specific national conditions.

What is not seriously addressed by the SP is the enduring hold that the Labour Party exerts over a plurality of politically conscious workers, both for historical-cultural (i.e., *class*) reasons and because New Labour's policies have not yet made life miserable enough for enough people to provoke a general and concerted revolt. For, while the litany of New Labour crimes – war, inequality, privatisation, increasing inequality, low wages, the persistence of poverty and the maintenance of anti-union laws – is accurate enough, it is only one side of the story. Low unemployment, low inflation and low interest rates have secured, at least, the acquiescence of those not yet hit by the most divisive and destructive aspects of neo-liberalism. Meanwhile, even many of those who strongly oppose the New Labour agenda remain convinced that 'their' party can and must be won back to 'real Labour' policies.

Obstacles

This is not to say that there is any guarantee that Labour can be broken from its current neo-liberal leadership and policies, or that this is necessarily the best approach to securing real political representation for the working class. Sell quite rightly points out the weakness of the Labour left, the declining numbers of active members and the difficulty of winning new recruits to a party associated with war, privatisation and inequality. These are real obstacles but at present they seem lesser obstacles than those impeding the construction of a mass workers' party on the basis of a tiny layer of activists, mostly drawn from the historically small and uninfluential far left. Hannah Sell's approving reference to the German Left Party omits to mention that this was a party established by the merger of an existing small mass party (the PDS) with a substantial split from the Social-Democratic Party. While we must all defer to the verdict of history, it currently seems more likely that a viable 'new workers' party' in Britain will be built by breaking socialist supporters of the Labour Party away from their own right wing *en masse*, after first building a strong left inside the party – rather than by planting a flag in the hope of attracting disenchanted activists in their ones and twos.

'I've had a wonderful time,' Groucho Marx once declared, '. . . but this wasn't it.' It might similarly be said that we *do* need a campaign, of sorts, for a new workers' party – but this one isn't it.

NOTES

1. Only to find that the cranky Socialist Party of Great Britain (est. 1904) claimed first dibs on the name 'Socialist Party', forcing the SP to add 'in England and Wales' to its name for official purposes – thereby producing the unfortunate acronym 'SPEW' – or 'Socialist Alternative' for elections.

2. The pamphlet can be ordered for £1 from the SP's bookshop at http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/bookframe.htm or it can be read online at http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/pamphlets/cnwp/.

3. Unless the SP considers the 'middle class' to be much more numerous than one might expect. In fact, there is some evidence in the pamphlet of a questionable (or, at least, ill-thought out) conception of class: '*More and more people who would have previously seen themselves as middle class, such as teachers and civil servants, are now relatively low paid and are increasingly being forced downwards into the ranks of the working class.*' This suggests (perhaps unintentionally) that class is simply a matter of income! **WA**

Opinion

Is George Bush an idiot?

Jack Bernard

George Bush is not articulate. He doesn't 'think on his feet'. He has trouble remembering names. Does this make him an idiot? No.

Tony Blair, on the other hand, exhibits characteristics present in much of the intelligentsia. Blair is articulate. Blair 'thinks on his feet'. Blair is self-confident and has a big ego. And like much of the intelligentsia, he has a relatively narrow field of knowledge, mostly learned by rote. Bush is not 'of the intelligentsia'.

But Blair has the greater claim to idiocy. His dabbling in world politics has probably signalled the end for Blairism, whereas Bush, though now unpopular, has largely achieved what he set out to achieve. One must not be fooled by Bush's *feigned* idiocy.

As for being dangerous, Bush is no more, and no less, dangerous than John F. Kennedy. One has to remember that Kennedy gave the go-ahead for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Had it been successful, it would have returned the Cuban workers and peasants to the dire conditions that existed prior to the revolution, and would have stopped them from later experiencing the highest literacy rate and the best health service in Central and South America.

Oliver Stone's analysis in his film *JFK*, that the assassination of Kennedy was a coup d'état, is essentially correct. More precisely, it was a *palace coup*. But it is a myth that Kennedy was a nice man who wanted to pull the troops out of Vietnam but was stopped by nasty people in the US establishment. The *eventual* withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam did not signify that the USA had gone soft on Vietnam, i.e., given up its role as the most counter-revolutionary force on the face of this planet since the Second World War.

What *is* particularly dangerous is *the period opened up* by the collapse of the USSR. Stalinism will go down in history as a counter-revolutionary phenomenon despite, for example, aiding both the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions against US counter-revolutionary aggression. The post-Second World War decades of 'peaceful co-existence' between the USSR and the USA had a function of keeping the USA somewhat in check, even though the Vietnam War was, to an extent, a surrogate war between the USA and the USSR. Now there is no one to keep the USA in check.

So we are returning to the conditions that characterised the earlier period of the present epoch of monopoly capitalism (which started in 1900-1901): an epoch of world wars. The next world war will probably be fought between continents, but it would be idiocy to try and predict what the sides are going to be. **WA**

Bolivia fights back against neo-liberalism

Nick Davies hails the landslide election victory of Evo Morales as part of the revolutionary process in Latin America

If in Latin America every election is effectively a referendum on neo-liberalism, the result in Bolivia amounts almost to a declaration of war. In electing Evo Morales, a former llama herder and coca grower, candidate of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), as Bolivia's first ever indigenous president, Bolivians have demanded a halt to 500 years of pillage of their country and subjugation of its indigenous people. 'We're here to change our history, we're taking over,' Morales declared at his inauguration. Putting himself on a potential collision course with Washington, Morales has promised to nationalise Bolivia's oil and gas reserves and defend the production of coca for medical and industrial purposes. Almost as soon as the result was declared, as a clear signal that he knows who his friends are, Morales paid visits not to Washington but to Cuba and Venezuela.

The scale of Morales's victory on December 18 was nothing short of staggering. He got 54 per cent of the vote, the largest vote a presidential candidate has achieved in 30 years, on a turnout of 84 per cent. Jorge 'Tuto' Quiroga, the main candidate of the pro-US, mainly white or mestizo oligarchy and a Washington favourite, managed a mere 28.5 per cent. Had the Electoral Council not disenfranchised more than a million, mainly indigenous voters, Morales's victory might have been even more overwhelming. In the Andean departments, where the predominantly Aymara and Quechua indigenous people live, the figures speak for themselves. In La Paz, Morales beat Quiroga by 66 per cent to 18 per cent, in Cochabamba, the score was 64 per cent to 25 per cent, in Oruro, 62 per cent to 25 per cent, and in Potosí, 57 per cent to 25 per cent.

Even in Santa Cruz, a stronghold of the oligarchy, the MAS managed 33 per cent as against 41 per cent, and in Tarija, another lowland department where the oligarchy is strong, the MAS scored 31 per cent. These figures indicate that the oligarchy's use of the rhetoric of regional autonomy for the lowland areas did not stop workers and peasants there voting along class lines. The MAS has a comfortable majority in Congress with 72 out of 130 deputies. Only in the Senate (12 seats out of 27) is it not in control.

On the crest of an anti-imperialist wave

This victory didn't come out of nowhere. In October 2003, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada ('Goni') was obliged to resign and flee to Miami. Lozada's removal was the culmination of an 11-day general strike and demonstrations estimated at 500,000 (Bolivia's population is about eight million) led by miners and peasants from the city of El Alto, and supported by peasants, miners, workers, coca growers, taxi drivers, street-vendors, students and sections of the middle class from all over Bolivia.

Gas sparked off this insurrection. Bolivia has the second biggest reserves of natural gas in South America. The gas war began with the government's plan for a $5.2 billion natural gas pipeline project, controlled by a consortium of energy multinationals, in order to export Bolivian gas, via Chile, to the United States. The price for export to the US would be a miserable 70 cents per thousand cubic feet, and Bolivia would receive only 18 per cent of that. It did not take a genius to realise that Bolivians were being ripped off by an international trade system not designed for their benefit. Yet again, one of Bolivia's natural resources was to be extracted for the benefit of Europe and North America, leaving Bolivians poor. Within a month the gas uprising threatened to become an all-out civil war. Government troops massacred 84 protestors and killed 15 conscripts who had refused to fire on demonstrators. The unreliability of some of the armed forces, and the government's loss of the support of sections of the middle class, forced Lozada to cut and run, but not before looting $85 million from the Bolivian treasury to make his exile as comfortable as possible.

The gas war followed the water war of 1999-2000. In 1999, the World Bank pressurised the Bolivian government into privatising the water companies. It refused credit to the public company which ran the water services, insisted that there be no subsidies to mitigate price hikes, and turned the whole supply over to a subsidiary of International Water Ltd, owned by Bechtel, one of the US companies currently profiteering from the destruction of Iraq. In Cochabamba, price rises of 60 to 90 per cent per month and the requirement that peasants had to buy a permit to collect rainwater from their own wells and roof tanks were met with huge and furious demonstrations, forcing the water profiteers, eventually, to abandon Bolivia. Bechtel's humiliation was complete six years later, when its $50 million legal action against Bolivia for loss of profit was finally abandoned.

Central to Bolivian culture is the coca leaf, long used as an appetite suppressant and to combat altitude sickness. For several years now, coca growers have been involved in a struggle for survival against US policy in Bolivia, which is based exclusively on the eradication of the coca leaf. US economic aid is dependent on coca leaf eradication, thus blaming indigenous Bolivians for the North American

and European problem of cocaine addiction. As in Colombia, there has been a counter-insurgency strategy of coca eradication, involving the military, devised by current US ambassador David Greenlee when he was a CIA agent in Bolivia, which has resulted in the violation of human rights and large-scale poverty in areas where growing coca is the only way to survive.

When in 2002 Morales first ran for president, the ex-US ambassador Manuel Rocha threatened Bolivia with a loss of international aid if Morales won. Rocha's intervention pushed Morales's vote to within 1.5 per cent of the winner, Lozada. Coca growers have demanded a pause in eradication, the modification of the anti-drug laws and a study of legal coca markets. In January and February 2003 a mass mobilisation of coca-growing peasants demanded the suspension of coca eradication, the nationalisation of privatised industries and services and an end to the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Many of the coca growers used to be tin miners. Tin used to be Bolivia's chief export until the price crashed in the 1980s partly due to the release by the USA onto the world market of its tin reserves. The tin miners had always been the most militant sector of the Bolivian working class. In 1985, Victor Paz Estenssoro privatised the tin mines that had been nationalised under his first presidency following the national revolution of 1952. His right-hand man was none other than the then up and coming US-educated technocrat, Lozada.

Neo-liberalism's impact on Bolivia has been bloody and terrible. When the mines were privatised, the miners' union, with a long and proud history of militancy and courage, was crushed and 20,000 miners were 'localised', in other words, sacked, dispersed and 'relocated' to the informal sector in the shantytowns. Bolivia was always one of the poorest countries in South America. Unquestionably, the neo-liberal assault has made it poorer, destroying the state sector, increasing unemployment and underemployment, and weakening the social protection that kept many Bolivians from starvation. Seventy per cent of Bolivians now live in poverty. Bolivia's rich natural resources are looted by US or European multinationals. In the name of the 'war against drugs', Bolivians are prevented from making a living in one of the few ways they can. In the name of the 'war against terrorism', money in Britain's aid budget earmarked for, among other countries, Bolivia has been diverted to pay for the occupation of Iraq. It must come as a terrible disappointment to Tony Blair that the Bolivians remain stubbornly unconvinced of the merits of globalisation!

Lozada's replacement, the former vice-president, Carlos Mesa, clearly felt the people's anger, and in his inaugural address was forced to adopt a conciliatory tone: 'I want to create a country for all Bolivians . . . where we can respect the equality of everyone.' Aware that he might suffer the same fate as his despised predecessor, he admitted: 'I am only going to be the president if I serve you [the country] because if you end up serving me, you will kick me out.' As it happened, whatever Mesa proposed was either too much for the multinationals, or not enough for the workers' and peasants' organisations. In April 2005, in a TV address, he confirmed what all Bolivians already knew, that the multinationals were running the country and would not tolerate any reduction in their influence.

This impasse resulted in a further insurrectionary upsurge, even greater and more politically advanced than that of 2003. With El Alto once again at its centre, this movement, led by the national trade union confederation (COB) as well as numerous other workers', peasants' and community organisations, had as its main demand the nationalisation of gas. If the parliament could not meet this demand, then, these organisations insisted, it should be shut down. In the main cities, *cabildos abiertos* or mass meetings took place on a daily basis, often hundreds or thousands strong. Mesa resigned. To escape the masses, parliament sat in Sucre instead of La Paz, but demonstrators surrounded the parliament nonetheless, forcing the oligarchy to forgo its first choice of interim president, Vaca Díez, in favour of Eduardo Rodríguez, head of the Supreme Court.

Morales, then, is surfing on a revolutionary, anti-imperialist wave. After his victory, in Cuba he signed agreements with Fidel Castro for Cuba to develop eye hospitals in Bolivia and help in the training of Bolivian medical students. Cuba will also assist Bolivian anti illiteracy programmes. In Caracas, he signed agreements for Venezuelan funding of health and education programmes, and a trade deal, exchanging Venezuelan oil for Bolivian soya. Hugo Chávez proclaimed that he and Morales were part of an 'axis of good'. Morales, for his part, announced that 'We are joining in this anti neo-liberal and anti-imperialist struggle'.

But is he?

Morales: the solution or the problem?

Morales does not only have to worry about the armed forces, the oligarchy, the USA, the oil and gas multinationals, the IMF, and the threats of the eastern provinces to secede. He is not short of critics from his left either. These critics come from the Bolivian left and the workers' movement, and also from the international revolutionary left. These two sources of criticism are related, with the revolutionary left having some presence in Bolivia, and the left outside Bolivia taking its cue from the critics inside the country. The criticisms of Morales are that he has been less than energetic in supporting the demands of the masses, that his is a 'populist' rather than socialist movement, based on the indigenous peasantry rather than the working class, and that he has manoeuvred an opportunity for the working class to take power into an electoral blind alley.

On the face of it, Morales may have a case to answer. During the October 2003 uprising, he apparently played no part, being on a trip to Europe at the time. When Mesa, caught between the masses and the multinationals, proposed a referendum on the question of gas ownership, Morales supported it, coming under fierce criticism from the COB, which called for a boycott. In the uprising of May-June 2005, the MAS leaders were calling for royalties on gas exports to be increased from 18 per cent to 50 per cent, far short of the popular demand that if parliament could not guarantee the nationalisation of gas, then it should be shut down. The MAS staged its own demonstration in favour of the 50 per cent demand, separate from the larger one organised by the COB and other organisations, which called for nationalisation. Morales apparently appeared on television appealing for the lifting of strikers' roadblocks. MAS leader Ramón Loayza had to admit that his party had been 'surpassed by the ranks'. He was obliged to issue an ultimatum to parliament to nationalise gas within four days or be closed down.

Morales's critics have seized on his decision to sell the Mutún iron mine, which contains one of the largest reserves of iron and manganese in the world. This sale had been suspended by former president Rodríguez, under pressure from local MAS deputies, as well as trade unions, environmental groups and peasant organisations in the area. Morales has also drawn criticism for saying to businessmen in Santa Cruz, a hotbed of reaction, that he would respect their right of 'autonomy'. Some of his cabinet appointees (the economic ones as opposed to the 'social' ones) are questionable such as Salvador Riera, a Santa Cruz businessman, as minister for public works, and Luis Alberto Arce, who has links with the IMF, as finance minister. Moreover, on his whistle-stop, pre inauguration tour, Morales did

not just visit Cuba and Venezuela. His visits to France and Spain were widely interpreted as goodwill gestures to reassure, among others, the Spanish giant Repsol that its investment in Bolivia is safe in his hands. A phrase that kept cropping up in the communiqués from those meetings was 'legal guarantees' of investments.

It is important to understand the appalling pressures facing Morales and his government. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America. It has been ruined by 20 years of neo liberalism. The oligarchy may try to use the armed forces to sabotage his administration. In particular, the oligarchy in Santa Cruz and other eastern lowland departments will threaten to secede, thus breaking up the state, if they do not get their own way. Just over the border from the would be secessionists, in Mariscal Estigarribia, Paraguay, a US military base is being developed, capable of housing 16,000 troops. The Paraguayan senate has voted to grant this base immunity from Paraguayan law, as well as International Criminal Court justice. Paraguay looks set to play the same role as Honduras did in the 1980s. Paul Wolfowitz of the World Bank has already offered Morales his 'advice', to help Bolivia with 'mechanisms to ensure transparent, responsible and intelligent investment'. Reporting on Morales's visit to South Africa, the *South African Daily Star* set out what his enemies hope will be his most likely course: 'Though Morales has alarmed conservatives, some South Africans who have encountered him believe that his rhetoric is mostly designed for popular consumption . . . they believe he is a rough diamond who will lose some of his rough edges and gain more polish when he actually tries to run his country.' In other words, the forces ranged against Morales will do their best to make sure that he turns out to be another Lula rather than another Chávez.

However, a mere 48 hours after his inauguration he appointed as his oil minister Andres Soliz Rada who, as a journalist and congress member, has spent 30 years campaigning for state ownership of oil and gas. Soliz has repeated Morales's promise to renationalise gas and oil reserves. Morales has said he will nationalise the subsoil, in that he will impose state ownership on the gas and oil that is extracted, but he will not expropriate the assets of the multinationals involved in extracting it. He says he will review the contracts with the multinationals, asking them to pay higher taxes and royalties. In his own words: 'Any state has the right to use its natural resources. We must establish new contracts with the oil companies based on equilibrium. We are going to guarantee the returns on their investment and their profits, but not looting and stealing.' (In seeking to negotiate new contracts on far better terms, rather than, at this stage, going for complete expropriation, Morales appears to be following the Venezuelan example, although there, the foreign oil companies are now joint enterprises with the state oil company, the PDVSA.)

Further, Morales has maintained his promise to repeal the hated decree 20160, which, allowing 'employment at will', has been the framework for the neoliberal policies of the past 20 years. He has promised to distribute untilled land, but not to expropriate the *latifundia*, or large estates. He has stated categorically that he will defy the demands of the USA to eradicate the growth of coca, and has appointed a coca-grower as minister of social defence, responsible for coca. He has dismissed the entire military high command, whom he believes to be disloyal. He has placed the privatised national air line, LAB, under the control of a government 'administrator' for 90 days in order to investigate allegations of asset-stripping, allegations which had prompted a pilots' strike. He has asked Bush to extradite Lozada to answer charges arising out of the murder of demonstrators in October 2003. Not a bad record for his first few weeks in office!

Some of this may look disappointing to those who demanded nationalisation of multinationals' assets, and isn't a 'return on profit' to the satisfaction of energy multinationals merely 'looting and stealing'?

However, while no one should lose any sleep over the fate of the oil and gas multinationals or their shareholders, and while the nationalisation of imperialist assets, giving Bolivia complete control of its resources, must be an aim, to make support of the government conditional on whether Morales nationalises without compensation this or that imperialist asset would be sectarian and wrong. If Morales is to carry out real change, and therefore if his tenure is to be more than a heroic, and doomed, 15 minutes of fame, he has got to proceed patiently and carefully, pick his battles, and take on his enemies one at a time, and under conditions of his choosing when he knows he can win. There's a story in Venezuela that during the coup attempt of 2002, Chávez phoned Fidel Castro for advice and was told, 'Do anything, but do not do another Allende on us'. This is an enigmatic remark, with a multitude of possible meanings: possibly 'better to live to fight another day than choose a glorious martyrdom'. Or on the other hand, did it mean, 'if you think generals might be disloyal, do not promote them'? Or 'if the people demand arms, do not refuse them'? Or did he mean all three of these?

The support of the masses is essential. They expect from Morales more than from possibly any other government in Bolivia's history, including the national revolutionary government of 1952. He has promised 'zero corruption, zero bureaucracy', and as if to prove it, has halved his own salary. The more Morales sticks to this, the more accountable he is to the mass organisations, and the more open his government is about the real and genuine difficulties it faces, the more likely the workers and peasants are to be patient if all of their expectations cannot be met overnight.

It is sometimes necessary to distinguish between the understandable impatience of the masses and their organisations and the sectarianism of the vanguard. It is sectarianism and factionalism, spilling over from previous disputes, which seems to be at the root of the hostility shown by some workers' leaders towards Morales. Take Jaime Solares, leader of the COB, for example. He is apparently in favour of a 'worker-peasant revolution of a socialist character' and yet refuses to support a MAS government. While furiously denying that he will support a military coup, he says: 'I never called on soldiers to carry out a military coup. I simply said that if a soldier who was patriotic and committed to the people took power in Bolivia, like Chávez in Venezuela, I would be the first to support him.' (*International Viewpoint* No.373, December 2005).

It seems that Morales is too right wing for Solares because of his position on gas royalties, and because his base is the indigenous peasantry as opposed to the working class, to the extent that his government is a worse option than a military coup! Just what kind of sectarian gibberish is this? What kind of signal does it send out to the oligarchy and to the military? If you are plotting to overthrow Morales's government and install a military demagogue (who says he is 'just like Chávez') a section of the workers' movement will support you! There is a section of the Bolivian military said to be sympathetic to the mass organisations, and Bolivia has seen pro-left, anti-US generals in the past, notably General Torres, briefly in power in 1971, but to talk of military intervention at this time, counterposed to the movement which was on the point of electing Morales by such a landslide almost beggars belief.

As for the accusation, if that is what it is, that Morales is insufficiently 'proletarian', it has to be said that neither Morales nor his party are from the traditional Bolivian left. Morales does not, and has

never claimed to be a Marxist, and therefore he should not be judged as one. But doesn't any movement towards socialism in a country such as Bolivia involve a coalition of all the oppressed? Wasn't it a coalition of the oppressed that led the uprisings in 2003 and 2005? Isn't this the kind of coalition being constructed by Chávez in Venezuela? If Chávez had relied on support only from wage earners in factories, he might well be history by now. Aren't the coca growers on the cutting edge of the confrontation with the USA? Over the past 20 years, centres of working class militancy have been broken up. Many workers are now in the 'informal sector': the street traders, one man or one-woman businesses, taxi-drivers and so on. This sector, consisting in large part of ex miners and recent immigrants from the countryside, and engaged in a struggle for survival, has a considerable social weight in Bolivia, as it does all over Latin America. It would be as ridiculous to regard these people as petit-bourgeois in the European sense, as it would to regard Bolivian teachers, for example, as such. What is important, surely, is what this movement does, and that is a political, not a sociological issue.

The third fundamental criticism of Morales, that his election victory represents a conscious turn away from the workers of Bolivia taking power for themselves, is only sustainable if there was a realistic possibility of power being seized in the middle of 2005. Now, the uprising of 2005 was broad-based, one in which all the oppressed and downtrodden in Bolivia were represented. The widespread and popular demand that the government nationalise the gas, coming as it did after the gas war of 2003, and the water war, showed what the mass movement thought of neo-liberalism and its local representatives. The demand that parliament nationalise the gas or be closed down represented a visceral desire not to go on living in the old way, as did the resolutions emanating from the trade unions, peasant unions and the *cabildos abiertos* calling for a workers' and peasants' government. The *cabildos abiertos* themselves represented an attempt, albeit a short lived one, at direct, participatory democracy. But the workers and peasants did not take power. The COB leaders apparently blame the lack of a revolutionary party. But if we are to assume that the existence of such a party is a prerequisite for the taking of power, then doesn't the lack of one suggest that the movement was not quite as politically advanced as has been claimed. (Solares's addled comments about a 'patriotic' officer breaking the logjam appear to bear this out.) The Bolivian masses cannot have been short of advice from the representatives within Bolivia of the international far left on the merits of a revolutionary party, but maybe, looking at the numerous Trotskyist nanosects, they did not like what they saw.

It is one thing to advance the slogan of a workers' and peasants' government, and for that slogan to enjoy a degree of popularity among the workers' and peasants' organisations. For it to be realisable in any real, immediate, concrete way is quite another. While the *cabildos abiertos* were clearly a valuable experience in popular, participatory democracy, they were not able to consolidate into something more permanent, assuming administrative functions and thus posing the question: who really rules this country? This is what the soviets were able to do in Russia in 1917, hence the correctness of the slogan 'All power to the soviets'. (One of the problems with discussions of this sort is the tendency to use the particular conditions in Russia as an all-purpose revolutionary template. However, just occasionally the comparison is a useful one!) Another comparison is with Portugal in 1974-75, where the Socialist Party, backed by the EEC and the CIA, did channel the militancy of workers into electoralism. However, an alternative existed in the form of the federation of 2000 factory councils, or *plenarios*, 200 of which were, by March 1975, running their enterprises, as well as rural co-operatives based on land seizures, the co-operative nurseries, clinics and so on.

Whatever was positive about the uprising of 2005, there was never a dual power situation, with the working class exercising executive power in a way which was able to supersede the power of the Bolivian state. Instead, the masses saw the December elections as a practical, realisable way in which they could express their demands and advance their interests. They see the victory of Morales as their victory, against the oligarchy, and against the USA.

Therefore, the verdict on the three charges made against Morales by his left, or ultraleft critics, must be not guilty, or at least not proven. So how should Marxists interpret events in Bolivia, and if they are present there, what should they do?

Revolution: not an event, but a process

To understand fully the significance of events in Bolivia, Marxists need to understand firstly that revolution is a process and not an event (as Marxist scholars Sweezey and Huberman say in their book *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution*: 'It unfolds through many stages and phases. It never stands still'), and secondly that in Bolivia socialist revolution must inevitably adopt a national, anti-imperialist character.

What does the first of these propositions mean? It means that the process started by the water war, continued by the gas war, then the uprising of 2005 and now finding its expression in the landslide election victory of Morales has yet to realise its full potential. In other words, the situation is fluid – we don't know how things are going to turn out. In his actions since his election, Morales has not, despite the predictions of his left critics, sold out. It is up to the most class-conscious vanguard of the workers' and peasants' movement to make sure he continues in the same vein and that if he does, and he comes under attack, to support him.

When Chávez came to power in Venezuela in 1998, he had a certain history as a left nationalist and had attempted a coup in 1992. At first, he followed that same course: opposition to the Venezuelan elite and redistributive economic and social policies, and all the while professing to follow a 'middle way' between socialism and capitalism. Like Morales, Chávez had some right-wingers in his cabinet. Only by the beginning of 2005 did he as much as admit that he'd been making a mistake, and that there was no middle way. Not only does he now lard his speeches with quotations from and references to Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg, but also he has announced the need to transcend capitalism and build socialism. Why and how has he had the space and time to be able to do this? Partly because the price of oil has allowed him to deliver the redistributive policies which he promised, partly because his opponents have been disorganised and disunited, partly because the USA has been preoccupied with Iraq, but also because the masses have been prepared to give him the benefit of their support at important junctures – the 2002 coup, the 2003 sabotage and the numerous elections and referenda in between times. This is because they know that he is on their side, that there is a fundamental difference between Chávez and the alternative, and that to think otherwise is sectarian stupidity. It means that Chávez has had a base of support which will defend him, but also act as a counterweight to some of the more timid or right-wing members of the Chávez bloc.

This is so even though Chávez has not been able to do everything at once. Initiatives such as the *misiones* which are attacking the grotesque inequalities in society, the expropriation of idle estates, the nationalisation of enterprises, and the *cogestión* (co-management between workers and the state) have all been put in

place since 1998. These measures do not make Venezuela socialist: workers' control exists only on an ad hoc basis, there is no democratic plan of production, and, most importantly, the bourgeoisie has not been dispossessed as a class, but they do put the oligarchy very much on the defensive, and put the masses in a position where they are more likely to defend these previous conquests and go on to make new ones. These measures make the realisation of socialism a far more realistic proposition than before, and the process begun in 1998 has not yet run its course. But at the risk of labouring the point, back in 1998 they were not there, they have all been implemented since, in a period of zigzag experimentation, setback and advance, some hard lessons and tough choices.

This is what is more than likely to happen in Bolivia. Events will not unfold in exactly the same way of course, and Morales has already benefited from the presence of Chávez, and may yet benefit from friendly regimes in Mexico and Peru, depending on election results. Certain sectarian critics of Morales in Bolivia and elsewhere may not like the prospect, probably because they have a picture inside their heads of what they think a revolution should look like – a putschist caricature of 1917 perhaps, with Morales as Kerensky and, presumably, someone resembling themselves as Lenin. While such a model is almost certainly inapplicable anywhere, we should also remember that these people do the Bolsheviks a disservice: the Bolsheviks were not above a certain revolutionary pragmatism and patience when it was required.

This perspective does not imply blind faith in Morales, and he should certainly not be above criticism. If Morales makes mistakes or unjustifiable concessions, the workers' and peasants' organisations should call him to account. They should exert their own influence on Morales, to counter that of his right wing ministers and the pressure from outside the country. Morales may even collapse altogether. It seems that some of the most sectarian naysayers are almost wishing that he will, so that they can say 'We told you so! Only a Trotskyist party armed with a programme etc., etc., . . .'. We do not know what will happen, although we do know that Bolivian history is littered with the political (and physical) corpses of revolutionary nationalists who capitulate to imperialism or the oligarchy, and of revolutionary Marxists who retreat into their own sectarian laager. Marxists should maintain their political independence from Morales, and be prepared to sketch in the blanks, ideologically speaking. But to counterpose now to this already existing movement some ultra-'revolutionary' sect which exists principally in the minds of its advocates would be simply inane. Remember: 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it'.

Morales has promised to 'refound' Bolivia, by holding elections within six months for a Constituent Assembly. A lot depends on what this assembly is based on, how it is elected, and what it can do. This must not be merely a slightly more democratic version of the existing, discredited parliamentary set-up, but must provide a more popular and far more direct democracy, based on workers' and peasants' organisations. If it does, it will provide a huge impetus to resistance movements in US allies such as Colombia and Peru. Morales has spoken of introducing a bill into Congress in March, with a view to Assembly elections taking place in July. He has emphasised that, if necessary, people would force the Congress to approve the Assembly. The Assembly's unlimited powers will, according to Morales, 'eliminate the colonial state and neo-liberal model'. If Morales is as good as his word, then Bolivia can take a further huge step against neo-liberalism, and towards solving the crisis of the unreformed Bolivian state.

A national struggle and a class struggle

Over the past 20 years or so, the mechanism of domination by North American and European capital over Latin America has undergone a profound change. Until the 1980s, military dictatorships, many of them almost unbelievably brutal, were commonplace. The fate of Guatemala's Arbenz, toppled by US intervention in 1954, was typical of that which awaited progressive elected governments. By the 1970s, Chile and Uruguay, both countries with a history of stable democratic government, were competing for the title of torture chamber of Latin America. The Sandinista regime in Nicaragua suffered a slow death by strangulation at the hands of the Contras and their US backers.

Now, the kill is cleaner. Every country on the continent has an elected civilian government, but beyond issuing a passport, staffing embassies in various capitals and sending a team to the Copa America, there is precious little that that government can actually do. This hollowing out of the nation state is the inevitable product of the economic policies known, in shorthand, as globalisation, the internationalisation of the neo liberal policies of deregulation and privatisation pursued domestically by Thatcher and Reagan during the 1980s, and now imposed by the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on the rest of the world. These bodies are made up of representatives of nation states, and dominated by the most powerful states, predominantly the USA. The USA particularly represents its own agenda, the agenda of its leading corporations, as the international order.

The effect in Bolivia, as in the rest of the continent, has been a dramatic increase in levels of poverty and inequality. However, unlike most of Europe, where the response has been a decrease in voter turnout as political parties squabble over a minute patch of the so called middle ground, voters in Latin America (where in some countries, voting is compulsory) have used their new-found electoral freedom to boot out the lackeys of the IMF at every opportunity. In Argentina, for example, the more Néstor Kirchner stands up to the IMF, the more popular he becomes. In Venezuela, Chávez has won every election or referendum he has fought. In Uruguay, the Frente Amplio has the first parliamentary majority for any party since 1966 and in 2004 its presidential candidate, Tabaré Vázquez beat the discredited, pro US Jorge Batlle out of sight. In Bolivia, Morales has won a huge victory on a huge turnout.

Whether these victories have been won by parties or candidates from the traditional left or whether they have been won by a Chávez or a Morales, they have been won using the rhetoric of the sovereignty of the nation state, pitted against the USA, its local agents (the oligarchy) and the international financial bodies, which are seen as being US-controlled anyway. The struggle is now against the privatisation of the state, or for the 'nationalisation' of the state, hence the huge support in Bolivia for the nationalisation of gas, the bedrock of support in Venezuela for the measures taken by Chávez, and the vote in Uruguay's referendum for the right to have access to clean water to be guaranteed by the constitution. This is not simply patriotism. Even the multi-class, bourgeois dominated, social formation of the nation-state enjoys more legitimacy than the unaccountable financial institutions or the 'democratic' USA ever will.

This development should make Marxists look again at the relationship between national struggles and the class struggle. The issue of the relative weight of national and class struggle in the socialist revolution in any given country has been a matter of controversy among Marxists for decades, particularly in the more 'developed' countries in Latin America, such as Argentina. Yet the hyenas of the 'Wash-

ington consensus' do not discriminate. All countries have been devastated. The assault on Argentina was possibly the most dramatic, perhaps because people there had further to fall. Suddenly, in a country with food resources to feed 300 million, levels of childhood malnutrition were soaring, and 58 per cent of the population were on or below the poverty line. Doesn't this mean that the various descriptions of nations such as 'semi-colony' or 'state of intermediate capitalist development' now look a little academic? If any government in the continent chooses, in line with an electoral mandate, to implement a progressive taxation system, to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, and to opt out of the 'war on drugs' and the 'war on terror' they become, in Donald Rumsfeld's sinister understatement, 'worrisome' and for that reason alone, deserve solidarity. (In the same way, socialists' solidarity with Cuba should not be conditional on whether they regard it as socialist, but should simply be a defence of Cuba's economic independence).

Anyway, back to Bolivia. Although Morales does not come from the workers' movement or the traditional left, still less the revolutionary left, and although his programme might be described by the more desiccated, pedantic 'Marxists' as merely 'populist', Marxists should see his victory and the process it represents not just as a worthy, supportable alternative to socialist revolution (although nothing more than that) but as what it really is, a flashpoint in the international class struggle against the assault of neo-liberalism. We should see events in Bolivia, as well as Venezuela, as part of the international class struggle, even though that struggle is presented by Morales, Chávez and their supporters in national terms.

The national struggle in Bolivia, the struggle against the political domination of the country by the USA, against the pillaging of its natural resources by multinationals, against an economic system which makes most Bolivians poor, is an expression of, or a form taken by, the class struggle on an international scale – a struggle for economic and political power, a struggle for control over resources, for control over lives, between labour and capital. This does not mean that there is never class conflict between Bolivians. Of course there is. But ultimately, for all its talk about the 'patria', the Bolivian oligarchy is defined by, and depends on, its relationship to US and European capital. Bolivia's subservient relationship to Europe and North America has made the country what it is. Unfortunately, it is not possible like filleting a fish, to take out the 'national' parts of the conflict, leaving only the 'pure' class politics, which we feel we can deal with. We have to deal with the whole struggle as a totality, and the 'national' element of the struggle will never be truly over until Bolivia is no longer threatened as a nation, in other words, until the defeat of imperialism worldwide.

Of course, there is also class struggle on another level, the struggle by the working class for hegemony over the national movement and the national struggle. This is a struggle to determine which class's interests best represent the interests of the nation as a whole, which class has the least stake in the existing order, which class can best achieve real, not illusory, independence. The fact that the national bourgeoisie will ultimately sell out because they fear the workers and peasants more than the imperialists does not hand hegemony over the national struggle on a plate to the working class. It has to be fought for. If it is not fought for, then the movement will be left to the bourgeoisie. In practical terms, the more the Bolivian left stands with Morales, the more it tries to engage with him, push him to the left, and counter the influence of right wingers in the government, the more it promises to defend him, arms in hand if necessary, against reaction, the more difficult it will be for those to Morales's right to influence him. The less sectarian the left is, the more chance there is that real gains can be made, so that the revolution which starts out as a democratic, anti-imperialist revolution can 'grow over' into a socialist revolution.

The precise form taken by that 'growing over' is difficult to predict, and we should not try too hard. History is full of surprises and those expecting a re-run of October 1917 in Russia are likely to be just as disappointed as those hoping that the high Andes will resemble the Sierra Maestra of the 1950s. Events in Venezuela question, for example, the assumption that a traditional 'vanguard' party is required to lead the masses.

The administration could start by taking over those enterprises threatened with closure by their owners and handing them over to their workers, or, as in Venezuela, the state retaining 51 per cent ownership and the workers 49 per cent. The Morales administration will at some stage have to neutralise the armed forces in some way, either by splitting them, as in Venezuela, or by developing a rival centre of power. Morales will have to trust the masses to defend him by arming them, and moves will have to be made against strategically important sectors of capital, so that these are nationalised under workers' control. Ultimately, the apparatus of the state, which serves the interests of the oligarchy and the multinationals, will have to be replaced by a state serving the interests of the workers' and peasants' organisations. As to when and how these things happen, this will depend on the course taken by the class struggle in Bolivia and beyond.

Of course, the idea that it is possible to build socialism in a single country is as absurd now as it has ever been, and even more so in the case of Bolivia, poor and landlocked as it is. The new Bolivia has a job on its hands to avoid strangulation at birth, let alone developing the economic and political space it needs. The only way to guarantee the gains made in Bolivia is to export them, and, paradoxically, the only way to maintain the defence of the Bolivian nation state is for it to be absorbed, on its own terms, into something wider. How can this be done? Faced with a similar problem, Castro's Cuba attempted what later proved to be a politically contradictory twin track approach: unsuccessful attempts to replicate the Cuban revolution elsewhere in Latin America, and taking the Kremlin's shilling, leading to the politically disastrous Cuba missile crisis and, once the guerrilla movements had been wound down, full integration into the Soviet bloc. This may have prevented Cuba from collapse, but at the cost of an inevitable bureaucratisation, the low point of which was Castro's support for Brezhnev's invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Morales has a somewhat different set of choices. There is no Soviet Union, but already the relationship with Venezuela and Cuba promises to be mutually beneficial.

Bolivia's economy has always been dominated by mining. In 2004, 40 per cent of Bolivia's export earnings came from a combination of gold, tin, zinc, silver, lead, antimony and tungsten. Bolivia has substantial reserves of these. Morales needs to rebuild COMIBOL, the state mining company which was virtually destroyed in the 1990s, in order to take advantage of the competition for these resources between the USA and Europe on the one hand, and China and other Asian economies on the other, and negotiate increased benefits for the state. Regarding gas reserves, it is not enough that just the deposits are nationalised. The gas has to be Bolivia's all the way to the border, and there has to be someone on the other end who will buy it. Therefore, simply to 'expropriate' it at one end won't necessarily achieve anything. Developing a regional market for gas which is not based on 'looting and stealing' is therefore important. The problem is the present dependence

on Brazil, the most right-wing of the 'left' governments elected in South America. The answer may be the Venezuela-led pipeline project, linking the Caribbean with the southern cone.

As for agriculture, which consists mainly of coca, coffee and soya, the administration needs to develop policies, including credit, research and development, and marketing, to increase in a sustainable way the use of the land available for cultivation, without resorting to the environmentally destructive solution of huge scale soya cultivation for European markets.

Crucial for Bolivia's survival could be ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, being built by Cuba and Venezuela. Its aim is to build a 21st-century version of the integrationist project of the fighter for South American independence, Simón Bolívar. It stands for economic integration based on co-operation, social justice, opposition to neo liberalism, and the redistribution of wealth created from nationally controlled resources. It is an attempt to build a positive alternative to the hopefully doomed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the projected Alaska to the Andes playground for US corporations. Morales may find some breathing space, and ALBA scope for expansion, depending on the results of elections in Mexico and Peru and the course taken by events in Brazil and Argentina. In the meantime, the USA will use 'free trade' deals to try to peel away from this process the peripheral, less 'worrisome', states, leaving Cuba, Venezuela and possibly Bolivia isolated

These are hopeful times for Latin America. Just over 30 years after Chile became a blood-spattered laboratory for neo liberalism, across the continent workers and peasants are saying that they have had enough of a system that makes them poor, and they want a society which is organised differently. They are the living contradiction to the belief of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown that there *is* no other way to organise society. In his exultant response to the attempted coup against Chávez, foreign office minister Dennis MeShane clearly spoke for the British government, preferring as it did the judgement of the neo-cons in the White House and the Venezuelan elite to the poor on the streets of Caracas. Socialists in Britain have therefore every reason to feel heartened by events in Bolivia. Too often in the past we have had to organise solidarity with the workers and peasants of Latin America in the wake of their defeat. For a change, we can do so in the real hope of their victory. **WA**

Gas nationalisation

Since this article was written, the Bolivian government has nationalised gas. On May Day, fittingly, Evo Morales read and signed the decree, at a gas installation. In La Paz, vice-president Álvaro García Linera announced to a May Day rally that 68 gas fields and both refineries were being occupied at that moment, by the Bolivian armed forces and Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB), the state oil company.

The nationalisation involves complete restoration of 100 per cent Bolivian ownership of reserves, as well as state control of the sale of hydrocarbons domestically and of sales abroad. Installations (including pipelines) are to be at least 50 per cent plus one state property. Gas revenues are to be split 82 per cent-18 per cent between the state and private operating companies (the exact reverse of the split that was established under neoliberalism) in the case of some reserves, and 50-50 in others. Foreign energy multinationals have been given six months to renegotiate their contracts with the government, or leave the country. Bolivian gas companies privatised in the 1990s are also to be nationalised.

The Bolivian authorities want to open the books of the energy multinationals. Energy minister Andres Soliz Rada has announced that they planned to scour the financial records of foreign energy companies and the government has threatened explicitly to seize company assets if the new contracts could not be negotiated.

'If the negotiations do not go well, we could go to the next step, expropriation,' he said, adding that the companies would be compensated. But the first step, he said, is an audit of foreign company documents. 'It's time to open the black boxes of the petroleum companies.'

Soliz Rada made this announcement at a news conference at a refinery run by Petrobras of Brazil, the company with the most to lose in Bolivia. Here, as at other private oil installations, military police guarded the entrances, searching cars to make sure no documents were being removed.

What Bolivia won't pay any compensation for are the gas reserves themselves. These were inalienable under the constitution anyway, and so the contracts signed under Lozada giving these over to foreign companies were themselves unlawful. The contracts and Lozada's hydrocarbons law were craftily worded in order to appear to respect the constitutional mandate, so that the gas was said to become the operating company's property 'at the wellhead', not before, and for a limited period of a few decades which, in reality, exceeded the useful life of the deposits at current rates of exploitation. Foreign companies have no claims to make, as they have no legal contracts on which to base such claims.

The response of the gas multinationals and their supporters in the media has been predictable. Morales has been lectured to by Blair and Condoleezza Rice, and called everything from 'childish' to 'petulant' by the media. The Bolivian masses have responded by giving Morales approval ratings of 80 per cent. Morales's sectarian critics inside Bolivia simply don't know what to do with themselves, however. The 'general strike' called by COB leader Jaime Solares was by all accounts a complete flop, and that was on April 21, *before* the nationalisation. It has been argued that the nationalisation is not 'really' that, more the renegotiation of contracts. In one sense, this is true. The nationalisations of the 1945-51 Labour government were not 'perfect' nationalisation either, as compensation was paid to former shareholders. But whoever uses such objections as a reason for refusal to support such measures, or tries to pretend that nothing has really changed, is a sectarian fool

The correct response to such a measure is not just to defend it, or even support it, but to applaud it. To a large extent, control over Bolivia's resources has been taken back from the multinationals that have been bleeding Bolivia dry. However, nationalisation, even under a government as progressive as that in Bolivia, is not socialism. The government and the YPFB are not inoculated against corruption. There needs to be full transparency and accountability. The capitalists in Bolivia have not yet been expropriated *as a class*. The state still rests on capitalist social relations, not the working class organisations who support it. The soldiers who occupied the gas installations may obey different orders tomorrow. Therefore, the constituent assembly, promised as the re-founding of the Bolivian state, should do exactly that. This note of caution should not be a reason to withhold support from the Morales government, or to judge it and find it wanting, against an idealised notion, existing only in our heads, of what a progressive Bolivian government should look like. Instead, socialists all over the world should be offering support and constructive advice in what promises to be a long and difficult task. As we say in the article, revolution is not an event, but a process.

Slobodan Milosevic

Yugoslavia's defender or destroyer?

Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic died in custody at The Hague UN war crimes tribunal on March 11. **Nick Davies** looks at his role in the break-up of Yugoslavia

Murder, suicide, neglect, stress? Whatever it says on Slobodan Milosevic's death certificate, the internet conspiracy theorists will no doubt be busy for years to come. Even in the manner of his passing Milosevic has managed to polarise opinion, just as he did in life. The mainstream media have dusted down the articles from the 1990s which embraced what is basically the 'big bad wolf' theory, that Milosevic alone was responsible for every war and every death in the former Yugoslavia. Thus he becomes the convenient scapegoat for all the ills visited on the former Yugoslavia at the hands its own people, and the West.

The left has, for the most part, correctly pointed out that in ending his days in a prison cell in The Hague, Milosevic unluckily fell foul of victors' justice. Milosevic was brought before a drumhead tribunal of dubious legality, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), while those with more on their conscience than him will spend their retirements on the lecture circuit and the golf course. Some on the left seriously lose the plot, however, when they mourn Milosevic as some kind of anti imperialist, a defender of Yugoslavia, or, most bizarrely of all, some kind of socialist martyr. He was none of these things.

Rupture

The collapse of the former Yugoslavia was a complex, multi causal phenomenon, for which Milosevic must take part, although not all, of the blame. Let us go back a little. Tito was compelled by his 1948 rupture with the Kremlin, and therefore with Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, to look elsewhere for alliances. In political terms this meant the non-aligned movement. Far more significant was the economic relationship with western Europe and a relative integration into the capitalist economic order. The economic measures announced in 1965 allowed openings to foreign capital in the form of the right to invest in Yugoslav enterprises, providing that at least 51 per cent of the capital remained Yugoslav. Relatively few investors took advantage of this opportunity, because the limited self management of enterprises that existed in Yugoslavia was too much for them to stomach. More significantly, the regime borrowed money from Western banks and governments in order to finance industrialisation and economic development. By 1980, the year of Tito's death, Yugoslavia owed $20 billion. The IMF and the other financial institutions imposed punitive repayment schedules. The federal government was obliged to apply roughly a fifth of Yugoslavia's total earnings to service this debt. Between 1978 and 1983, real wages fell by 40 per cent. Unemployment reached about one-third of the workforce. The austerity policies undermined the credibility of the federal government and, crucially, they exacerbated the already existing inequalities between north and south.

Although Serbs dominated the armed forces, and most of the military-industrial complex was situated in Serbia, the two most economically developed republics were Croatia and Slovenia. The turn towards economic decentralisation, embarked upon after 1965, provided for increased competition among the enterprises. This obviously benefited the more efficient and profitable enterprises with better markets and situated in richer regions. Until 1965 there existed a Central Investment Fund. This controlled 70 per cent of overall investment. It was wound up, and its assets divided among the banks, which became the main source of investment funds, and the enterprises. The aid fund for the underdeveloped regions (in the south) was reduced to a shadow, controlling a reduced share of the social product, and instead of redistributing resources in the form of grants, was only able to give out loans. Thus, the gap was set to increase. To cut a long story short, throughout the 1970s and 80s, the north, economically more developed and with valuable hard currency from tourism, got richer, at least relative to the south, which got poorer. By 1992, writing in *Capital and Class* No.48, Iraj Hashi was able to give the following figures for per capita social product, taking the Yugoslav average as 100: Slovenia 208, Croatia 128, Serbia 101, Montenegro 74, Macedonia 64 and Kosova (not a republic in its own right but an autonomous region of Serbia) 27. Unemployment was at that time 3.4 per cent in Slovenia, 8.6 per cent in Croatia, 18.3 per cent in Serbia, 28.3 per cent in Macedonia and 58.3 in Kosova. In the 1980s, the Croatian and Slovenian governments were openly saying that they wanted to subsidise the poorer south even less.

Capitalist restorationist tendencies

It was in this context that in the 1980s the respective bureaucracies of the politically dominant republics adopted a national-chauvinist centralising course in order to buttress their own position against other republics, as against the working class which until the mid-1980s was taking action on a relatively unified basis against austerity policies, and to put themselves in as strong as possible bargaining position with the West. This involved strengthening the capitalist restorationist tenden

cies exhibited by all the republican bureaucracies.

This process took different forms in the different republics, according to the material conditions. The northern republics wanted to orient themselves away from the rest of Yugoslavia, towards western Europe. Virulent nationalism was little use to the Slovene leadership, as there were no significant minorities within the republic and few Slovenes living elsewhere. Resurgent Croat nationalism was directed against the Serb minority, 12 per cent of the population concentrated in the Krajina area, around Knin, and in western Slavonia, and was intended to appeal to the 18 per cent of the population of Bosnia-Hercegovina which regarded itself as Croat. Serbia had most to lose from the quickening disintegration of Yugoslavia. Its economy was weaker and less attractive to investors from the West. Serbs were dominant in the federal bureaucracy and the armed forces, and there were Serbs living in Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and in the autonomous Serbian regions of Vojvodina and Kosova.

Hierarchy

This was the environment in which Slobodan Milosevic diligently and determinedly made his way up the hierarchy of the Serbian party, becoming head of the Belgrade branch in 1984, head of the Central Committee of the Serbian League of Communists in 1986 and president of Serbia in 1989. Initially seen as a grey figure, notable for his suspicion towards nationalism and praise of Tito, he was careful, at first, to avoid committing himself. He soon decided which horse to back, seizing on the largely fabricated grievances of the Serb minority in Kosova, (or in Serbian, Kosovo), outnumbered 9-1 by Albanians. He shrewdly exploited the almost mystical significance of Kosova, with its battlefields and religious sites, for Serb nationalists, and, using his undoubted oratorical and organisation skills, he created a formidable Serb nationalist movement. By bussing in crowds of supporters and staging intimidating mass rallies, he abolished in 1989 the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosova, and replaced the regime in Montenegro with one led by his supporters. Faced with the imminent unravelling of the Yugoslav state, in part as a result of the policies he himself had been pursuing, he then considered his options. His first preference seems to have been for a reorganised version of federal Yugoslavia, without the checks and balances of the 1974 constitution, in which Serbs would be dominant, and in which Croats and Slovenes would be intimidated into staying put.

The strong-arm tactics of the Serbian bureaucracy and the violation of the federal constitution to incorporate the autonomous regions into Serbia shook the rest of Yugoslavia to the foundations. However, the upsurge of Croat nationalism was not only a defensive response to what was happening in Serbia. The Croat nationalists had a shrewd idea of where Yugoslavia was going and were busy safeguarding their position. The reappearance of the symbols of the fascist Ustase regime of 1941-45 and the re-emergence of the HOS (Croatian Party of Rights) and its military wing terrified many of the Serb minority. The Croatian constitution was amended to downgrade the rights of the Serbs. Serb public officials were sacked. It was these legitimate fears which Milosevic and his allies in Croatia were later able to exploit.

Truncated

Milosevic's plan B was the 'amputation' of Croatia, so that Slovenia and those parts of Croatia with no Serbs living in them could be allowed to go their own way. At this stage, Milosevic anticipated that this new, truncated Yugoslavia would include the Muslims of Bosnia-Hercegovina, on the basis that the Muslims had the most to lose from the break-up of the federation, and that they would wish to be in the same state as the Muslims in Serbia, Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro. The 'Serb' parts of Croatia would decide in a referendum what they wanted to do. It seems that Milosevic hoped that the Croats would be intimidated into accepting this plan, but as a safeguard, the Serbs would be organised and armed by way of a militarised SDS (Serbian Democratic Party) and softened up with anti-Croat propaganda so that the 'referendum' delivered the required result.

The rest, as they say, is history: the 1991 conflict in Croatia and the 'ethnic cleansing' carried out against Croats in those parts of Croatia mainly inhabited by Serbs. The response in the West was generally a one sided demonisation of the Serbs, with Milosevic cast as the root of all evil, largely due to the more effective public relations employed by the Croats. Germany and Austria were, for their own reasons, effective lobbyists for the Croats and Slovenes. Among the left there was an attempt to shoehorn the conflict into a national-liberation conception, with Yugoslavia seen as a Serbian-dominated 'prison-house of nations'. Because of the different forms of economic, political and military domination which existed in the federation, this did not really stand up.

The opposite position, so the speak, on the left was to see Milosevic as the defender of the Yugoslav federation and of Yugoslavia's socialised property relations against the attempts of the West to break up Yugoslavia and privatise its economy. This did not really stand up either. Milosevic was not defending the Yugoslav federation. He was complicit in its destruction. What he was defending was a debased version of it with a built-in Serb majority: Serboslavia, as some Croats called it. It is significant that soldiers of the Yugoslav army (almost entirely shorn of its non-Serbs) besieging the Croatian town of Vukovar were replacing the red star on their caps with the white eagle, the symbol of royal Serbia.

Although it was to a large extent the pressure of the world economy on Yugoslavia which strengthened the centrifugal forces within the federation, the West's attitude to the break-up of Yugoslavia was not strategic, but managerial. If the break-up of Yugoslavia was to involve bloodshed, prolonged conflict and, most crucially, the destruction of capital, then it was best avoided. The West did not want the $20 billion it was owed going up in smoke. A united, capitalist Yugoslavia would have suited the West fine. It was only after the death of Yugoslavia that the West started pulling lumps of carrion off the carcass, with Germany and Austria favouring Croatia and Britain and France broadly favouring Serbia. Indeed, those who saw the destruction of Yugoslavia as the conscious project of the West (which they needed to do in order to cast Milosevic as its opponent) need to explain why the fighting in Croatia had been in full swing for several months, and a cease-fire signed, before the EU, under German pressure, eventually recognised Croatia and Slovenia on January 15, 1992.

Gangster elite

Those who saw Milosevic as a defender of socialised property should have conferred with the politicians and businessmen up to their necks in the privatisation of those parts of the Serbian economy not yet in the hands of the gangster elite, including Milosevic's own family. However, these points of detail mattered little to the left's loyal band of Milosevic-lovers, who paraded their historical illiteracy for all to see, arguing that as the Croats represented the political continuity of the fascist Ustase regime (despite the fact that in the 1940s, Croats fought with Tito's partisans and in the 1990s many Croats deplored the rise of Croat nationalism), so the Serbs represented a political continuity with the partisans (forgetting the collaboration with the Germans and Italians of Draza Mihailovic's Chetniks, and the presence in Belgrade of the pro-Nazi, Serbian regime of general Nedic).

The correct position for the left to take towards the Serb-Croat war should have been that of neutrality, with no support for either side, but for the reconstruction of the federation, and some on the left did take this position. However, for the next stage of the conflict, the war in Bosnia-Hercegovina, this simple slogan was not enough, and much of the left in western Europe and North America made a further candid admission of political bankruptcy.

Bosnia-Hercegovina declared its independence in 1992 because its leadership thought that this would protect it against the activities of the SDS. The attempts to co-opt the Bosnian Muslims into a Serbian-dominated state having been unsuccessful, the SDS had been busy in the mainly Serb-inhabited areas of Bosnia-Hercegovina organising, arming and persuading the Bosnian Serbs, by way of a barrage of lurid and hysterical propaganda, that they were on the point of having an Islamic fundamentalist state imposed on them. On January 9, 1992, the mainly Serb areas of Bosnia Hercegovina declared, after the by now familiar 'referendum' (a plebiscite conducted at gun point), their 'independence' as Republika Srbska, in furtherance of a plan between the former enemies Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman to divide up Bosnia-Hercegovina.

Ethnic cleansing

The word 'mainly' is used here advisedly. It was impossible for any one part of Bosnia-Hercegovina to separate from the others on an ethnically pure basis without having to drive out, or systematically oppress those members of the other communities who were living there. Separation meant ethnic cleansing. The Serbs in Bosnia were getting arms from the federal army, the JNA, via the SDS. The Croats were getting them from Croatia. The Bosnian Muslims were not getting any weapons at all. They were in the weakest position, and they were being made to pay for it. They also had the most to lose from the destruction of Yugoslavia. Some of the Western left displayed a commendable solidarity with the oppressed by dropping a strictly neutral position, demanding that the Muslims be armed so as to be able to defend themselves. However, even this was missing the point. The only real principled position the left should have taken is for the defence of the state of Bosnia-Hercegovina. This leaves out any of the largely academic debates about whether the Muslims were a 'nation' or whether Bosnia was. The defence of Bosnia-Hercegovina represented, in a practical form, the defence of multi ethnic communities against the drive to create ethnically pure statelets. In other words, it was how the defence of Yugoslavia, such as it was, could concretely be realised.

Sophistication

It did not require a great deal of political sophistication, surely, for a socialist to decide which side he or she was on. On the one side, supporting the existence of the multi-ethnic communities were most of the workers in the urban centres, the liberal and socialist youth and intelligentsia, and those who wanted a quiet life and preferred not to slit their neighbours' throats. On the other side were ethnic chauvinists, nationalists, fascists, lumpen elements, patriotic gangsters and the frankly ignorant and misled. However, matters were not so simple for Milosevic's 'Marxist' fan club. Some, in the face of all the evidence, chose to regard the struggle as one for Bosnian Serb self determination. Others identified Bosnia with the Muslims, seeing the defence of Bosnia as the defence of one community only, instead of the defence of all those, mainly Muslim, but also Serb and Croat, who were resisting the division of Yugoslavia into ethnically pure states. This took two forms. Some counterposed an abstract 'class position' to the reality on the ground, so preferring a multi-ethnic workers' militia which existed only in their heads to the multi ethnic Bosnian 2nd army which was defending the city of Tuzla. Others swallowed hook, line and sinker the line of the Bosnian Serb leaders that they were resisting the imposition of an Islamic state (which must have been interesting to the mayor of Tuzla and the editor of the main Sarajevo newspaper, both Serbs). Thus, the Bosnian president, Alija Izetbegovic, had all manner of fundamentalist opinions attributed to him which he did not hold – there was plenty to criticise the vacillating, pro-capitalist Izetbegovic for without making things up. Milosevic's 'useful idiots' in the West were also on hand to repeat dutifully the campaign of historical slander against Bosnian Muslims concerning their role in Ottoman- and Habsburg-ruled Bosnia, in the first Yugoslav state of 1918-41, and in the Second World War. Even if they did not go this far, many on the left refused, or failed, to recognise the multi-ethnic nature of much of the defence of Bosnia-Hercegovina. In so doing they echoed the mainstream media which felt the need to pigeonhole everyone opposed to the Serb and Croat nationalists as Muslims, whether they wanted to be called that or not.

Western intervention

Possibly the principal argument mounted against Bosnian defencism was that the Bosnian Muslims were imperialist catspaws, allowing themselves to be used as pawns to justify Western intervention into Yugoslavia. This argument is now tied in with a vigorous campaign of historical revisionism concerning the extent to which Muslims suffered at the hands of the Serb and Croat nationalists. Two points cry out to be made here. Firstly, just because something bad is exploited by the West for its own nefarious purposes does not mean it did not happen. Secondly, if the West wanted to help the Bosnian Muslims, it did not do a terribly good job of it.

Once it was clear that Yugoslavia was doomed, Western governments preferred to have as few successor states as possible to deal with, and that these be stable and in the charge of a strongman they could do business with. Multi ethnic Bosnia did not fit into this strategy at all, and it was obvious that the fate of Bosnia was not top priority for, for example, the British foreign office and the Major administration. While Bosnians, mainly Muslims, were being killed and driven out of their homes, the arms embargo, which blatantly discriminated against Muslims, remained in place, aid was provided on a drip-feed basis, the airport at Tuzla, a multi ethnic workers' centre, remained shut for months, and Srebrenica was abandoned to a Chetnik massacre.

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This inertia led to some friction between the USA and the EU, and eventually there was Western intervention, ostensibly in the interests of the Muslims. Izetbegovic and the rest of his administration saw no alternative to asking for imperialist intervention, because that was the kind of politicians they were, but the requirement to defend Bosnia should not have been dependent on the political line taken by its leaders. In any event, this intervention was not actually in the interests of Bosnia at all. By 1995 the Bosnian army had eventually got hold of some arms (from Iran? how dare they?). Once it started pushing back the Serb positions with the cry of 'coffee in Banja Luka!' (a formerly mixed Bosnian city now 'cleansed' of its Muslims and all its mosques destroyed), the West was desperately trying to get the offensive called off. (Izetbegovic's preferred slogan might have been 'just a few more square hectares to strengthen our bargaining position at Dayton, please?') At Dayton, Milosevic was rewarded with Republika Srbska. The Bosnians were 'rewarded' with the rump Muslim Croat fiction, a sad parody of the former multi-ethnic Bosnia-Hercegovina, ruled over by a UN imposed viceroy, with a shattered infrastructure, thousands of refugees and the destruction of countless cultural artefacts such as the library at Sarajevo, detailing 500 years of Ottoman presence in the Balkans. Some victory! Of course, it was also a disaster for the Serbs who risked their lives to defend multi-ethnic Bosnia.

Apologists

A word needs to be said about 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia. The extent of the killing and driving out of Croats and Serbs in Croatia, and, later, of the different groups in Bosnia-Hercegovina was not on a level with the Holocaust, and it did not constitute genocide. It does not help to defeat the arguments of the apologists for Milosevic to argue that it was. 'Ethnic cleansing' was the establishment, by force, of ethnically homogenous areas or states. Many were killed, or became refugees, but what of the many Yugoslavs who were not ethnically 'pure' and had no obvious community to escape to? What was to become of a Serb married to a Croat, or a Bosnian Muslim with one Serb parent? (It is significant that it was in Bosnia-Hercegovina that there was the highest number of people describing themselves in censuses as 'Yugoslav'.) Many people were forced, in order to save their skins, to make a choice, and make it quickly. As Robin Blackburn eloquently observed:

> '. . . those with a Catholic or Croat "given" identity soon discover that they and their children are only really safe when there are HVO or HOS thugs to protect them, despite the fact that they abhor the Ustase, have staunchly atheistical views, Orthodox Serb cousins and cherish the characteristic Bosnian marks of a hybrid, partly Islamic civilisation . . . the discovery of identity in such a situation is not some sort of pure spiritual election, nor the welling up of an inner essence, but rather the assumption of an imposed social marker, policed by pitiless repression and fear.' (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.45, p.9)

Milosevic was an actor in the destruction of Yugoslavia. He therefore made history, although not in circumstances of his own choosing. Without him, Yugoslavia may well have disintegrated anyway. He did not start the process of disintegration, but he actively assisted in it. He was not alone. His counterparts on the Croatian side are also responsible. How much direct responsibility has Milosevic for turning Croatia and Bosnia into a charnel house? Whenever the most notorious deeds were done, Milosevic, like Macavity, was not there. But he was head of state at the time, and in Croatia, the federal army was involved. It is difficult to believe that he did not know what was going on. It is equally difficult to believe that he could do nothing to stop the atrocities that were committed by his allies if he did not also support or condone them. Let us leave it to a one-time associate, who was cut loose by Milosevic once he became an embarrassment, Vojeslav Seselj, of the fascist Serbian Radical party:

> 'Milosevic organised everything. We gathered our volunteers and he gave us special barracks, Bubanj Potok, all our uniforms, arms, military technology and buses. All our units were always under the command of the Krajina or Republika Srbska army or the JNA. Of course, I don't believe he signed anything, there were verbal orders. None of our talks was taped and I never took a paper and pencil when I talked with him. His key people were the commanders. Nothing could happen on the Serbian side without his orders and his knowledge.' (Tim Judah, *History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, p.188)

Milosevic's next chance to wrap himself in the Serbian flag was in the 1999 Kosova war. Unfortunately, many of his Western apologists on the left tried to wrap him in a red one as well. Just as the war in Bosnia was different from that in Croatia, the one in Kosova was different again. Using the plight of the Albanians in Kosova as a pretext, Nato launched a military operation, the aim of which was the establishment of a Western military presence in the Balkans. In the face of a military assault, the small Serbian peace movement was marginalised, and many of Milosevic's former critics stood by him. In this situation, socialists were right to oppose the attack on Serbia, without giving any political support whatsoever to Milosevic.

Co-operation

We can tell how much the West *really* cared about Kosova. Milosevic had been told that in return for his co operation at the Dayton Agreement of 1995, which partitioned Bosnia-Hercegovina and thus sanctioning previous ethnic cleansing, that Kosova was his to keep. 'No more than terrorists' was how the then US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, had chosen to describe the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA). In contrast, the Milosevic regime had been indulged by Western, and particularly British, politicians and bankers (including one Douglas Hurd). The Western powers did not want an independent Kosova. Further adjustment of international frontiers in the southern Balkans would be an unwelcome precedent, bad for the stability that was the prerequisite for the reconstruction of a fully-fledged market economy, and a threat to Nato's southern flank. However, the stripping by Serbian authorities of all the rights previously enjoyed by the Kosova Albanians provoked opposition and unrest, which provoked an imposition of virtual martial law, which in turn provoked the insurrection which erupted in 1998. The Western powers felt that they had to calm the situation down, before the conflict engulfed Macedonia and Albania proper.

The Rambouillet Agreement, the solution attempted by the Western powers, sought only to give Kosova autonomy within Serbia, not full independence, and would have disarmed the KLA. In fact, what provoked Milosevic's refusal was the obvious provocation of a provision, allowing Nato troops into the *whole* of Yugoslavia to police the deal. So Milosevic became the latest in a long line of former Western favourites to be transformed into the 'new Hitler'. He must have been wondering where he'd gone wrong: if he'd joined Nato, the West would have been selling him the weapons to wipe out the Albanians!

However, there were some on the left who took at face value the claims of Clinton and Blair that the attack on Serbia was in fact a humanitarian mission to rescue the Albanians. There were others, on the other hand, who not only saw through this, but also bent the stick too far in the other direction. Some took the view that if the Western media decided to flag up a story to justify intervention, then not only must that story be untrue,

but so must the 'backstory'. The national oppression of the Albanians of Kosova was therefore denied, in the name of 'anti imperialism', as was the right of the Kosova Albanians to self-determination, up to and including the right of separation if they wanted it. Instead, they were regarded as agents or unwitting dupes of Nato and the KLA dismissed as gangsters. It was true that the majority of the Kosovars not only supported the Nato attacks but also were cheering them on. This was not surprising. Their backs were to the wall and they needed a friend. They had been battered by years of Serb repression. It could also be argued that in forging a *de facto* alliance with Nato, the KLA ceased to be an authentic national liberation force. The right to tell the Kosovars they were sadly wrong had to be earned by solidarity with them, not by cheering on their oppressors. The absence of a significant, independent working class presence in the Balkans and in the rest of Europe meant that to many Kosovars, this did not appear as a viable option. The support network, mainly in Germany and Switzerland, for the Kosovars of Albania, was far deeper, and broader, than mere gun running. If some of the KLA's methods, a product of the volatile mix of Hoxhaite Stalinism and Albanian nationalism, were unsavoury, so was the squeamishness of their critics, who, when it suited them, could be quite starry eyed about other movements whose methods were equally questionable.

Self-determination

There was no inconsistency between calling for self determination for the Kosova Albanians and not for the Bosnian Serbs. Kosova and Bosnia were not the same. The Albanians in Kosova are 90 per cent of the population and self-determination could be realisable without driving out the Serbs. In fact, the previous KLA leader, Adem Demaci, had advocated equal rights for the Serb minority. Of course, real self-determination, and not the impoverished, gangster ridden, Nato-occupied Bantustan which Kosova now is, could only be realised by way of a renewed, independent, voluntary socialist federation of Balkan states, but this was not on Nato's agenda, and it was not what Milosevic wanted either.

In fact, the Rambouillet Agreement caused a bitter dispute within the KLA. Adem Demaci refused to go to Rambouillet, and denounced acceptance of the agreement. He was sacked as the KLA's political representative, and replaced by Hashim Thaci who led the delegation at Rambouillet. Demaci's ally as KLA chief-of-staff, Suleiman Selimi, has also been sacked, and replaced by Croatian army veteran Agim Ceku, so that the required result could be delivered.

By 2000, after a series of disastrous and bloody wars, sanctions which had ruined the economy, and Nato occupation of Kosova, Milosevic had become a liability to those who had previously supported him. Importantly, he had begun to lose support among sections of the middle class and working class who could never make up their minds whether Milosevic's problem was starting wars or losing them, and this made it possible to create, with some of his more long-standing opponents, a united 18-party electoral front headed by the Serbian nationalist Vojeslav Kostunica. Once it was clear that the autumn election he had tried to fiddle was lost, support fairly melted away. Crucially, sections of the army and police indicated, either openly or by a nod or a wink that they would not fire on workers or demonstrators, or order those under their command to do so. It was this development, several days into the post-election standoff that convinced Milosevic that the game was up. The storming of the Belgrade parliament might have made good TV, but it was little more than symbolic. Essentially, what occurred was a coup by sections of the ruling apparatus that were able to mobilise behind them sections of the working class and urban middle class. In some ways, therefore, the fall of Milosevic was akin to that of Ceaucescu in 1989, only with less blood spilt.

The choice of Kostunica was an astute one. Whereas Milosevic became a rabid Serbian nationalist to advance his political career, Kostunica had always been one. His attitude towards the wars in Croatia and Bosnia could be described as robust. His campaign manager and Democratic Party boss, the now late Zoran Djindjic, was never too fussy about the company he kept, openly socialising with Radovan Karadzic during the war in Bosnia. However, Kostunica himself appeared not to be tainted by any direct association with the Milosevic regime, and there was enough talk about democracy and clean politics to bring in liberal and social democratic minded people. What was important was that Kostunica wanted to bring Yugoslavia into the Western orbit, and the promise by Western governments shortly before the election of the removal of some sanctions if Kostunica were to win must have concentrated many minds.

There were still some that laboured under the delusion that Yugoslavia was in some way 'socialist'. 'Arson rules in Belgrade' wailed the *Morning Star* in October 2000. Thirteen years at least after Milosevic abandoned what he claimed to be 'socialism', these 'communists', pathetically, refused to abandon him. It followed that this was not a case of a regime basing itself on state property relations being overthrown by a capitalist-restorationist regime. Privatisation, much of it in the form of looting by the Milosevic family, had been in full swing for several years. The set-up was more Suharto than Ceaucescu.

Corrupt

From the point of view of the Yugoslav working class, the fall of Milosevic's corrupt and despotic regime could only be welcomed. It got people out into the streets, suppressed radio stations got back on the air, and the working class has found space to organise itself and gained in confidence from facing down the regime.

But of course, the job was not even half done. Having patted the workers on the back for their bravery, Kostunica expected them meekly to return to their factories to face pay-cuts or the sack in the face of the expected neo-liberal offensive. Many from the old regime still had their snouts in the trough. Many were still in the state apparatus keeping their heads down. The Serbian and Montenegrin parliaments were still stuffed with members of Milosevic's party, or that of his wife, the Party of the Yugoslav Left (!). The following March, Milosevic was arrested on the orders of Djindic, by this time prime minister after having reinvented himself as a liberal. In June 2001, at the behest of the US, Djindjic put Milosevic on a helicopter to Tuzla, by then a US base, and thence to The Hague.

Milosevic did not destroy Yugoslavia on his own. Workers in Serbia and Montenegro now feeling the cold blast of the neo liberal offensive, as a prelude to possible EU entry, know that removing him did not make their lives better overnight. But Milosevic's career represents a tragedy for Serbia, and for all the people of the former Yugoslavia. A lesser tragedy, but a tragedy nonetheless, is how so many people who should have known better chose to praise this plodding bureaucrat turned Chetnik thug as the defender of all that he destroyed. **WA**

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Assessing the civil war in Sierra Leone

Bob Wood reviews three books

David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone*, James Currey, Oxford 2005

Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: the RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone*, Hurst and Co, London 2005

Ibrahim Abdullah, *Between Democracy and Terror: the Sierra Leone Civil War*, Codesria, Dakar 2004

The last UN soldiers left Sierra Leone at the end of December last year, leaving behind some UK forces still training the Sierra Leone army. The largest-ever deployment of UN peacekeepers (and the British Army under separate command) had successfully restored democracy after a protracted civil war that started in 1991, and defeated a vicious rebel movement, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), or so the story ran. No account of the war was complete without a reference to the RUF's trademark – the hacking off of limbs. As ever, the reality is rather more complicated.

Keen commences his account by noting two key events in the war: the 'unholy alliance' formed between the army and the rebels in 1997, and the 1999 invasion of Freetown, in which 6,000 people were killed. He notes that although the RUF was involved, the invasion was largely the work of the Sierra Leone army, even though 'many find it easy and politically convenient (or both) to blame the country's plight on the evil of a few rebels . . .'. But, he asks, how could between 100 and 300 rebels invading from Liberia in 1991 create the subsequent mayhem in which two-thirds of the population were displaced and 50,000 killed in a decade of war? Adjectives like 'evil' and 'inhuman' subvert our understanding of the violence, and it remains 'incomprehensible'. To try and understand is not necessarily to justify.

He also notes the inability or unwillingness of a weak state (by 1990 the state scarcely existed except in name only) to crush the rebellion. There were benefits to be had in a war economy, and there was widespread collaboration with the enemy – hence the title of his book.

In tracing the historical development of the country, Keen brings to the fore the profound divide between the colony of Freetown – founded by freed slaves in much the same way as neighbouring Liberia – and 'up-country', the rest of what is now Sierra Leone, and which became a British protectorate only much later. He also draws attention to substantial powers enjoyed by chiefs, the influence of diamonds on politics in the country, and the ethnic basis of post-colonial politics – Mende (Sierra Leone People's Party) in the south and Temne (All People's Congress) in the north. Under the influence of both structural adjustment and President Siaka Stevens's almost incredibly corrupt regime, the country was by the 1980s an economic disaster zone, with massive unemployment and rampant inflation. 'If the war resembled a virus spreading from Liberia, it was the weakness of the Sierra Leonean body that allowed it to spread.'

Keen proceeds to ask whether the rebellion had political or economic motives – was it fuelled by grievance or greed? The programme of the RUF was relatively undeveloped, calling for an end to corruption, an end to the 'raping of the countryside to feed the Freetown elite' and improvements in education. When it entered Sierra Leone in 1991, the force contained many Liberians and Burkinabè and was dependent on the then president of Liberia, Charles Taylor. In Keen's account, the RUF quickly resorted to coercion and the use of forced labour and slavery on its farms. He quotes an ex-student interviewed in 2000 as saying: 'We had good intentions. We regret it now. It's gone completely out of control.' Economic motives, especially the pursuit of diamonds, quickly transcended the political.

Humiliation

If the RUF was 'not a coherent political movement', it was not just a bunch of bandits. Its base came from three sources. Firstly there were urban marginals linked to student radicals, the *lumpenproletariat* or more briefly, lumpens. Secondly, socially disconnected village youth were drawn to the RUF, with, thirdly, illicit diamond miners. In essence, the violence was the result of these humiliated groups visiting in their turn shame and humiliation on their victims. Ingrained habits of deference and silence, learnt in colonial times and persisting into post colonial times, are overcome, and 'when emotions break out they are often uncontrollable'. Keen refers to Eric Hobsbawm's book *Bandits* and it is worth looking at what Hobsbawm had to say, in his chapter on the Avengers, in a little more detail than does Keen.

Briefly stated, Hobsbawm's argument is that: 'Excessive violence and cruelty are . . . sufficiently significant to require some explanation as a social phenomenon.' In the first place, brigands live by love and fear. But 'cruelty is inseparable from vengeance, and vengeance is an entirely legitimate activity for the noblest of bandits' and 'among the weak, the permanent victims who have no hope of real victory even in their dreams' this vengeance takes the form of 'a more general "revolution of destruction", which tumbles the whole world into ruins, since no "good" world seems possible.'

The counter-insurgency mounted by the government against the rebellion was a failure. When the rebels entered the country, the army was only 1,500-strong and under-equipped, although it expanded rapidly to some 7,000 by the end of 1991. Often unpaid, the urban-recruited soldiery proved unable to find the rebels, and resorted to attacking civilians for 'hiding' the rebels – a scenario familiar enough for armies facing guerrilla warfare. The army's failure led to the formation of civilian self defence forces, particularly the Kamajors among the Mende in the south, but also among other ethnic groups in different parts of the country.

Popular acclaim

A military coup in 1992 brought Valentine Strasser and the National Provisional Revolutionary Council to power, with popular acclaim. The new government mounted an anti-corruption drive, and promised to end the war. A renewed offensive against the rebels ensued, and the army expanded to some 13-14,000 by the middle of 1992. But: 'Increasingly, the Sierra Leonean military was an army of marginalized and often embittered youth. Significantly, its social base was edging closer to that of the RUF . . .' As one Freetown poet commented: 'Gov'ment Wharf rat, turned soja now.' (Government Wharf is one of the more run down areas of Freetown.) Drug and alcohol use by both the army and the RUF increased, and looting using actual violence, rather than just the threat, became much more widespread.

The situation was beginning to spiral out of control. As Keen says: 'Soldiers and rebels increasingly came from the same

social base; and both the insurgency and counter-insurgency were shaped by a weak, unrepresentative and corrupt state and an undeveloped economy. . . .' There was a growing preference to attack civilians. One of Keen's interviewees said: 'A soldier might not get paid for 2-3 months, and then the commanding officer cuts something out for himself.' Even so, the army made major gains, and when Strasser declared a unilateral ceasefire at the end of 1993, many thought the war was effectively over.

But 1994 brought renewed conflict in the south and east. This was a new kind of war, with killing, maiming and burning instead of mere displacement of the population. What became known as RUF Phase 2 replaced RUF Phase 1, but the extent to which the RUF was actually responsible must be open to doubt. This second phase, according to one of Keen's sources, 'involved attacks that were nearly all by our soldiers . . . they killed and looted goods . . . they do not know Sankoh'. Another source said that '. . . it was impossible to tell the RSLMF [army] from the RUF . . . the NPRC had little real control over the soldiers in the field. Soldiers and rebels were found to collaborate with each other'. Soldiers sold arms, defected to the rebels, and formed independent groups. The distinction between soldiers and rebels became blurred. Sierra Leoneans coined a new word for this phenomenon – sobels – soldiers by day and rebels by night.

Lost control

By the end of 1994, the army leadership had lost control of about half of its men. Perhaps, and this is a question Keen does not seem to ask, this was true of the RUF as well. A pattern developed to 'rebel' attacks: when the military was sent to an area, the 'rebels' always attacked, the 'army' pulled out. By this time there were up to a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and some 200,000 refugees, mainly in neighbouring Guinea.

Throughout 1994, the RUF leadership effectively seemed to disappear. It simply went missing, and rebel units acted independently. Attacks on Sierromco (where bauxite was mined for aluminium) and Sierra Rutile (rutile is a source of titanium) were apparently carried out by the army, but blamed on the rebels. One ex-RUF combatant alleged that: 'When soldiers were defeated and joined the RUF, these amputations started. The 96 elections, the RUF had nothing to do with it, it was the army cutting off thumbs used in elections.'

NGOs and aid organisations, fearing that aid might be interrupted, also helped keep alive the convenient fiction that the RUF was the source of all atrocities – 'only one of the abusive parties was being blamed'.

Possibly aware that it could no longer rely on the army to prosecute the war, the Strasser-led NPRC turned in 1995 first to ex-Gurkhas, and then to the mercenary outfit Executive Outcomes, which succeeded in re-establishing government control over the more important mining areas – diamonds, bauxite and rutile. Meanwhile the NPRC was under increasing domestic pressure to hold elections, and when elections were finally held in early 1996, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected president in the second round in March, standing on the SLPP ticket. The RUF refused to participate in the elections.

Doomed to failure

The new government immediately came under pressure from the 'international community' to negotiate a peace agreement with the RUF. One was duly signed, in Abidjan in November 1996, but because (as Keen rightly emphasises) it ignored the role of both the disaffected army and the Kamajors, it was doomed to failure.

In spite of the apparent progress, everything was thrown back into the melting pot by the coup in May 1997. Angry army NCOs, concerned most of all with corruption in the officer corps (officers frequently claimed pay for non-existent ghost soldiers and held back a proportion of their men's pay), locked up senior officers and released prisoners from Freetown's jail. Among these was a major, Johnny Paul Koroma, who was installed as the leader of the new ruling junta, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The RUF supported the coup, indeed it seems to have known about it in advance. There was widespread looting, as the unpaid soldiery indulged in what they dubbed 'Operation Pay Yourself'. Seventeen out of 22 on the AFRC were NCOs. The coup exacerbated the north-south divide. Kabbah was seen as pro-Mende and supported by the Kamajors, and some northern Temne politicians lent their support to the AFRC.

Expanded

The junta was quickly internationally anathematised. There had been a Nigerian armed presence in the country from the beginning of the war, under the auspices of Ecomog, the Ecowas Monitoring Group (Ecowas is the Economic Community of West Africa States). At the time of the coup the force consisted of some 3,000 Nigerians and 1,500 Guineans, and this was rapidly expanded to 14,000 mostly Nigerian troops. In February 1998 Ecomog attacked from its base at the capital's airport, and pushed the combined AFRC and RUF forces out of Freetown, reinstating president Kabbah.

Throughout 1998 the rebel forces gradually encroached on Freetown, setting the scene for the single most savage event in the entire war. The majority of those who attacked Freetown in January 1999 were AFRC soldiers who had fled to the Occra Hills outside the city, the West Side Boys. The RUF said that these forces were operating on their own behalf. Kabbah could only rely on a very small army and on the Kamajors.

The incursion was 'unimaginably brutal', the last act of vengeance by the armed dispossessed. An orgy of looting, burning, murder, amputation and rape left over 6,000 dead. Eventually the invaders were expelled from the city by Ecomog forces, who committed their own human rights abuses in the process. Kabbah was once more in charge of the capital, if not much else.

The tragic events of January 1999 galvanised the peace process. Under international pressure the Lome agreement in July installed the RUF leader Foday Sankoh as vice president and head of mineral resources. But the rogue soldiers of the SLA were excluded from the agreement and as Keen comments, 'pinning every problem on the RUF had once again created space for the abuses of others'. Peace refused to come.

It was only with the arrival of British troops in May 2000, and the arrest of the RUF leadership, that the process of disarming and reintegrating the rogue elements, no longer under the command of either the RUF or the army hierarchy, gathered pace. Even then: 'The idea that ex-combatants were being prepared for a future life beyond the war was largely a fiction.'

In the May 2002 elections, the SLPP once again emerged victorious with support from the south and opposition from the APC in the north, reconfirming the traditional pattern of politics in Sierra Leone.

Unemployment

Keen concludes by saying that most people in the country, whatever side they were on in the war, agree that it was driven by lack of education, unemployment, failures in local justice, corruption and the draining away of natural resources. 'It is important,' he says, 'to challenge simplistic interpretations of "reconstruction" that could reconstruct the source of the problem.' He fears that 'without addressing some of the deep grievances in Sierra Leone, a defeated rebel movement might

quickly be replaced by "another RUF"'.

Lansana Gberie, now an academic in Canada, was a journalist in Sierra Leone during the war, and his book is consequently one of the most readable and often well-informed of the three. The 'decade long war may have been aberrant and freakish', he says in outlining the purpose of the book, 'but it was started and managed by ordinary men whose motivations ... need to be investigated and understood'. Unfortunately his account is distorted by an almost visceral hatred of the RUF.

Displaced

Gberie emphasises the scale of the calamity that overtook the country during the war. By the end of 1996, many thousands had died and two-thirds of the population had been displaced (three million out of a total population of four-and-a-half million). At that date, only 16 per cent of the country's health facilities were functioning (mainly in Freetown) and 70 per cent of the schools and colleges had been destroyed. Between 1991 and 1995, the economy had a negative growth rate of more than 6 per cent.

At the start of the war, 'Sierra Leone was virtually a collapsed state, its ruling elite a corrupt, violent and effete class confined largely to the capital ... Poverty and despair rotted the society; violence and political thuggery became the norm ...' But Gberie will have no truck with the idea that the RUF may have been a genuine response to this situation. 'The RUF phenomenon ... was more a case of organised delinquency ... aimed at criminal expropriation, not social protest.'

Outsiders, he says, judged the RUF by its document 'Footpaths to Democracy', hastily put together in London in 1995: 'It was all rhetoric, of course, bearing little relationship to the true character and preoccupation of the pillaging and brutal and largely illiterate RUF ...' Illiteracy is of course widespread in Sierra Leone, and it is interesting that Gberie should use this particular stick to beat the RUF.

Gberie provides an excellent summary of Sierra Leone's post-colonial history. He is clear about the nature of the state, 'which is of colonial – and therefore illegitimate and exploitative – origin and function'. The relative privilege of Freetown is illustrated by the literacy rates at independence – 80 per cent for the capital with only 2 per cent of the population at the time, and 6 per cent for the rest of the country. Even in 1978 infant mortality was 20 per cent in Freetown and 30 per cent elsewhere.

Undermined

Perhaps if Gberie had had the opportunity to read Keen's book before his own was published, he might have revised his opinion, but as I have said, his account is undermined by the way that he lays all the problems of the war at the RUF's door. Although he says that 'most of the rebels who entered Freetown [in January 1999] were ex SLA soldiers', he then proceeds to quote the Human Rights Watch report on these events, which (mistakenly) states that '... the widespread participation in abuses suggest that they must have been authorised at a high level within the RUF's command structures'. Gberie comments, apparently forgetting his own evidence: 'That drive to undo, destroy and terrorise had been the RUF's signature quality all along ...' It is difficult to see how actions carried out by remnants of the Sierra Leone Army can give rise to any conclusions about the nature of the RUF.

To Gberie, it is clear that the RUF's political programme was never anything more than a smokescreen to obscure their mercenary intentions: 'My argument is that however much Sankoh's complaints against the rotten political system echoed those of many Sierra Leoneans ... his lack of political maturity and serious political organisation ensured that he remained nothing more than a functionary within a vast network of warlord economies that was controlled by Charles Taylor and his principal supporter, Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso.' Moreover: 'The RUF was thus largely conceived as a mercenary enterprise, and never evolved beyond banditism; it never became a political, still less a revolutionary, organisation.' Even more strongly: 'In insurgent groups like the RUF we saw an organisation without any legitimacy or pretence to ideology carrying out a sustained campaign of violence ...' At the very least surely Gberie must concede that the RUF had at least a pretence to ideology, as 'Footpaths to Democracy' demonstrates.

Diamonds

What was the war about? Gberie is clear in his own mind that the answer to this question is diamonds: '... the explanation that focuses on diamonds – as both the fuel for the war and the motivation for the RUF's leader and principal foreign backers – is now widely accepted.' Certainly control and exploitation of diamonds created an interest in the war continuing, but this was not confined to the RUF – the Sierra Leone army, Ecomog (especially the Nigerians) and parts of the UN forces (Unamsil) were equally and sometimes more culpable. But Gberie is quite simply wrong if he is suggesting that diamonds were a root cause of the war.

Like Keen, Gberie is concerned that the war will be seen as a mere interlude, and that the country will settle, comfortably for some but uncomfortably for the majority, back into its old ways: '... the tragedy is that Sierra Leone's political elites, in the form of the SLPP in power after the end of the war, appeared, like the Bourbons, to have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.'

Ibrahim Abdullah has edited a collection of essays by mainly Sierra Leonean academics, now mostly resident in North America, which has its origins in debates during the war on Leonenet, an internet discussion forum. Among the aspects of the war covered by the various authors are corruption, state complicity, the Nigerian intervention, and the local press in the war. There is insufficient space to do justice to this wide variety of themes, so I shall concentrate on Abdullah's account of the origins and character of the RUF.

Terrorised

Abdullah sets the tone in his introduction to the collection, where he refers to the RUF as 'the rag-tag guerrilla army that had terrorised the populace for more than a decade'. He correctly condemns the 'one size fits all' approach, and says that: 'The primary analytical focus is on developments internal to Sierra Leone: how lumpen or underclass youth culture and the emergence of a radical student movement coalesced ... [to produce the RUF].'

Seeking to unravel the processes which gave rise to the RUF, Abdullah says that '... it is necessary to situate the investigation within the context of Sierra Leone's political culture, especially the glaring absence of a radical post-colonial alternative'. He laments the demise of the radical tradition epitomised by I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson's Youth League in the thirties. 'What marked Sierra Leone's post-independence politics was,' he says, 'its conservative orientation and uncritical support for the West.' In contrast to the Youth League, the youth project of the RUF 'lacked the discipline and maturity that Wallace-Johnson was known to constantly emphasise in his writings and speeches'.

The links between students and lumpens were formed in the eighties, when the economy nosedived. It was impossible even for graduates to get jobs in the public sector, and the informal sector ('natural abode of the *lumpenproletariat*') mushroomed.

Abdullah defines the *lumpenproletariat* as 'largely unemployed and unemployable youths who live by their wits .... They are prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness and gross indiscipline' and are to be found in every city in Africa. Not the most inspiring of

character references perhaps, but apparently it was these young people who began to hang out with students from Fourah Bay College (Freetown's University), listening to music (Bob Marley and others) and beginning to take an interest in politics. The latter was mainly of the panafricanist variety, with some Nkrumah, Fanon, Guevara and Castro, and fragments of Marx and Lenin. Study groups were formed.

In 1985 the students of Fourah Bay College elected a radical leadership, a coalition of Libyan Green Book enthusiasts, panafricanists and socialists which ran under the label of Mass Awareness and Participation (MAP). Allegations of Libyan involvement led to the expulsion or suspension of 41 students, and three lecturers lost their jobs. Some, including Alie Kabba, the union president, were imprisoned. When he was released, Kabba, with others, travelled to Ghana, where they joined the Libya-Burkina Faso-Ghana network. They remained, however, 'an informal political group linked together by their common experience of expulsion and their commitment to radical change'.

Armed struggle

In 1987 this group launched a call for armed struggle from their base in Accra. The call was rejected by the majority of the Sierra Leonean panafricanist organisation Panafu, but in July and August of that year small groups travelled to Libya for military training. They were no more than 50 in total. They left Libya divided in 1988, and the leadership fell to Foday Sankoh, Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray. They travelled widely in Sierra Leone and Liberia for the next three years, and finally launched an active guerrilla struggle in 1991. In the early stages of the war there is little indication of the later brutality, indeed it was reported that areas under Kanu's control were peaceful and well-organised. But in what may have been a significant turning point in the evolution of the RUF, both Kanu and Mansaray were executed in 1992, and Sankoh emerged as the undisputed leader.

Abdullah evinces the same disdain for the RUF as Gberie: 'To understand the character of the RUF, we need to look at the social composition of the ruffians, their policies, actions, statements and programmes, if any.' He is contemptuous of 'Footpaths to Democracy', which 'contains words and phrases lifted from Mao Zedong and Amilcar Cabral' and was hurriedly drafted in London. 'If they had read Cabral,' he says, 'they would not have recruited lumpens.' And yet later on he writes that Cabral 'identified this particular group as the crucial link between the urban-rural networks so important to the success of the PAIGC'. But Abdullah is surely right when he suggests that: 'The movement did not . . . undertake a concrete analysis of the situation which comes with a revolutionary project.'

Catch-all

The problem with the term lumpen (or *lumpenproletariat*), as most writers have used it to describe the RUF's social base, is that it is a catch all which obscures as much as it illuminates. It includes disaffected urban and rural youth, and apparently alluvial diamond miners. Sometimes it is no more than a synonym for the masses. And I have to plead guilty in that I have accepted this description in the past.

Amilcar Cabral, the outstanding leader of the struggle against colonialism in Portuguese Guinea, did make the kind of 'concrete analysis' that the RUF apparently failed to do. As his biographer makes clear: 'In his analysis of the *déclassés*, Cabral, unlike Frantz Fanon, carefully distinguished between the young men and women who had come to town to seek work and a better life from the real *lumpenproletariat* whom Fanon had credited with great political potential. While the former readily joined the struggle, the latter, Cabral suggested, more often than not acted as the colonial authorities' unpaid spies and informers. Whereas Fanon had defined the *lumpenproletariat* as a group of unemployed, uprooted peasantry who had barely managed to survive in the cities, and had seen them as the spearhead of the peasant revolution's thrust into the cities, Cabral argued the reverse. He maintained that these young people with petty-bourgeois connections in the cities became the cadre required by the party to carry political mobilisation into the countryside.' (Patrick Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War*, 1983)

In Cabral's own words: 'The really *déclassé* people, the permanent layabouts, the prostitutes and so on . . . this group has been outrightly against our struggle . . . On the other hand, the particular group . . . for which we have not yet found any precise classification (the group of mainly young people recently arrived from the rural areas) . . . . They have proved extremely dynamic in the struggle. Many of these people joined the struggle right from the beginning and it is among this group that we found many of the cadres whom we have since trained.'

Colonialism

Initially, Cabral's party concentrated on 'the working masses and employees in the urban areas'. But after a massacre in 1959, in which dozens of striking workers were shot down, they concluded that 'the course followed until then had been a mistaken one. The urban centres proved to be the stronghold of colonialism, and mass demonstrations and representations were found to be not only ineffectual but also an easy target for the repressive and destructive operations of the colonial forces'. (Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea: An African People's Struggle*, 1969)

In this connection it may be relevant to note that in the seventies the students of Fourah Bay College did attempt to forge links with labour in Freetown. But the government defeated the labour movement by a combination of buying off the leadership and putting down a wave of labour unrest in 1982.

Psychotic

The turning point in Sierra Leone's civil war was the period in the late nineties, when the army disintegrated. Both the government and the RUF appear to have lost control of the situation, and the traumatised country underwent what might be described as a collective psychotic episode. To blame Sankoh and the RUF for excesses carried out by ex-RUF forces probably makes even less sense than to blame Kabbah and the government for the excesses of ex-SLA forces.

A proper history of the RUF remains to be written, but it is clear that it did not stay static during the period from its inception to its demise. Much of what has been written about it assumes an unchanging character, and often fails to distinguish between its leadership and its base. There is nothing lumpen about, for example, Omrie Golley, who represented the RUF in the later stages of the war, and who is described by Gberie as an 'urbane and articulate British-trained lawyer'. And the global categorisation of the RUF's base as lumpen is problematic too. Petty criminals, high on drink and drugs, who also took an interest in the ideas of Nkrumah and Fanon? It hardly seems likely.

The status quo ante has been re-established with the help of a huge deployment of UN and British troops, and it is business as usual for the unreconstructed 'colonial' state. The British are retraining the army for the umpteenth time. Proposals have been put forward for the privatisation of the company which provides Freetown's water supply. Political and economic corruption is once again widespread, and the country is only one place above the bottom in the UN's Human Development index. All the conditions that gave rise to the civil war are falling slowly back into place. **WA**

Workers and workers' parties

Darren Williams considers one of the most important strategic questions for the left – the building of a mass workers' party – in a period in which structural changes in the capitalist system and a succession of political defeats have led to a dramatic decline in class consciousness among workers

The socialists of 100 years ago were generally far more optimistic than their successors today. they saw the worldwide abolition of capitalism within their own lifetimes as a realistic, even a likely, prospect. Subsequent experience has dramatically lowered expectations: from the perspective of the early 21st century, the progress of the socialist project is largely a story of disappointment and defeat and hopes for the future are necessarily cautious and tentative; only in Latin America are there grounds for optimism regarding the short-to-medium term. Explanations for the setbacks of the 20th century must take into account a number of factors, from the ebb and flow of the world capitalist economy to the mixture of repression and concessions employed by particular national bourgeoisies at decisive junctures. Of course, the governmental record of the left warrants particular attention: not least the degeneration of Soviet socialism under Stalin and his successors and the largely inglorious experience of social democracy in office. But there is also the even more fundamental issue of the relationship between socialists and the working class and the type of organisation to which this gives rise. The vicissitudes of the intervening years have cast far greater doubt over such matters than existed a century ago. By then, socialism had become established as the political project of the working class and there were large, and rapidly growing, parties committed to the advancement of both in most industrialised countries. Notwithstanding some significant political differences, relatively few socialists (other than the anarchists and syndicalists) doubted that they belonged within these parties.

This situation came to an end in 1914, when the leaders of most social-democratic parties supported the drive to war in pursuit of their respective 'national' interests, prompting the first major rupture in the organisational unity of the (non-anarchist) left, a split that was consummated after the Bolshevik Revolution three years later and the establishment of the Communist International. Today – countless splits (and rather fewer fusions) later – there is less consensus than ever as to how socialists should organise; the experience of the last century provides considerably more negative than positive examples. Moreover, while recent years have seen a heartening upsurge in popular radicalism – as manifested in the 'global justice' and anti war movements – this has been driven largely by forces from outside the established workers' movement, for whom class need not be central to politics. While the remnants of the Marxist left continue to assert the unique destiny of the working class as the revolutionary subject, they often do so in a rather mechanical way, repeating cherished formulas about vanguard parties, united fronts and workers' power but rarely paying serious attention to the contemporary realities of workers' social situation and political behaviour.[1] Yet it is surely essential for socialists to get to grips with these questions, making a considered assessment of the historical record and the present conjuncture, if we are to resolve the unfinished business of our movement.

Reversing the decline of the left

It is necessary to start by acknowledging that the mass parties that claimed the allegiance of the workers throughout the 20th century have ultimately failed to make sustained progress towards socialism.[2] Moreover, this failure has not generally given rise to new mass parties, better equipped for the job; instead, it has contributed to the widespread collapse of confidence in socialism as a realisable goal. This applies particularly to the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe, North America[3] and Australasia: those with the oldest working classes, the longest-established workers' parties and the longest deferred hopes for a socialist future. It is on these countries that I will focus in this article – not because they are ultimately more important than the rest of the world to the global struggle for socialism but because it is here that the impasse of the left is greatest. In these countries, in particular, the dilemma that today faces those still committed to class politics as the basis of the socialist project, is whether they should work within the parties that have historically commanded mass working class support – despite their political inadequacies – or seek to establish new parties with a pristine commitment to socialism. The resolution of this dilemma would always be difficult, given the politically turbulent times through which we are living; it is further complicated, however, by the fact that what passes for socio-political analysis on the Marxist left is too often constructed *ex post facto* to justify a particular tactical 'turn' by this or that self styled 'revolutionary' organisation. This article is an attempt to put these questions into some sort of context and to clarify the issues which should inform any serious Marxist approach to political strategy today.

The arguments put forward for the establishment of new parties of the left usually focus on three factors: the calamitous nature of the current phase of world capitalism; the increasing readiness of broad popular forces to challenge oppression, injustice and war; and the inability of the historic mass parties of the left to provide the necessary political leadership to these forces. On the first point, there should be little disagreement among socialists: the socially dysfunctional character of capitalism can rarely have been clearer than at present, when we face the resurgence of imperialist aggression and plunder, environmental catastrophe and ever-increasing disparities of wealth and power within and between states. Such circumstances undoubtedly call for an urgent response by socialists. As to what form this response should take, and how this is conditioned by the rise of new oppositional forces and the degeneration of the mass reformist parties, this is less clear. I will return to the question of popular radicalisation later. First I shall deal with the state of the mass parties.

Social democracy: from retreat to surrender?

Social-democratic parties have, since at least the Second World War, usually remained the principal parties of the working class (in terms of membership and electoral support) – at least in those countries where a substantial working class existed and was free to choose its political party. Even in those countries, such as Italy, where Communist parties have enjoyed predominance within the workers' movement, these parties have tended to adopt an essentially social-democratic

approach to politics. Yet the record of social democracy, even in Scandinavia, must be adjudged one of failure, when measured by its own original ambitions. Indeed, successive leaderships of the social-democratic parties have avoided acknowledging this failure only by redefining their goals. The social-democratic programme originally entailed the determined, albeit incremental, advance to socialism, through the progressive socialisation of the means of production and the direction of the economy by the state, in the interests of the working class. By the 1950s, the goalposts had, in most countries, already been shifted: now, social-democracy accepted the confines of an essentially capitalist economy, but sought to secure for the working class an increasing share of the wealth generated by that economy, along with generous social welfare provision. At times when the left has been in the ascendant within these parties – for example, during the 1970s and early 1980s in Britain, Sweden and France – the original goal of an incremental advance to socialism has been resumed (albeit more formally than substantively, in some cases). In the last 20-30 years, however, they have even retreated from their previous programmes of gradual structural reform, adopting policies not fundamentally different from those of the conservative or Christian-democratic right. When in government, they have set about dismantling many of their own historic achievements (nationalised industries, comparatively progressive tax regimes, etc.). Even their most durable achievement – the welfare states of northern Europe – have now been declared unfit for the demands of the 21st century, and in need of 'reform'.

This shift in the political programme of social democracy is regularly cited as an argument for abandoning work within the historic mass parties, in favour of establishing new formations. In recent years, it is argued, the change has been not merely quantitative, but *qualitative*: not merely a continued rightward drift into unfriendly territory, but rather a violent lurch over a political precipice. As a consequence, we are told, socialists no longer have anything to gain by working within these parties, by attempting to change their policies or influence their supporters; indeed, their most class-conscious former adherents have already renounced their former allegiance.

At a time like the present, when social democrats are espousing the free market, deregulation and privatisation, it is understandable that many left activists should feel that everything has changed beyond recognition and that a completely new approach is required. Yet these issues call for sober assessment, for current developments to be put in their proper historical perspective. For much of the organised far left, the present seems perpetually to be a time of unprecedented turmoil: politicians and capitalists were never more treacherous than they are today, workers and the oppressed never angrier, more united and more determined to effect change; capitalism never more crisis-ridden. This sort of default catastrophism makes for good inflammatory rhetoric but poor political analysis. When a 'sharp, wrenching turn' is being proposed, it is worth pausing to assess whether things really have changed so dramatically as to render old methods utterly redundant.

As noted earlier, there undoubtedly *has* been a significant change in the ideology and programmes of social-democratic parties, the most significant feature of which has been the general abandonment of any commitment to the end-goal of a new socialist society, qualitatively distinct from capitalism. This change has taken place gradually, however. Gregory Elliott, in a book on the Labour Party, identifies three phases in the history of social democracy: a 'Marxist' phase, lasting from the establishment of the Second International in 1889 until the First World War; a 'Keynesian' phase, lasting from around 1940 until the mid-1970s; and a 'social-liberal' phase that continues to the present day.[4] The precise dates differ from one country to another, of course, and different trends have always co-existed; even today, when most social-democratic leaderships have embraced 'social-liberal' policies, there remain plenty of neo-Keynesians and Marxists within the ranks of their parties. Moreover, the general shift to the right has sometimes, in some countries, been reversed (albeit usually temporarily). Nevertheless, the overall political trajectory of these parties has followed the course that Elliott describes.

Given the distance that now separates mainstream social-democratic politics from any idea of replacing capitalism with socialism, the *political* argument for organising in opposition to these parties seems at first sight fairly persuasive: in peddling the idea that capitalism is permanent and inevitable, they are deluding and misleading the workers who support them; consequently, it is necessary to establish parties that will expose them for what they are and present an authentic socialist alternative. The political reality is, however, more complex than this schema would suggest; moreover, there are some significant practical and organisational questions that need to be addressed.

Plus ça change . . . ?

In emphasising the wretchedness of present-day social democracy, its left critics sometimes risk giving the impression that its past record was one of consistent and principled (if ultimately ineffectual) service in the cause of the workers. The reality is, of course, less edifying. While it would be a gross injustice to portray all past social-democratic leaders as either class traitors or dupes, it is arguable that they often did as much harm as good (in government, at least) to the people they claimed to represent. In foreign policy, the principles of international proletarian solidarity have regularly been flouted: from general collusion in the imperialist slaughter of 1914-18, to the Blair government's participation in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Even the hallowed Attlee government, let us not forget, took part in the Korean War. Similarly, in domestic policy, social-democratic governments, even in their supposed heyday, broke strikes, imposed wage restraint, undermined civil liberties and abandoned their most ambitious reforms as soon as the bourgeoisie mustered concerted opposition.

Yet, despite the many unwholesome aspects of the social democrats' record, the fact is that a majority of workers, at most times and in most countries, has been willing to accept such leadership, while the various alternative parties of the left have generally failed to rally mass support. And in most countries there has been no shortage of such alternatives to social democracy, ever since the great betrayal over the First World War led to the widespread formation of Communist parties. From the 1930s onwards, the latter were themselves challenged from the left by Trotskyist and other revolutionary parties. While Communist parties have sometimes eclipsed the social democrats (e.g., in Italy, and in France up to the 1970s), this has usually seen them behaving like alternative social-democratic parties, rather than representing something qualitatively different. In none of the advanced capitalist countries have revolutionary socialist parties ever presented a serious challenge to the hegemony of the parliamentary-reformist left, despite the latter's many failings. Simply denouncing the timidity and 'misleadership' of the social democrats, and offering a more radical approach, has consistently failed to produce the instantaneous enlightenment achieved by the boy who pointed out the emperor's nakedness. Hence the argument that, as long as a majority of the working class continued to look to the social-democratic parties for leadership (with

whatever illusions), then it was necessary to work inside – or, at least, close to – these parties, in order to win a hearing among their members and supporters, the better to persuade them that a different kind of leadership was required.[5] To distance oneself from these parties was to consign oneself to political irrelevance.

Many of those who accepted this argument in the past, however, argue that it no longer applies today: the latest transmutation of social democracy represents something qualitatively different from before, calling for a different response. Whereas social democrats always held back the most militant impulses of the workers, convincing them to opt for compromise, rather than outright confrontation, with the bourgeoisie, they at least offered significant structural reforms and real material benefits for the working class. In their latest incarnation, however, social democratic parties treat prosperity and growth as sufficient evidence of the value of their policies, without questioning how these have been achieved, or whether their benefits have been equitably distributed. To use Trotsky's phrase, this is 'reformism without reforms'. When social democracy promised to use the power of the state to restrain the rapacity of capital and to ensure decent employment, housing, education and healthcare for all citizens, it was difficult to argue that reformism was a dead end. The Marxist left (or, at least, the more realistic sections of it) had to take up a position of constructive, comradely criticism: sympathising with the aspirations of social democracy, but patiently pointing out to its followers the limits of its reform programme, the imprudence of relying on the goodwill of the capitalists or their allies within the state, of expecting economic stability from a fundamentally irrational and crisis-ridden system. The social democrats had to be kept under pressure to carry out their own programme (the progressive parts of it, at least) and then to go further; and if their resolve should fail, they would have to be replaced by a more determined leadership.

Now, however (so the argument runs), when social democracy seeks state power in order to enforce the principles of the free market, to discipline workers 'for their own good', it is self-defeating to play down our criticisms and suggest that the argument is over means rather than ends. Workers do not have to be convinced that they are being sold short by the social democrats: they can see that for themselves, as their jobs become less secure, their employment rights at work are diminished, their public services cut back or privatised. Their experiences are increasingly making them receptive to an alternative and it is the responsibility of socialists to provide that alternative, proclaiming as loudly as possible the political bankruptcy of the established parties.

New left parties: the dog that didn't bark

This argument certainly has much to recommend it: social democracy, as a body of ideas and a general approach to government, *has* qualitatively changed. Anyone who argues that this change is only superficial and that social democracy is 'essentially' the same as it ever was either began with a dismissive idea of 'old' social democracy, or else has an unduly optimistic impression of how it stands today. Moreover, there is some evidence that the political retreat of social democracy has weakened its electoral and membership base, albeit not everywhere (see Table 1). Undoubtedly, it has deterred many class-conscious workers from giving further support to these parties and – to differing degrees in different countries – this has created a potential constituency for a political (and perhaps organisational) break with mainstream social democracy. The extent of this trend is a matter of some controversy, however. In most advanced capitalist countries, social-democratic parties remain among the two or three most popular parties in terms of electoral support and disillusionment with their shift to the right has not, thus far, generally been translated into mass support for any rival left party claiming the ground that they have vacated. Of the new left parties established in advanced capitalist countries over the last 15-20 years, very few have won more than five per cent of the vote in a national election and the only one to get into double figures has been Spain's *Izquierda Unida* (United Left), itself built around the long-established Spanish Communist Party.

While this may be regrettable, it should not be too surprising, unless one has simply accepted at face value the somewhat schematic prognoses widely proffered by the organised far left. The latter tend to overstate the number of people who, in abandoning a rightward-moving social-democratic party, will necessarily gravitate towards a more authentically socialist party. Such exaggeration proceeds, in part, from a somewhat simplistic view of social psychology, which assumes that people will draw politically radical conclusions from their observations about the failures or iniquities of bourgeois politicians. There is little evidence that this

Table 1: Average vote by decade, for selected major left parties since the 1970s

	1970s		1980s		1990s		2000s	
	000's	%	000's	%	000's	%	000's	%
Australian Labor Party	3,238	44.9	4,007	46.1	4,332	40.8	4,375	37.7
Austrian Socialist Party	2,314	50.0	2,203	45.4	1,752	37.3	1,792	36.5
British Labour Party	11,711	39.1	9,243	29.2	12,539	38.8	10,143	38.0
Danish Social-Democratic Party	1,041	32.2	1,017	30.9	1,198	36.0	936	27.5
German Social-Democratic Party	16,637	43.8	15,051	39.4	*15,126	*39.7	*14,538	*36.7
New Zealand Labour Party	669	42.8	803	43.3	673	32.4	887	41.2
Norwegian Labour Party	867	38.8	965	37.4	907	36.0	738	28.5
Portuguese Socialist Party	1,885	33.4	1,499	26.5	2,196	39.0	2,315	41.4
Spanish Socialists (PSOE)	5,425	30.0	9,048	44.0	9,288	38.2	9,473	38.4
Swedish Social Democrats (SAP)	2,296	43.7	2,448	44.5	2,164	39.8	2,114	39.9

Actual and percentage vote for the parties listed, in all national legislative elections, averaged over each decade.
*Post-unification results for Germany exclude the five former-GDR states, to allow for more meaningful comparisons.
Sources: Australian Government & Politics Database; BBC; Election Resources on the Internet; Elections New Zealand; Psephos; Statistics Norway; Statistics Sweden; Wikipedia.

happens on a large scale, other than in the context of major social or industrial struggles. At other times, it is only those with a very well developed sense of class-consciousness, or a clearly worked-out socialist worldview, who follow the script. For the most part, people who have lost their faith in social democracy can be lumped together only negatively – in terms of their common disillusionment, rather than the positive political conclusions that they may draw. Many, while retaining 'left' attitudes, simply withdraw from political engagement, while others may hold a mixture of progressive and conservative views, which would not preclude their supporting a party further to the right than social democracy (the extreme example being the phenomenon of white working class people voting for neo-fascists when they feel they have been 'abandoned' by their traditional party).

While there has been a small increase in electoral support for non-mainstream parties (of the right as well as the left), a more marked trend has been decreasing voter turn-out, suggesting a disillusionment with electoral politics as such – fed, I would argue, by the increasing consensus among social-democratic, liberal and conservative/Christian-democratic parties, particularly over economic policy (see Table 2, which demonstrates that there has been a clear downward trend in voter participation since the 1970s in almost all the major capitalist democracies).

On the other hand, the residual mass support for social-democratic parties remains substantial, not least in those areas with the strongest history of working class organisation. Within this base of support there will be those who continue to vote for 'their' historic party despite their disenchantment with its recent political trajectory; those who have been convinced that this trajectory is necessary and perhaps even desirable; and those who continue to give their support out of a sense of almost tribal loyalty, bolstered by an appreciation of the real social gains won by these parties in the past. Nevertheless, the compound of these elements remains strong; on present trends, it may be gradually eroded over a period of generations but it will take more powerful forces than those presently at work to break it down altogether.

It is worth considering some of the likely explanations as to why there has not been a more decisive and general break with social democracy.

First, there is a question as to how widely it is recognised that social democracy has shifted to the right and adopted policies inimical to working class interests. For all those labour movement activists and loyal voters who ever based their hopes for a better future on conference exhortations and manifesto promises, the change since the 1970s is all too evident. Yet most people are more concerned with what parties do *in government* than with what they may declare in their programmes and policy documents. And the fact is that social democracy in government rarely represented as sharp a contrast to the policies of conservative or liberal governments as their respective ideologies and party programmes might have suggested. To say this is not simply to belittle, once again, the achievements of the parliamentary left, but to recognise that the policies of the right and centre, too, were once a good deal more progressive than they are today. For example: while Britain's post-war Labour government nationalised large parts of the energy, transport and communications sectors, plus iron and steel and the Bank of England, similar measures were carried out by coalitions dominated by bourgeois parties in France and Austria; in all cases, nationalisation was seen as a means of strengthening capitalism, not of beginning its transformation into socialism. Conversely, majority social-democratic governments in Sweden and Norway carried out no nationalisation at all.[7] Similarly, the progressive tax rates introduced by Labour governments in the 1960s are often recalled (usually with horror, by bourgeois commentators) but it is less frequently remembered that the top rate of income tax under Eisenhower's Republican administration in the United States was 91 per cent.[8] Governments of right as well as left sought to maintain full employment and adopted Keynesian demand-management techniques to moderate the effects of the trade cycle.

Conversely, governments nominally of left, right and centre alike have, since the 1970s, adopted the free-market nostrums of neo-liberalism. While working class voters can hardly be indifferent to the impact of this – massive public spending cuts, greater economic insecurity, reduced employment rights, etc. – they would not necessarily hold social-democratic parties specially responsible, particularly when the latter's version of neo-liberalism is usually a little milder than that implemented by right-wing governments. Political activists and industrial militants judge parties of the left by the yardstick of their declared socialist objectives; the majority of working class voters are more likely to base their expectations on those parties' recent behaviour in government, and consequently to expect less. When 'their' party disregards their interests so flagrantly as to forfeit their vote, they are more likely to conclude that politicians *as such* cannot be trusted and to abstain from electoral politics altogether (see Table 2) than to demand a new socialist party, re-founded on the original principles now betrayed by the old.

A further, related, point is that the proponents of new left parties tend to underestimate the scepticism that exists about the viability of a socialist alternative. However unappealing the neo-liberal poli-

Table 2: Average percentage turn-out, by decade, in national elections since the 1970s

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Canada	74.6	73.3	68.3	63.7
France	79.0	76.6	72.2	70.7
Denmark	88.4	86.7	84.3	85.8
Fed Rep Germany	90.9	87.3	79.7	78.4
Finland	75.4	76.7	70.0	72.0
Ireland	76.6	72.7	67.3	62.6
Japan	71.0	68.8	61.0	62.7
Netherlands	85.8	83.5	76.0	79.6
New Zealand	83.8	91.4	85.9	77.0
Norway	81.6	83.1	77.1	75.5
Portugal	87.5	78.0	65.7	63.7
Spain	73.6	73.4	76.9	72.2
Sweden	90.4	89.1	85.0	80.1
UK	75.0	74.1	74.7	60.4

Average percentage turnout of registered voters in all national legislative (and, where applicable, presidential) elections held in each decade in the major capitalist democracies (excluding those with compulsory voting).
Sources: BBC; Election Resources on the Internet; Elections Canada; Elections New Zealand; House of Commons Research Papers; International IDEA; Statistics Norway; Statistics Sweden; US Census Bureau; Wikipedia.

cies of recent years may be to large numbers of people, there is widespread acceptance of the idea that there is no realistic alternative – or, at least, none that involves asserting social control over capital and the market. The latter are held to be impracticable either on economic grounds (because of 'globalisation' – specifically, the increased mobility of capital, supported by the policing role of the WTO et al) or on political grounds (the supposed electoral unpopularity of higher personal taxation, etc.). It is hardly surprising that such views should be so widely held, given their assiduous promotion over the last 20-30 years by the mass media, bourgeois economists and other 'experts' and the mainstream political parties (including the social democrats). Moreover, there is a rational core to such ideas, since the only alternative to neo-liberalism that most people in the advanced capitalist countries have experienced was the Keynesian welfare state that existed in most of these countries from 1945 until the 1970s or early 1980s. This model depended on stable capital accumulation to provide the high tax yields that financed its comparatively generous social spending and it therefore became unviable from the mid-1970s when capitalism went into a deep and lengthy recession. Moreover, it was often bureaucratic, unresponsive and economically inefficient; in associating the idea of socialism in the popular mind with this regime of welfare capitalism (or with the Soviet bloc), the bourgeoisie and its apologists have done much to undermine it as an attractive alternative model of society.

Finally, there is the obvious point that parties and movements of the socialist left rarely receive anything approaching fair or even-handed treatment from the mainstream media in capitalist societies, for reasons that should not need to be spelt out. Moves to establish left alternatives to social democracy are likely to be ignored, ridiculed or denounced. Of course, it was ever thus, but at the beginning of the 20th century, when the first socialist parties were getting off the ground, the reliance on the mass media for information was less pronounced than it is today. Conversely, it may be argued, we have today a profusion of alternative media sources, via the internet. While this undoubtedly represents a huge benefit, which has transformed the possibilities for communicating socialist ideas, those ideas have to compete with thousands of alternatives in cyberspace. Moreover, there remains a significant 'digital divide', even in the most affluent countries and regions, and it is working class people who are most likely to be on the wrong side of that divide.

To point out these significant obstacles is not to counsel despair about the possibility of building mass socialist parties – just to promote a fuller appreciation of the difficulties that lie ahead. Nor should it be inferred that continuing indefinitely to worry away at social democracy's left flank is ultimately a more viable option. The rightward trajectory of the mass parties, if it continues at the present rate, will soon leave socialists without an environment capable of supporting any left politics. What is needed is a political approach that is both dynamic and realistic: one that takes account of the changed political landscape and advances a clear strategy for relating to social forces as they actually are. I will make some suggestions about this later on; first I will touch on the theoretical dimension of these questions.

Bourgeois parties, workers' parties and bourgeois workers' parties

The arguments for a break with social democracy are often presented in what purports to be the scientific language of Marxist class analysis: what were once workers' parties, we are told, can no longer be considered as such because they have undergone a change in their 'class character'. For all their pretensions to analytical precision, however, these arguments lack clarity about what determines a party's 'class character'.

There are two respects in which a party could meaningfully be described as a 'workers' party': it could be *for* the workers – i.e., dedicated to the pursuit of their class interests – and/or it could be *of* the workers – i.e., drawing its membership, organisation and electoral support from the working class. In the pre-1914 period, parties like the German, Austrian and Scandinavian social-democratic parties met both criteria: their social base was almost uniformly proletarian and they were dedicated to the establishment of a classless, socialist society. At any later period, there is more of a question as to whether these parties' politics were *for* the workers, but their class base remained proletarian.[9] In this latter characteristic, they have not fundamentally changed even today. In most countries, a majority (or, at least, a plurality) of class-conscious workers still identifies with these parties, votes for them and sometimes even joins them. Admittedly, the numbers are smaller, and declining, but this is a matter of degree, not kind. It is also argued that workers make up a smaller proportion of social-democratic voters and members than they did in the past. This is probably true to an extent, as the occupational structure of advanced capitalist societies has changed, creating more intermediate layers in the class structure. But unless one identifies the working class very narrowly with manual workers, as few serious Marxists (other than Nicos Poulantzas) have done,[10] then the continuing social weight of the working class means that it is bound to account for the bulk of the social democratic base.

If, then, the social democratic parties still qualify as workers' parties in terms of their social base, there is nevertheless the question of their politics, which have clearly developed in a reactionary direction. As I have observed above, however, this has been a gradual process. We need to consider at what stage in this process if at all – we could say that social democracy decisively committed itself to the class interests of the bourgeoisie, as opposed to those of the proletariat. In terms of concrete policies, there can hardly have been a decision more inimical to working class interests than sending millions of workers to their deaths in the trenches in 1914, yet the leaders of most social-democratic parties supported this decision, at a time when they were still formally committed to the abolition of capitalism. Moreover, many of the same parties subsequently implemented reforms that *did* benefit the working class. It might be argued that a significant marker of these parties' changing class character has been their own relinquishment of any special allegiance or orientation to the working class. Again, this has not happened, in most cases, 'overnight', but by a gradual process, whereby the language of class has been downgraded and then quietly dropped.[11] Even where the change has been made in a decisive and explicit manner – most notably, by the northern European social democrats, which dropped their self-description as workers' parties in the 1950s, becoming instead catch-all 'people's parties'[12] – the practical significance of the change was questionable; certainly it did not appreciably lessen these parties' working class support, nor did it provoke major splits to the left at the time. Arguably more significant has been these parties' adoption, since the 1970s, of neo-liberal economic policies, which represented a disavowal of any idea that the working class might have legitimate interests of its own which conflicted with the demands and priorities of capital. Even this, however, has not provoked a general and decisive political break from social democracy by substantial sections of the working class. This last point underlines the fact that the attitude taken by a political party towards the working class

is less important than the attitude that the class takes towards the party. Even where parties which once extolled the workers' cause now treat them with contempt, while substantial numbers of workers maintain some allegiance towards those parties there is at least an argument for socialists to continue to relate to those parties, in order to engage with those workers.

The altered class character of the mass parties has been asserted all the more vigorously in the case of those, like the British and Australian Labour parties, whose relationship with socialism was always more tenuous than that of, say, the German SPD or the Swedish SAP. The phrase, 'bourgeois workers' party', attributed to Lenin,[13] has often been invoked to express the contradictory character of such parties: bourgeois politics coupled with a working class social base. Now, it is argued, this contradiction has been resolved and they have become bourgeois parties, pure and simple. Again, this argument is not as coherent as it may first appear. The *politics* of the 'bourgeois workers' parties' may now be more unequivocally 'bourgeois' than before but if they were *already* politically (as opposed to socially) 'bourgeois',[14] then this change is a matter of degree, not of kind, and hardly amounts to a change in class character. Moreover, their social base remains qualitatively unchanged; to the extent that they were ever workers' parties, they remain so, by virtue of their subjective identification as such by millions of working class people.

In any case, assigning political parties to the 'correct' analytical category is clearly far less important than making a concrete analysis of their relationship with real social forces and the potential for working with or within them. There will be circumstances when socialists should work, in the short term, even within unequivocally bourgeois parties, where particular leaders or factions within these parties have established a working class base (for example: there might be a case for supporting local election campaigns by left-ish US Democratic Party politicians, where these have a local base in the black or Latino communities). In reality, assessments of the class character of political parties by far left often have more to do with practical questions (such as those groups' prospects for winning support) than with questions of high theory. It would be better to acknowledge this openly, to facilitate a more useful discussion of strategy and tactics.

Socialists in search of a social base

The practical corollary of the debate about party-building is that socialists are confronted with two distinct and counterposed types of potential constituency. On the one hand, there is the mass of people – overwhelmingly working class, or at one or two removes from the working class – who maintain a historically-grounded sense of identification with the main social-democratic or labour party in their country. Some of them will be party members or strong sympathisers and may have a degree of influence as opinion-formers within their union branches, workplaces and/or communities; the majority, however, will not be politically active other than on election day. Even among those who are party members, the exclusive form of political activity, beyond the organised left – a minority of a minority – will be campaigning for parliamentary and municipal elections. Yet however passive such a constituency, it cannot be sidestepped on the road to socialism – not least because of its relative size – and, indeed, it will contain thousands of activists and foot soldiers whose support will be indispensable to the success of any socialist project.

On the other hand, there are the growing numbers of people who may be considered 'naturally' predisposed – by social background or past allegiance – to support the left, but who no longer retain any party affiliation. Again, this category comprises a wide spectrum, in terms of degrees of political engagement. At one extreme, there are those who have made no conscious decision to withhold their support from the social-democratic party; rather, they have abstained by default – exemplifying a process of collective political disengagement within certain sections of society (especially among young people). At the opposite end of the spectrum are those very politically minded people – often trade union or community activists – who have positively resolved to deny their support to a party that seems to have betrayed their interests or values. Between the two extremes there are large numbers of people who have gradually lost the inclination to line up behind a party with which they feel a decreasing affinity.

Ultimately, socialists will need to engage the most politically conscious elements from both these groups. In their *immediate* political activity, however, they have to make a choice as to where they are going to prioritise their efforts at building mass support. The approach required, in terms of propaganda and tactics, will be very different if the focus is on the mainstream social-democratic base than if it is on those who are already breaking with social democracy. If socialists are going to concentrate on the mainstream of social-democratic workers, with the intention of breaking them from their current right-wing leaders, this will probably require continuing to work in or around the social-democratic parties, so as to engage their members in comradely debate about the need to reverse the current trajectory of these parties in order to defend historic values and achievements. On the other hand, if the priority is to be those who have already given up on social democracy, then the emphasis will be on denouncing the inability or unwillingness of the social-democratic parties to defend workers' interests and countering any idea that these parties can be 'reclaimed'.

The second approach has, over the last ten years or so, been more favoured by a majority of the organised Marxist left, particularly in such countries as France, Italy, Portugal, Denmark, Britain, Australia, and latterly Germany. The rationale is straightforward: although usually still a fairly small – if growing – minority of the working class, those who have already become disillusioned with social democracy are more likely to be open to an alternative. They are often portrayed as the 'vanguard' of the class, impelled to take a leading role by a clear appreciation of their interests, which the broad masses are slower to grasp.

New movements and old

Those working class voters who continue to support social-democratic parties, even while the latter are abandoning their historic commitments and attacking workers' interests, may appear – by virtue of this stubborn attachment – to represent a comparatively conservative section of the class, in contrast to those who have been radicalised by the experience of betrayal by their 'own' party. This is not the whole story, however. As noted above, such people vote the way they do with varying degrees of enthusiasm, resignation or desperation. Moreover, the persistent adherence of workers to social-democratic parties cannot be dismissed as mere conservatism. To give continuing political support to a party on the basis that it is in some sense a 'workers' party' represents, in itself, a form of class consciousness – notwithstanding any illusions about the political role of such parties that such an allegiance may also reflect. And, like any form of class consciousness, it is based on *collective* ideas: on the shared experience, and agreed interpretation, of social relations.

The implications of this must be taken seriously by anyone with a commitment to class politics. For all their political

failings, the social-democratic parties (and, in some countries, the Communist parties) have unquestionably enjoyed mass working class support lasting several decades. Moreover, we are not talking here merely about the aggregate of thousands of atomised individual decisions by voters: it is *collective* support, organised as such – whether formally, through party branches or affiliated union bodies, or informally, through social networks in workplaces and neighbourhoods (this is the concrete meaning of the phrase 'working class base', reduced to an empty cliché by the hack-propagandists of the far left). And any party capable of advancing the struggle for socialism today would surely need a comparable base – in size and character. This raises some very important questions about how the left should go about building political parties.

First of all, the experience of the mass workers' parties during the 20th century presents positive examples (the construction of organisations that mobilised many thousands of people) as well as negative ones (the failure of these parties, outside the Soviet Union and its satellites, to hasten the demise of capitalism). Today's left needs to separate the positive from the negative, if it is to integrate the lessons of past experience into a political strategy for socialist advance in the 21st century. In a nutshell, how can we build workers' parties today that command the mass support enjoyed by their predecessors a century ago, but which avoid the political degeneration that those parties underwent? To what extent does the relationship between party and class that sustained the historic workers' parties need to be reproduced as the basis of a renewed socialist project? Must the structures and networks that these parties retain even today – albeit in a somewhat withered form – be taken over wholesale by a new socialist leadership? Or can a similar relationship be replicated by a new organisation? How far should we aim to establish a *different* kind of relationship between party and class, given the weakness of most such parties' pursuit of workers' interests, once in parliament and government? To what extent can the failure of such parties to win socialism be attributed to their character as parties, and to what extent to the character of the capitalist states in which they operated: the structures and pressures of parliamentary democracy and government? These are the questions that the left needs to address, for they go to the heart of the strategic considerations involved in the establishment of a viable mass socialist party today.

At the most practical level, there is a need for a clear approach to recruitment. Outside periods of mass radicalisation associated with major social struggles – such as the immediate aftermaths of the two world wars, or the years between the *événements* of May '68 and the Portuguese Revolution – revolutionary parties tend to acquire members in ones and twos, often from a student or intellectual milieu, and on the basis of the attractiveness of a worldview that provides a neatly comprehensive explanation for such unsettling social phenomena as recessions and wars. Conversely, the mass reformist parties have historically recruited people in far larger numbers – often several at once from the same workplace or neighbourhood – around election campaigns and/or concrete issues of immediate tangible significance, especially at a local level. The enormity of the task of rebuilding the socialist movement today is such that we cannot rely on the individual recruitment of the ideologically committed. We are not simply recruiting revolutionary cadre to provide leadership to the massed ranks of class-conscious social-democratic workers; the decline of the mass parties means that there is a much bigger gap to be filled – whether that is done, in the first instance, inside or outside the old parties. We therefore need a 'primitive accumulation' of members, something that can only be achieved by appealing to their class interests at the most concrete level.

In this regard, there are problems both with building new parties and with trying to revive the left within the existing mass parties. On the one hand, it is difficult to persuade people to defend their interests by joining a party that currently seems singularly indifferent, or even hostile, to those interests. On the other hand, it is perhaps equally challenging to convince someone to invest their hopes in a party that is small, untested and liable to be dismissed as cranky and marginal by the political establishment.

But this is not merely a practical question about selecting an approach that will yield the most fruitful results; it goes to the heart of class politics. If the unique status of the working class as revolutionary subject remains valid – because it alone consistently has the motive and the potential means for disposing of capitalism – then a party that seeks to turn that potential into a conscious force for socialist change must address it *as a class*. Historically, the trade unions, the mass parties and the other institutions of the workers' movement organised workers into a conscious, collective political actor, instilling or reinforcing class loyalties that might otherwise have been eclipsed by national, regional, ethnic or religious affiliations. In the early period of the workers' movement, this was aided by the rapid growth of new industries that created self-contained, close-knit communities – mill towns, mining districts and the like – forging strong bonds of solidarity. Relatively quickly, the movement developed its own culture and infrastructure, with values and institutions distinct from those of official, bourgeois society, and strong enough to sustain a sense of identification that could be reproduced within each new generation. Yet the industries that provided the bedrock of the workers' movement throughout most of the 20th century have declined or relocated to the 'Newly-Industrialising Countries' of the Pacific Rim et al. Contrary to the claims of conventional bourgeois discourse, the working class in the advanced capitalist countries has not disappeared: it has simply transferred to new occupations and sectors, often – *like the* burgeoning call centre industry – every bit as alienating as the 'dark, satanic mills' of early industrialisation.

On this basis, it should – in principle – be possible for workers in these industries to be organised and, moreover, for them to be won to a class politics that goes beyond immediate industrial demands, in the same way that their forebears were. In practice, however, the barriers to this are clearly greater than they were a century, or even 30 years, ago. The decline of traditional heavy industries in the advanced capitalist countries since the 1970s has been accompanied by other social and political developments that have weakened the working class vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie. Trade union membership has been drastically reduced. Neo-liberal economic policies have eroded the public sphere, reducing the number of social relations that are not regulated by the market, and this has been reinforced by the entrenchment of neo-liberalism as 'official' ideology, presenting individualism and atomisation as the natural, inevitable and desirable basis of human society. For their part, the social-democratic leaders have increasingly abandoned any concept of class (other than in a trivial sense, relating to matters of status and lifestyle) – along with the idea that there are *any* significant social actors beyond individuals and families (and, of course, businesses). All this, combined with other factors that stem from different causes – such as the growth of home-based popular entertainment – means that there has been a general decline in collective social engagement, and not just in the industrial and political spheres (a phenomenon lamented by the liberal US academic Robert Putnam in his celebrated book, *Bowling*

Alone). As a political movement based on the principles of collective interests and collective action, socialism is naturally at a disadvantage in such an environment. The leadership of social democracy has played a particularly regressive role in this respect: in denying the political saliency of class, it has actively *disorganised* the working class. The left needs to overcome this by re-connecting the ideas of class politics with the experiences of working people.

How viable left parties are built

There are two aspects to this: first, engaging with the existing forms of working class political organisation; and second, developing a longer term strategy for rebuilding a socialist movement based on class politics. To take the first of these: a new or revived socialist party can only be built from within the existing workers' movements. The latter, for all their bureaucratisation and failures of leadership, are the product of workers' struggles over many decades; their structures and networks – however withered they might have become – are the embodiment of the principle of workers' self-organisation and must be the starting-point for any serious attempt to reconstruct the left. This relates not only to the trade unions but also to the mass parties and necessitates a battle by the socialist left within, and for control over, their structures. It will frequently be the case that there is no realistic chance of the left winning overall control of these parties; nevertheless it is only by addressing working people within the organisations that they themselves have built that socialists can secure any hope of winning their political allegiance. If and when the left judges that it can make no further headway within the established parties, it must be able to split these parties from top to bottom, regrouping a section of the acknowledged political leadership, as well as the rank-and-file.

This is borne out by the experience of those new left parties that have been established over the last 15-20 years, as social democracy has embraced neo-liberal policies. The only such parties that have established themselves as a viable, visible presence in national politics, with a mass membership and a robust electoral base, have been Spain's *Izquierda Unida* (United Left) and the Italian *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (Party of Communist Refoundation). In Germany, *Die Linkspartei* (the Left Party) has made a promising start, which it will hopefully be able to maintain.

Izquierda Unida (IU) – a broad coalition, rather than a unified party – was formed in 1986 on the initiative of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), out of the forces involved in the campaign against Spanish membership of Nato: a collection of mostly small, socialist, republican and green groups. For several years, IU made significant progress, winning support electorally and in the unions at the expense of the Socialist Party (PSOE), which was pursuing a neo-liberal economic agenda. It topped nine per cent of the vote in the 1989 general election, boosted by a significant role in the previous year's general strike, and won almost 11 per cent (2,600,000 votes) in 1996, when the Socialist government was displaced by the right-wing *Partido Popular*. From 1999, however, it went into decline, its support slipping to five per cent in 2000 – despite an electoral pact with the PSOE – and it achieved a similar result four years later. Waning support and a lack of clarity about its political project have led to protracted internal strife in IU, involving the departure of almost every founding organisation apart from the PCE. Nevertheless, it has historically achieved a degree of support unrivalled by most similar formations; even today it has five parliamentary seats and more than 2,500 councillors, and claims to have some 70,000 activists.

The *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* was established in 1991 by a number of opposition currents from the Italian Communist Party (PCI), following the PCI leadership's decision to transform the party into the 'post-communist' *Partito della Democratica Sinistra* (PDS). These currents included the pro-Soviet group led by Armando Cossutta, which broke away in 1998 to form the Party of Italian Communists, and a more numerous 'left-Eurocommunist' group – the followers of Pietro Ingrao (although he himself remained in the PDS until 1993) – as well as others further to the left. In addition, *Rifondazione* was joined at the very outset by *Democrazia Proletaria*, the only substantial remaining far left party in Italy, consisting of ex-Maoists and Trotskyists. Within ten years of its foundation, *Rifondazione* had some 100,000 members – most of whom had not belonged to the old PCI – and a particular base in the historical strongholds of the Italian left, such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna. It enjoys strong support within the biggest Italian union confederation, the CGIL, as well as in smaller radical union centres such as COBAS. Moreover, it has engaged effectively with young anti-globalisation activists – especially around the Genoa demonstrations in 2001 and the European Social Forum in Florence the following year. It has usually won between five and seven per cent of the vote in national elections, reaching its high point in 1996, when it won over three million votes: 8.5 per cent of the total. Following the recent elections, it has 27 Senators and 41 members of the Chamber of Deputies, as well as five MEPs.[15]

The German *Linkspartei* has been the most dramatic success story of the various new left formations, having made a substantial electoral impact before it has even been fully established as a party. At the moment, it remains an alliance between two bodies, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), successor to the ruling party of the GDR; and a recent split from the SPD, called the Electoral Alternative for Work and Justice (WASG). Since German reunification in 1990, the PDS had polled between 2.4 per cent and 5.1 per cent of the national vote but had much greater support in the East, where it had won up to ten per cent and was a junior coalition partner in two state governments. The WASG was established in 2004 by members of the SPD and trade union left, in opposition to the Schröder government's welfare 'reform' measures, 'Agenda 2010' and 'Hartz IV', which included attacks on unemployment benefit, pensions and workers' rights. The WASG was boosted in May 2005 by the defection from the SPD of Oskar Lafontaine, former party chair and finance minister; by the time of the election in September, it had 12,000 members. The *Linkspartei* stood in the election on a platform of progressive tax rises to fund a more generous welfare state. It won eight per cent of the vote (25 per cent in the East and five per cent in the West), securing 54 seats in the *Bundestag* – the first time in the postwar Federal Republic that there has been representation for any party to the left of the SPD, apart from the Greens, who have drifted rightward in recent years. The two sections of the *Linkspartei* are now confronting the process of full merger and deciding how to build on their initial success.[16]

All of these parties have been based on significant sections of the pre-existing organised left: either splits from long-established mass parties or existing parties, in their entirety, serving as the core of a regroupment of broader forces. In this way, such parties have been able to demonstrate that they are a legitimate offshoot of the mass workers' movement, rooted in workplaces and communities and headed by leaders who have proven their mettle in the class struggle. This has allowed them to take with them a significant portion of the membership, organisational resources and electoral support of the parties from which they have origi-

nated, and/or which they have sought to challenge.

By contrast, other new left parties have been formed by self-styled revolutionary groups on the fringes of the mass workers' movement, with their membership largely limited to the combined membership of these organisations and their periphery. Their argument has been that large initial political resources would be unnecessary, because the abandonment by the social democrats of the interests of working people, and any real commitment to social justice, had created a strong current of opinion in the workers' movement and broader society that they could harness. In practice, however, they have usually failed to make a significant impact, in electoral terms or by any other measure of political influence. Of course, some of these parties have had more success than others: the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark, launched by the country's Communist, Maoist and Trotskyist parties, has won parliamentary representation and a membership more than double that of its combined founder organisations. In France, an alliance of two Trotskyist groups, the LCR and *Lutte Ouvriere*, won five seats in the European Parliament in 1999 (losing them, however, at the following election). These, however, are the exceptions, and even these initiatives have fallen a long way short of becoming a significant challenge to social democracy.

Left 'recomposition' in Britain: a brief history

Britain has had more than its fair share of these new left parties over the last decade or so. The first, Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP), might have had the best chance of establishing itself as a viable alternative to New Labour, as it had a genuine base in the trade unions (notably the NUM and RMT) and could credibly present itself as the authentic left of the mainstream labour movement – rather than simply a marginal far left group. Its own leadership, however, systematically destroyed its chances. First, the party was launched at the wrong time: two years before a general election at which a majority of progressive people in Britain were willing to put aside any doubts about New Labour in order to remove the hated Tories. Second, the rationale for its foundation – i.e., the notion that by rewriting Clause 4 of its constitution, Labour had ceased to be a 'socialist party' – was based on the false premise that an issue of party programme would be of significant concern to working people in general, rather than just political activists. Finally, the dictatorial regime established by Scargill drove out huge swathes of the party's original membership and stultified its internal culture, reducing it to an empty shell. No sooner had the SLP's star begun to wane, than along came the next attempt to establish a political challenge to New Labour: the Socialist Alliance. This, however, represented little more than a pooling of resources by Britain's various (and mostly tiny) far left groups, as was reflected by its meagre showing in the 2001 general election. By contrast, its Caledonian cousin, the Scottish Socialist Party, had been built up gradually on the basis of serious interventions in mass struggles – notably the anti Poll Tax campaign and the struggle for a Scottish Parliament – and incorporated some small but not insignificant splinters from the Labour Party: the Scottish Socialist Movement and Scottish Militant Labour. Its electoral performance was correspondingly better than that of its comrades south of the border, especially in the 2003 Scottish parliamentary elections, when it won six seats. Its poor showing in the 2005 general election, however, has cast doubt on its long-term potential as a significant political force.

Respect was launched by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its allies as the successor to the Socialist Alliance, on the basis that the anti-war movement had created a huge popular constituency that cried out for an organised political expression. In some respects, it is an advance on the Socialist Alliance. First, its membership is clearly not confined to the far left. Moreover, in seeking to relate to a mass political movement that has mobilised millions of ordinary people – and by doing so in a language of concrete demands and clear aspirations – it has lifted itself above the subterranean ghetto of the far left. It has, predictably, been attacked in all the usual quarters for eschewing a 'revolutionary' programme and for not consistently placing socialism at the forefront of its propaganda. This criticism seems, however, to be based on the strange belief that building a mass socialist party is a matter of setting sufficiently stringent ideological preconditions for membership – rather than patiently attempting to win people over on the basis of agreement on an initially limited set of issues. The condemnation of Respect for appealing to Muslims *as Muslims* also seems to me a little ill conceived: at a time when their religious and cultural community is being demonised by politicians and the media as a den of terrorists and fundamentalist bigots, Muslims *as such* surely have legitimate interests, if only in defending themselves against persecution. The 'War on Terrorism' has undoubtedly radicalised large numbers of Muslims and socialists should surely be trying to ensure that politically progressive conclusions are drawn – rather than the reactionary obscurantism that is on offer from the genuine fundamentalists. Socialists will not win support from Muslims by preaching to them, however, but only by engaging in a genuine dialogue that acknowledges that lessons can be learnt by the white European left from the cultural and political practices of the embattled minority communities in our midst.

A more fitting criticism of the Respect leadership in this regard is that their attitude to their Muslim supporters is rather opportunistic: they seem principally interested in alliances with Muslim political and community leaders as a means of 'getting out the vote' and are consequently unconcerned about the political credentials of those prepared to work with them. Furthermore, Respect is in danger of becoming an almost exclusively Muslim party at the electoral level: the overwhelming majority of its votes in the 2005 general election and the 2006 local elections came from Muslim communities in east London and, to a lesser extent, the Midlands. Moreover, Respect has made little headway among other ethnic and religious minorities, including non Muslim Asians, despite the fact that these latter are barely less susceptible to racism and Islamophobia than actual Muslims. The party is not, in practice, therefore, a voice for oppressed minorities in general – just one in particular.

The anti-globalisation movement as a new revolutionary subject?

The confinement of Respect's voter base to little more than a section of the Muslim community illustrates the difficulties inherent in trying to build a political party out of a single-issue movement, however important that issue might be. The significance of the campaign to stop the Iraq war – and particularly the unprecedented international demonstrations on February 15, 2003 – is that it united millions of people who did not necessarily agree on very much else. While many of those people will undoubtedly have experienced a dramatic change in their worldview as a consequence of that campaign, probably far more will have largely retained the views on other issues that they held before. The SWP and George Galloway imagined that the war would serve as an epiphany for millions of people in Britain, illustrating the links between imperialism abroad and privatisation, inequality and racism at home. This revelation would galvanise long-term activists who had be-

come increasingly disenchanted, along with countless others who had previously remained quiescent; they would see that the only path to a truly progressive politics involved building a new party that would sweep New Labour away. Notwithstanding a handful of electoral gains, things have evidently not gone quite to plan.

The potential of popular protest movements to serve as a new agency of political change was already being proclaimed by many on the left before the 'War on Terrorism' even began. The stormy confrontation between a broad coalition of demonstrators and the forces of the US state outside the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999 suggested that powerful new forces were moving to challenge the supremacy of international capital, for the first time since the end of the Cold War. The fact that the protestors' demands called into question the supposedly ineluctable logic of capitalist globalisation, and the presence of trade union delegations as well as student-based 'global justice' organisations, seemed particularly promising. Despite similarly tempestuous protests outside further gatherings of the international ruling class – notably in Gothenburg and Genoa – the union presence has, however, never subsequently been as significant as in Seattle. Moreover, the idea that such a disparate and chaotic movement could be forged into a unified, organised political force now seems a little misplaced – despite the efforts of the British SWP and its international co-thinkers to assert their hegemony via the establishment of Globalise Resistance. The 'movement' always comprised a wide political spectrum, from liberal and faith-based groups seeking fairly specific reforms (such as the write-off of Third World Debt) to anarchists and semi-anarchists, like the Wombles or Reclaim the Streets.

To say this is in no way to deny the significance of such a furious upsurge of opposition to the worst excesses of the bourgeoisie, just when it thought that the collapse of the Soviet bloc had made the world safe for capitalism once again. The Marxist left has much to learn from the passion and ingenuity of the 'global justice' and anti-war movements and from the ability of key thinkers like Naomi Klein to convey radical insights to a wide audience. Nevertheless, these forces represent an unwieldy tool with which to attack the rule of capital. Moreover, to assign a leading role in anti-capitalist struggle to a movement with no necessary link to the working class is to necessitate rethinking the Marxist concept of revolutionary agency and no one yet seems to have gone further than suggesting that the anti-globalisation movement and the workers' organisations be somehow welded together. (*Rifondazione* did make some headway in this regard but now seems to have pulled back somewhat from its orientation to the anti globalisation movement and re-focused on more conventional modes of left politics.) There have, in the last couple of years, been specific campaigns which have brought together unions representing super exploited Third World workers and anti-globalisation activists in the imperialist countries – 'No Sweat' being a prominent example. Nevertheless, the appeal of such campaigns to their constituency in the 'First' World has been based largely on individual moral outrage, rather than collective material interests. As long as the labour movement does not organise workers in a truly international way, this will continue to be a stumbling block. Nevertheless, there have been some promising developments for international class unity, such as the recent Latino-led immigrant workers' rights movement in the United States: a national/class uprising by 'Third World' workers right in the heart of the hegemonic imperialist state. It is to be hoped that such phenomena will increasingly bring the global class struggle 'back home' in the coming years. In the meantime, the sectional attitudes and limited political horizons prevalent among large sections of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries remain a problem to be overcome.

Class politics and the united front

The foregoing discussion focuses more heavily on the obstacles to the renewal of the socialist project in the workers' movement than on the opportunities that present themselves. This is a necessary corrective to the tendency elsewhere on the Marxist left to seize on short cuts that can supposedly lift us out of the morass of defeat and disorientation into which we have sunk over the last 20 years. It is particularly necessary to caution against the tendency to launch new parties at every conceivable juncture. The developments that have weakened the social-democratic parties have not left untouched the political resources on which those parties were based. At a time when class consciousness and socialist principles have been under such sustained attack, it is imperative to seek to maintain the maximum unity of class forces – although against this must be set the ongoing demoralisation occasioned by living with a social democratic leadership that is actually attacking its class base. There is, of course, no failsafe formula that can determine when is a suitable moment to risk launching new parties: the circumstances of each country, and each conjuncture, are different. Nevertheless, the examples of parties like *Rifondazione* and *Izquierda Unida* demonstrate the kind of resources that are necessary *at a minimum* to ensure that such initiatives result in viable and effective organisations. Moreover, even these parties have faltered in their pursuit of a coherent socialist agenda.

Most importantly, even the capacity to maintain a significant socialist party does not absolve us from the responsibility to relate, in a comradely manner, to those sections of the working class that remain organised under different leadership, particularly where social-democratic parties retain the lion's share of workers' political allegiance. At a time when the left is more splintered than at any time in its history, the united front approach is essential, not just around specific concrete issues, but as a general approach to political discussion and organisation. The ideal scenario would, of course, be for all socialists and class-conscious workers to be organised in a single party under principled, left wing leadership – but since that is unlikely to happen in the vast majority of countries for the foreseeable future, we need to learn to work more productively across organisational boundaries, rather than taking every opportunity to point out the ideological shortcomings of other groups. Joint working by the left around specific issues is, of course, essential and is already often a reality. But we need to recognise that the socialist programme itself is not the exclusive property of any one party or group and that ideas and proposals can and should be shared and developed by the left collectively. A potentially positive step in this regard has been the recent initiative by the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) to develop a 'Left-Wing Programme' that could be adopted by broad forces within the labour movement,[17] in the same way that the Alternative Economic Strategy became a common programme for much of the British left in the late 1970s and early 1980s (itself echoing the French Socialist/Communist common programme of the early 1970s). We may disagree with the details (and even the name) of the CPB's initiative but the principle, at least, seems sound.

Beyond electoralism

The idea of a common programme for the socialist left cuts across the current obsession with standing candidates for parliaments and local authorities, often on the part of organisations that were once dismissive about the value of electoral politics. It is somewhat ironic that, just

as they have declared the political bankruptcy of the social democratic parties and sought to build a political alternative, the organisations of the revolutionary left have increasingly looked to electoral politics for the expression of that alternative. The ability to stand candidates in opposition to those of the social-democratic parties is treated as definitive evidence of the maturity of a political challenge and its capacity to represent the working class. Of course, elections *are* important for the left, as a means of communicating our political ideas and securing support; moreover, any realistic chance of winning office should not be lightly dismissed. Yet any engagement by socialists in electoral politics should be conducted in open acknowledgement of their limitations and with an awareness of their inadequacy as an expression of class interests. To take part in elections is to accept (even if only temporarily) the liberal-democratic political framework, which denies the very existence of such interests and conceals the existence of extra-governmental concentrations of class power.[18] In addition, voting is ultimately an *individual* activity and, as Perry Anderson observed 40 years ago:

> '. . . the Labour Party will never be able to unify the working class – or indeed any social group – behind it, as long as it tries to do so through the essentially serializing and isolating electoral mechanism. . . . By devoting all its energies to the single moment of the vote, the Labour Party necessarily suffers precisely at the vote – since it has neglected to build a more durable community which alone could create the basis for a solid and habitual victory at the polls.'[19]

What was true of the Labour party, in those far-off days when it still seemed interested in governmental office for some purpose other than the efficient stewardship of capitalism, should be even more apparent today to socialists with less faith in parliamentarism. While election campaigns (at best) provide an opportunity to mobilise large numbers of people on the basis of explicitly political issues, focused on a clear, immediate and (in principle) achievable goal, such an opportunity is likely to be short-lived. Between elections, there is every danger that the energy and commitment mobilised during the campaign will prove unsustainable. In the long run, socialists can only build the movement by pursuing a consciously hegemonic strategy, incorporating a much broader range of interventions, in areas of social life far beyond what is narrowly conceived of as political.'

Clearly, trade union activity is of crucial importance in this. Unions are the most fundamental form of working class organisation and any revival of class politics is virtually inconceivable without their central involvement. In recent years, as social democratic parties have accepted and even implemented the neo-liberal agenda, the better led unions have taken on an explicitly political function. As the operations of the state have been 'slimmed down' and commodified, public sector unions have played a particularly important role in defending jobs, services and the very idea of a public sphere beyond the influence of the market. On issues like water privatisation, which has provoked popular struggles on every continent, unions have begun to share information and link up their strategies on an international basis, leading coalitions of community organisations that have often scored major successes against corporate power. In any serious attempt to reconstruct the socialist movement – whether within or outside existing parties – the active involvement, or at least co-operation, of these unions will be essential.

But however effective the campaigning strategy of the unions, they have limited opportunities to raise the political awareness of the majority of the workforce that in almost all countries remains non-unionised. Union strategies for organising 'greenfield' sectors, such as the call centre industry, are obviously vitally important. An encouraging development in recent years – particularly in North America – has been the growth of 'reciprocal community unionism', whereby unions broaden the scope of their attention from the workplace to the wider community and simultaneously engage the interest and concern of that community with matters of labour process and employment rights.[20] Such initiatives can ultimately play an important role in rehabilitating the very concept of class as a significant social relationship, after several years in which it has been excised from the vocabulary of mainstream political discourse.

The importance of this task should not be underestimated. Few people could travel far beyond their own front door without becoming aware of the massive and growing inequalities that blight even the wealthiest societies, yet the terms in which socialists of all stripes traditionally discussed, and attempted to address, such phenomena must now seem totally alien to younger people, in particular. In Britain, New Labour has deployed the concept of 'social exclusion' to suggest that inequality becomes intolerable only where it reaches the extreme of preventing people from participating in civic life. As Blair's leading academic ideologue, Anthony Giddens, explains: 'Exclusion is not about gradations of inequality, but about mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream.'[21] The determined efforts of the bourgeois political, intellectual and media establishment have reduced such concepts as redistribution *as an end in itself* to quaint archaisms for many people beyond the depleted ranks of the organised left. Socialists therefore have an important (re-)educative function to perform in our political activities: raising awareness of the character and extent of social inequality, condemning it for the social evil that it is and setting out the means by which it might be remedied.[22] The same applies (for example) to the notion of control of one's labour and how this can be achieved by collective action; and the principle of universal access to essential goods and services as an absolute right, regardless of the ability to pay. These ideas are the building blocks of a renewed class politics.

Back to the future

A hundred years ago, the new social-democratic, socialist and labour parties in the advanced capitalist countries believed that history was on their side. The increasing size, in both absolute and relative terms, of the proletariat, and the grudging concession, by the ruling classes of these countries, of a widening of the suffrage, led to confident predictions of the inevitability of majority socialist governments, which would legislate away the capitalist system. Yet, by the time that parties of the left were able to form majority governments for the first time – generally after the Second World War[23] – they had moderated their goals and sought only to ameliorate capitalism, rather than to abolish it altogether. The best the working class could hope for was that its interests would be given equivalent consideration to those of the bourgeoisie and that a harmonious class compromise would be secured. One of the most popular explanations for this turnaround – advanced not only by bourgeois commentators but by Marxists or semi-Marxists like Adam Przeworski – is that the working class never did account for a majority of the electorate and that social democratic parties therefore had to adopt a cross-class orientation, which involved watering down their programme, in order to secure an electoral majority.[24]

This certainly reflects the thinking of these parties' leaderships, the more ideologically minded of which explicitly rebranded themselves from the 1950s as cross-class 'people's parties'. The continuous pursuit of the logic of seeking

compromise between classes that were never equally balanced in power and influence did much to bring about the unravelling of the social-democratic project and hence the disorientation that exists today. Yet this choice was not inevitable: even if the 'traditional' proletariat of manual workers in manufacturing and extractive industries ceased expanding, capitalism generated new layers of white collar proletarians and semi-proletarians, who were equally subject to exploitation, alienation and insecurity. They lacked, however, the same degree of class-consciousness (although this began to change from the late 1960s, with the growth of white-collar unions) and they certainly lacked any automatic political affiliation with socialism. The challenge for the left was to integrate them into a wider and deeper-rooted labour movement, but by this stage the social democrats were more interested in playing the parliamentary game than in building a force capable of revolutionising society.

Today, the rule of neo-liberal capitalism has fragmented and disorientated the working class still further and the task of rebuilding a class-conscious workers' movement is that much harder. The severity of the attacks on the jobs and rights of working people, and on the services they use and provide, is such that the need for a socialist alternative should be comprehensible to all. But to rebuild the movement, we have to start with the bricks that come to hand; political organisation cannot run too far ahead of the consciousness of working people. To re-connect the principles of class politics with people's concrete experiences, we need to make a concerted effort to revive and popularise socialist ideas. The task is likely to be long and drawn out but the supposed alternative, of seeking short cuts by declaring new parties when the resources to sustain them do not exist, is no alternative at all.

NOTES

1. I have addressed the continued relevance of class politics in more general terms in a previous article: 'Class Structure and Class Politics', in *Workers Action* 27 (Oct/Nov 2004), pp.30-37.

2. Even in Cuba, which *has* achieved sustained progress towards socialism, the seizure of power by the working class and peasantry was not accomplished under the leadership of the principal established workers' party, the PSP, but by the 26th of July Movement (M-26-7), a radical nationalist organisation supported by a broad coalition of social forces. Today's Cuban Communist Party was created through the merger of the PSP with the M-26-7.

3. Of these countries, the United States is, of course, exceptional in not having a mass workers' party at all; nevertheless, working class political organisation has as long a history there as in any other advanced capitalist country – longer, in fact, as the world's first labour party was established by Philadelphia artisans in 1828 (a fact cited by Marx and recalled by Mike Davis in 'Why the US Working Class is Different', *New Left Review* 123 [Sept-Oct 1980]).

4. G. Elliott, *Labourism and the English Genius: The Strange Death of Labour England?* (London: Verso, 1993), chapter 1.

5. Both Lenin, in works such as *'Left wing' Communism: an Infantile Disorder*, and later Trotsky argued that it was necessary for communists to participate in the British Labour Party and support the election of Labour candidates, while voicing their criticisms of the party's policies. In so doing, the communists could demonstrate their commitment to the interests of the class before Labour's constituency of class-conscious workers; the inevitable vindication of their criticisms would help to build support for revolutionary socialism. It should be acknowledged that Lenin and Trotsky underestimated the firmness of the hold that would be exerted by social democracy over the majority of politically-conscious workers – strengthened, of course, by the real social gains they would deliver in the period of postwar welfare capitalism.

6. Figures for the USA are given on the same basis as for other countries (i.e., percentage of registered voters) but the low level of voter registration in that country means that percentage of voting age population is a more meaningful indicator of political participation – and this has frequently been lower than 50 per cent.

7. The only Labour measures that met with any resistance from the bourgeoisie were the nationalisation of iron and steel and of road haulage (both re-privatised by the Tories) and its unfulfilled plans to nationalise sugar. There were specific factors in France and Austria: respectively, the punishment of collaborators and the need to prevent German-owned concerns being expropriated by the Soviet Union, by way of reparations; but then, it is unlikely that Labour would have carried out so much nationalisation other than in the immediate post-war context. See D. Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: Fontana, 1997), pp.150-66.

8. See the article, 'Taxing the Rich, 1957-Style' on the US website, *Too Much: a Commentary on Excess and Inequality* (http://www.cipa-apex.org/toomuch/articlenew2006/Feb13a.html).

9. Conversely, while the mass Communist parties have generally been workers' parties in both senses (which is not to endorse their various political strategies), the smaller left parties, while undoubtedly committed to the workers' cause, have rarely had much of a base within the working class.

10. For a summary of the debate among Marxists on the boundaries of the working class, see my article cited in note 1.

11. Labour's two 1974 manifestoes contained the famous promise 'to bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families'. By 1992, Labour was simply promising to 'empower people as citizens and as consumers of public and private services'. All of Labour's election manifestoes up to 2001 are available on the unofficial website, www.labour-party.org.uk.

12. On this, see S. Padgett & W.E. Paterson, *A History of Social Democracy in Postwar Europe* (London: Longman, 1991), chapters 1 & 2.

13. In fact, there seems to be little evidence that he ever used this precise term, although it is broadly consistent with his stated views on the subject.

14. One could argue that they ceased to be bourgeois workers' parties when they formally adopted socialist programmes after the First World War, becoming *pure* workers' parties (albeit reformist ones) but then reverted to being bourgeois workers' parties again in the 1980s/90s when they decisively abandoned their previous socialist aims.

15. This account draws on T. Abse, 'Lessons to be learned from Rifondazione', *Socialist Resistance* (winter 2002), p.20.

16. See P. Firmin, 'New left party in Germany', *Labour Left Briefing* (September 2005).

17. See http://www.communist-party.org.uk/downloads/LeftWingProgramme.pdf.

18. As Perry Anderson once pointed out: 'The whole *modus operandi* of social democratic politics is geared to an illusion: . . . a monocentric democracy in which power is co-extensive with the means of legislation . . . [and] . . . is distributed symmetrically to every adult citizen at regular intervals (elections) . . . then immediately reconstituted into a new, unitary pattern (government).' 'Problems of Socialist Strategy' in P. Anderson & R. Blackburn (eds), *Towards Socialism* (London: Fontana/NLR, 1965), p.235.

19. Ibid, p.256.

20. On this, see J. Wills and M. Simms, 'Building Reciprocal Community Unionism in the UK', *Capital & Class* 82 (spring 2004), pp.59-84; and S. Gindin, 'Notes on Labor at the End of the Century: Starting Over?' in E. Meiksins Wood et al (eds), *Rising from the Ashes? Labor in the Age of 'Global' Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), pp.190-202.

21. A. Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.104.

22. Useful recent material on this subject includes the pamphlet by B. Jackson & P. Segal, *Why Inequality Matters* (London: Catalyst, 2004), available here: http://www.catalystforum.org.uk/pdf/inequality.pdf and, in general, the content of the website *Too Much* (http://www.cipa-apex.org/toomuch/).

23. Majority social democratic governments were first formed in Australia (1929-32) and New Zealand (1935-40), then in Sweden (1945-48), Britain (1945-51) and Norway (1945-61). Other countries did not follow suit until the 1970s (Austria) or 1980s (France, Greece, Spain).

24. A. Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (CUP 1986).

WA

Socialists and the Second World War

These days, most people view the Second World War as a just war. But many strands of the left are descended from groups which opposed it. **Richard Price** explores this contradiction

The watershed of the 20th century

It's likely that last summer's commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War will prove to be the last major event of its kind, given that most veterans are already in their eighties.

Yet interest in the conflict remains unabated. On almost any evening, any week, the terrestrial TV channels carry documentaries, films or dramas about 'the war', while the satellite history channels would struggle to fill their schedules were it not for the endless bombardment of viewers with programmes devoted to its military campaigns, the horrors of Nazism, and biographies of Churchill, Roosevelt, Hitler and Stalin. The war also sustains a vast publishing industry, with big hitters like Anthony Beevor and Max Hastings guaranteed huge sales. Books like Frederick Taylor's recent epic, *Dresden*, continue to provide important revisions of widely accepted views. To many in continental Europe this is a peculiarly British obsession, rooted in imperial nostalgia, that we should get over and join the modern world – although France's preoccupation with commemorating the Resistance and Russia's honouring of its vast sacrifice are scarcely less prominent.

Those who grew up in Britain in the '50s and '60s couldn't avoid being saturated with images of British derring-do, from the 'miracle' of Dunkirk and the exploits of 'the few' in the Battle of Britain to D-Day and the campaigns in North Africa and the Far East. The vast slaughter of the eastern front was barely mentioned, nor was the contribution of servicemen and women from Britain's colonial empire, and it seemed as if Britain – 'standing alone' is the phrase that occurs again and again – won the war almost single-handed.

With the loss of empire, and the obvious decline of Britain as a world power, the war faded from prominence in the '70s and '80s, only to make a spirited comeback in the last decade. It's as if, trawling back through Britain's murky role on the world stage, there is a collective need to find a 'good' war of which we can be justly proud.

But there are powerful reasons why the Second World War continues to appal and enthral generations whose nearest connection may be through elderly parents or grandparents, and they cannot be reduced to flag-waving or lazy programming. To a far greater extent than the First World War, it was a global conflict. The scale of human suffering was immense, with at least 60 million dead – 2.5 per cent of the world's population. Of this figure, 50 million were on the Allied side, including 20 million Soviet military personnel and civilians. Although, in the 1930s, Nazism had seemed to many contemporaries to be just one totalitarian movement among many, hindsight and the terrible crimes of the Holocaust have raised it to the status of absolute evil in most people's moral universe. Finally, there is its pivotal place in the 20th century. More than any other event, it shaped the world we live in.

While some of the Allies' actions have engendered fierce controversy – among them, the devastation of Japan's cities, culminating in the dropping of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the area bombing of German cities, the Hamburg firestorm, the destruction of Dresden, and the failure to bomb the death camps – outside of the far right, few people today seriously question that this was a just war on the part of the Allies.

So secure is this reputation that whenever British prime ministers have gone to war since, they have invariably justified their actions by comparing each new enemy, whether it be Nasser, Galtieri, Milosevic or Saddam Hussein, with Hitler. What ever the spin, for more than half a century, Nazism has been the yardstick by which all forms of brutal dictatorship have been measured.

Attend any anti-fascist event these days and the chances are that speakers will draw comparisons between Nazism and the contemporary far right, and refer approvingly to the struggle to defeat fascism in the Second World War. Yet, amid this apparent consensus, isn't it hugely ironic that most of the influential currents on the left in Britain since the war have their origins in parties and groups that opposed the war? It remains the controversy that dare not speak its name.

The spectrum of anti-war opposition

Where war had been greeted almost universally by patriotic fervour in August 1914, there was little enthusiasm in any of the belligerent countries in September 1939. Pacifism, or at least a deep desire not to become embroiled in the machinations of continental Europe, was widespread in every major party in Britain. 'Never again' was a sentiment not so much of the political fringes as of the mainstream. This reflected not just British insularity, but was the product of the deep imprint left by the slaughter of the First World War.

In 1933, the Oxford Union had famously passed a motion declaring that it would 'under no circumstances fight for its King and country', and in July 1935, Canon Dick Sheppard founded what became known as the Peace Pledge Union at a rally of 7,000 people in the Albert Hall. By the time of his death in October 1937, its membership had

reached 100,000. Between 1939 and 1945 nearly 60,000 people in Britain claimed the right of conscientious objection – four times the number that did between the introduction of conscription in 1916 and the armistice in 1918. But with the future of the world being decided on the battlefield, pacifism could only provide a means for individuals to opt out.

From September 1939 to April 1940 – the 'phoney war' – there was significant anti-war sentiment among all major parties and across much of the left. It was pronounced among the ranks of the Labour Party before the enormity of the threat posed by Nazi Germany became fully apparent. Although only six Labour MPs opposed the war at its outset, 22 signed the manifesto of the Labour Party Peace Aims group in November 1939 that called among other things for a truce and a federal union of Europe. It was also supported by in excess of 70 CLPs and 20 trades councils. Regional conferences of the party in South Wales, the East Midlands, East Anglia and Scotland were marked by strong opposition, and, by March 1940, 90 constituency parties had passed anti-war resolutions and 18 motions had been put down to the party's conference in June.

A powerful wing of the Tory party led by Lord Halifax, that had supported Chamberlain's policy of appeasement throughout the mid- and late 1930s, finally woke up to the inevitability of war in 1939, but still looked for a negotiated settlement, right down to the fateful struggle within the cabinet in the week of May 24–28, 1940. Press baron Lord Beaverbrook opposed the war throughout its 'phoney' period, and in March 1940 made an offer to the Independent Labour Party's MPs, which they turned down, that he would give them the considerable sum of £500 for each by-election the ILP fought. By May he had become Churchill's minister of aircraft production.

Lloyd George, the veteran Liberal who had been prime minister during the First World War, had described Hitler as 'the greatest living German' in 1936. When war broke out, he attacked the folly of intervening on the side of Poland without an alliance with the Soviet Union, and in October 1939 urged parliament to take Hitler's peace overtures seriously.

The war was also opposed by Welsh, Scottish and Irish nationalists. Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party saw the war as an essentially English entanglement, in which the Welsh and Scottish nations had no interest. The IRA, meanwhile, continued the haphazard bombing campaign it had launched in January 1939 into the 'phoney war'. Today the campaign is best remembered for supplying some of the raw material for Brendan Behan's autobiographical *Borstal Boy*. Two IRA volunteers were executed and some 70 Republicans imprisoned as a result of the campaign.

On the far right, the British Union of Fascists, with some 8,700 members in 1939, contested three by-elections in February and March 1940, polling a total of only 1,300 votes. Its leaders continued to agitate against the war until they were imprisoned, albeit in comfortable surroundings, under Regulation 18B in May.

With such a spectrum of opposition from left to right, it is clear that the simplistic image of 'a nation united' against Nazism was far from true. Anti-war candidates, whether they were ILPers, or Scottish or Welsh nationalists, polled respectably, and sometimes very well, in wartime by-elections.

The CPGB: from 'imperialist war' to 'people's war'

Although it was one of the Comintern's smaller national sections, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had an important trade union base, and had won considerable prestige in the struggle against Mosley's Blackshirts. The signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact on August 23, 1939, threw the party into turmoil. On September 2 the party published a manifesto in which it stated: 'We are in support of all necessary measures to secure the victory of democracy over fascism. But fascism will not be defeated by the Chamberlain government.' Ten days later, the pamphlet *How to Win the War* by Harry Pollitt appeared, calling for support for a 'just war'.

'To stand aside from this conflict,' Pollitt wrote, 'to contribute only revolutionary-sounding phrases while the Fascist beasts ride roughshod over Europe, would be a betrayal of everything our forbears have fought to achieve in the course of long years of struggle against capitalism.'

Within a month, however, the CPGB was doing just that. The Central Committee majority for the pro-war line was overturned on Moscow's orders in early October, and the party now characterised the war as an imperialist conflict for profits, colonies and world domination, in which the working class should take neither side. Pollitt was removed as general secretary, and J.R. Campbell demoted from editing the *Daily Worker*.

The line the party pursued during the 'phoney war' was a phoney kind of Leninist defeatism. In keeping with Stalin's benevolent neutrality towards Hitler during the Nazi-Soviet pact, it placed the burden of responsibility for the war on Britain and France, and called for the war to be stopped. In industry it attacked the 'dilution' of skilled labour and energetically tried to build its support in the factories and the shop stewards' movement, while it called for better pay and conditions in the forces.

The Nazi Soviet pact lost the party John Strachey and some of the intellectuals it had recruited during the popular front period, and it subsequently lost control of the influential Left Book Club. But it still managed to increase its membership from 18,000 in July 1939 to 'close to' 20,000 members in the spring of 1940, and the circulation of the *Daily Worker* also picked up. With widespread scepticism about the need for war, and with little happening on the battlefield, the CPGB managed to hold on to most of its working class membership.

The Soviet Union's attack on Finland was condemned by the Labour Party and the TUC, and it further undermined the CPGB's links with the Labour left around *Tribune*. Faithful Stalinist fellow traveller D.N. Pritt MP was expelled from the Labour Party in January 1940, while Harry Pollitt, standing in an east London by election in February, won only six per cent of the poll. Within the CPGB, however, Britain's apparent willingness to divert forces to support Finland while fighting shy of engaging Nazi Germany served to firm up the membership.

When the phoney war was swept away by successive German victories, and Britain was faced with the apparently imminent threat of invasion, there was a partial shift of line. Now the party emphasised that the 'Men of Munich' were still in charge, and that without their replacement Britain would go the same way as France. It called for a government that was representative of working people to come to power, as the only way to prevent a fascist invasion and establish a 'people's peace'. It was also prominent in agitating for adequate air raid protection and deep shelters.

Eric Hobsbawm acknowledges:

> 'At all events, from the summer of 1940 one thing was clear even to Party members as passionate and devoted as myself: in the army nobody would listen to the official Party line against the war. It made increasingly little sense and, from the moment when the Germans swept into the Balkans in the spring of 1941, it was clear to me . . . that it made no sense at all.'

But after making a half step in the right direction, the CPGB reverted to blaming the horrors of war on its imperialist nature, and channelled much of its activity into the People's Convention – a Popular Front-style gathering that drew in liberals, clergymen, artists, pacifists and some prominent intellectuals. The convention, which

met in London on January 12, 1941, and was attended by 2,234 'delegates', who claimed to represent 1.2 million people, adopted a six point programme that called for:

- the defence of the people's living standards;
- the defence of the people's democratic and trade union rights;
- adequate air raid protections, deep bomb-proof shelters, rehousing and relief of victims;
- friendship with the Soviet Union;
- a people's government truly representative of the whole people and able to inspire the confidence of the working people of the whole world;
- a people's peace that gets rid of the causes of war.

Stage-managed though it was, the People's Convention was sufficiently broad and got enough publicity to prompt Labour Home Secretary Herbert Morrison to ban the *Daily Worker* under Regulation 2D nine days later. The ban would remain in place for 18 months.

After the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the party executed another U-turn, and it now declared the war to be a people's anti-fascist war. An energetic campaign was launched for the opening of a second front in the west. Its members in industry became enthusiastic proponents of speed-up and undermined trade union rights through participation in joint production committees. It advocated strike breaking, viciously attacked anti-war sections of the left such as the ILP and the Trotskyists, supported the electoral truce between the coalition parties and even campaigned for Tory candidates. It recruited significantly on the strength of the Red Army's epic defence of Stalingrad – membership rose from 20,000 to 56,000 in the course of 1942 – and, when it was unbanned, the print run of the first issue of the *Daily Worker* was 120,000.

But at the end of the war the CPGB disastrously underestimated the radicalisation among workers and in the armed forces, and on the eve of Labour's historic landslide in July 1945, it called for a continuation of the wartime coalition – Britain's one and only popular front government. Though it was able to ride the tide of pro-Soviet sentiment after 1941, there was widespread suspicion of the party's activities in the trade unions, and many had never forgotten the Nazi-Soviet pact.

After the event, the Stalinists tried to pass the pact off as merely a manoeuvre to buy time before the inevitable German onslaught. There is evidence to suggest that Stalin did indeed regard it as a means to buy time. But the human cost was enormous, from the cynical division of Poland and the repatriation of German anti-fascists to the Gestapo, to the annexation of the Baltic states and the disastrous Winter War against Finland. In the longer term these actions fuelled nationalist hostility towards communism.

It was Stalin's regime that had near fatally undermined the defence of the Soviet Union in the purges of the Red Army in 1937-38, and that had ignored warnings of Hitler's intentions from both Churchill and the famous 'Red Orchestra' spy network. When the invasion finally took place, the Red Army was taken completely by surprise. Stalin's reaction was to retreat to his room for a week in a panic that paralysed Soviet resistance to the German offensive. Decisive though the role of the Red Army ultimately was, Stalinism can take no credit from Stalin's role as a war leader.

The non-Stalinist left

By 1939, the Independent Labour Party was a shadow of its former self, but it still held three Clydeside parliamentary seats and retained other pockets of support. It opposed the war from a semi-pacifist position, arguing that it was being fought between two groups of capitalists, and that workers had nothing to gain from supporting either side. In October the ILP launched the slogan 'Stop the War by Socialism', but it had no practical proposals apart from calling for an international conference of workers from the belligerent countries. Despite polling respectably in the Stretford and East Renfrew by-elections, Jimmy Maxton was forced to admit that after six months of anti-war activity 'we have no success to record'. The ILP's call for an armistice and a peace conference had found only a small echo in the British working class.

Finding itself isolated because of the predominantly defencist mood, the ILP pragmatically dropped its 'Stop the War' slogan and in late 1941, around the time of the Lancaster by-election, it launched its 'Socialist Britain Now' campaign. Almost in spite of itself, the ILP polled between 20 and 30 per cent in three by-elections in 1941, much of its vote probably coming from Labour voters tiring of the electoral truce rather than specifically endorsing its policies. For the remainder of the war, the ILP emphasised its social programme, and argued that the war should be brought to a speedy conclusion by the introduction of socialism.

The Trotskyists, split until 1944 between the official section of the Fourth International, the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), and the Workers International League (WIL), numbered only 400 by the end of the war and substantially fewer when it started. The RSL adopted a line of pure revolutionary defeatism – and as a consequence declined into sectarian irrelevance. The WIL, although it upheld the line of opposition to the war as an imperialist war, favoured the tactical orientation set out in the SWP(US)'s 'proletarian military policy'. This recognised the reality of total war, and did not oppose conscription, but instead called for military training for workers under the control of the trade unions, for rights for workers in the forces and for the election of officers.

This policy, although it had little practical application, enabled the WIL to avoid the worst mistakes of the RSL, although its numerical gains were principally as a result of its energetic agitation around immediate demands, including better trade union rights, higher wages, adequate air raid protection and an end to the electoral truce between the main parties. Other small groups on the left, like the anarchists and the Socialist Party of Great Britain, also opposed the war for traditional reasons.

Democracy and fascism

The heterogeneous anti-war opposition, which has sometimes been interpreted by writers from the Trotskyist tradition as evidence of latent revolutionary internationalism, was not necessarily well thought out. While there were echoes of the Communist Party's call before the invasion of the Soviet Union for a 'People's Peace' across much of the left, it is hard to see that internationalism resided in the admittedly understandable desire to sit out the war in isolation from the terrible events across the Channel.

In spite of all the voices to the contrary, a majority of workers and progressive opinion could see that the consolidation of Nazism across the continent of Europe spelled catastrophe for workers' organisations and democratic rights.

To the extent that most Marxist thinking remained imprisoned within the 'imperialist war' template laid down by Lenin a generation earlier, it was hindered rather than helped in its understanding of events and the implications that flowed from them. In reality, the dynamics of the two world wars were quite different.

Large sections of the European working class had marched to war enthusiastically in August 1914, but learned from bitter experience that it was a war of competing imperialisms in which reactionary war aims on all sides led to senseless mutual slaughter.

In 1939, workers went to war reluctantly, but the conviction among workers of the Allied countries that the defeat of fascism was necessary tended to grow as the war progressed. Nazism represented not just another competing great power, but a force

that combined – at least until the latter stages of the war – technological superiority with unprecedented capitalist barbarism.

To define the war as imperialist was in one sense to state the obvious. Until 1941, the war remained principally a European conflict. It arose from the unresolved contradictions of the Versailles settlement, and the apparent impasse of capitalist depression. With its vast militarisation of economies, populations and entire continents, and the possibility that the colonial possessions of the great powers would be redivided, it could be viewed as a rerun of the First World War, albeit on a more devastating scale.

Clausewitz defined war as the continuation of politics by other means, while Lenin defined politics as concentrated economics. But the tendency to analyse the war as a phenomenon of the 'superstructure' whose nature was determined by what the warring sides had in common in terms of capitalist private property showed the danger of *reducing* politics to economics.

Those who defined the war as imperialist in 1939 drew from their definition the understanding that the working class internationally could make no fundamental distinction between the two sides. This in turn was underpinned by the strong tendency among Marxists in the 1930s to believe that they were living in the final period of moribund capitalism.

Trotsky had often argued against any idea that capitalism would spontaneously collapse, warning that no situation was too desperate for the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, the founding programme of the Fourth International in 1938 was imbued with the analysis that capitalism was in its death agony and that on a world scale bourgeois rule was no longer compatible with parliamentary democracy. From this he drew the conclusion that: 'The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership.'

Yet prior to 1933, Trotsky had been one of the few Marxists to understand the extent of the danger represented by Nazism that distinguished it from other forms of right-wing reaction. In December 1931 he warned German workers in a memorable phrase that if fascism took power, 'it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrible tank'. He was correct to understand that not only was Nazism destined to suppress all working class organisations and democratic rights, but that reliance on the parliamentary system to resist the Nazis was fatal.

Yet there was a potential contradiction in this position. While the ruling class in country after country might dispense with the niceties of democracy in order to preserve its rule, it did not follow that this was predestined to be a universal pattern. Given the incompatibility of fascism and bourgeois democracy, there remained the possibility that, with their backs to the wall, one or more of the capitalist democracies could engage in a fight to the finish with German fascism. Indeed, putting to one side the nature of democracy under the Republican regime and whether Franco was strictly speaking a fascist, something similar to this had just happened in Spain.

The furthest Trotsky was prepared to go in suggesting a significant difference between the two capitalist blocs in a European war is found in his testimony to the Dewey Commission in April 1937. Asked to compare what he would do in the event of war in the various belligerent countries, he answered:

> 'In France or England I would prepare the overthrow of the bourgeois regime . . . I would remain in opposition to the government and would develop systematically this opposition . . . In Germany I would do anything I could to sabotage the war machinery.'

But the nuance is important. If nothing else, the political space to develop 'systematic opposition' only existed because of workers' democratic rights, and herein lay a significant difference with the only avenue for work in Germany – sabotage based on underground conspiracy.

But even when he envisaged that possibility, Trotsky refused to countenance working class support for war on the part of any European capitalist state against Germany. In October 1938, at the time of the Munich crisis, Trotsky was adamantly opposed to the defence of Czechoslovakia:

> 'Even irrespective of its international ties, Czechoslovakia is an absolutely imperialist state. Economically, monopoly capitalism reigns there. Politically, the Czech bourgeoisie rules . . . over several oppressed nationalities. A war, even on the part of isolated Czechoslovakia, would thus have been waged not for national independence but for the preservation and, if possible, the extension of the borders of imperialist exploitation.'

The prospect of defeat

France had signalled its reactionary intentions when it illegalised the Communist Party on September 27, 1939, and imprisoned 35 of its parliamentary deputies shortly afterwards. When Germany launched its blitzkrieg on May 10, 1940, defeatism was rife among France's ruling class and political elite, and the collapse came ignominiously on June 22 after only six weeks of fighting. When the National Assembly met in Vichy on July 10, 569 members voted to suspend parliamentary democracy and hand over full powers to Marshal Pétain. When only 80 deputies led by Léon Blum voted against, it seemed that Trotsky's gloomy prognosis had been confirmed.

Had Germany succeeded in invading Britain in 1940, it would, no doubt, have found no shortage of collaborators among the 'Cliveden set' and the Germanophiles in the British establishment. It is likely that some kind of Vichy style regime would have been established, headed by Gauleiter Mosley or fronted by a more respectable figurehead like the former King Edward VIII.

But, although universal suffrage had only been achieved relatively recently, democracy had put down deep roots in Britain. While parliament was the tried and trusted form of capitalist rule, democracy also rested in part on the working class and its organisations. A Nazi victory would have meant the destruction of its labour and trade union movement, its cooperative societies, and its political liberties. Working class living standards would have been reduced by the occupying power. Jews, gypsies and gays would have been deported to death camps. Socialists and trade unionists would have been sent to concentration camps. So, although Churchill spoke frequently of the war as a war to defend the British Empire – his famous 'finest hour' speech entertained hopes of it lasting 1,000 years – the working class had tangible reasons of its own to resist military defeat.

After 1941, the war was increasingly rebranded as a 'people's war', reflecting the entry into the war of the United States and the Soviet Union – neither of which had any strategic interest in preserving the European colonial empires – and the importance of keeping the working class on board. The gap between the rhetoric of 'people's war' and the grim working and living conditions of many workers served to fuel the debate on post-war reconstruction.

The support that anti-war agitation in Britain did pick up among workers was fed by a number of discontents – shortages of food and housing, inadequate air raid protection, compulsory direction of labour, working weeks of up to 70 hours, draconian legislation, war profiteering and prices outpacing wages among them. Above all, there was simmering resentment at the inequality of sacrifice on the part of the better off, with their ready access to the black market and exemption from the hardest jobs. And it was working class areas in industrial cities that bore the brunt of the bombing.

Add to this a healthy distrust of the Tories, whether it was the discredited Cham-

berlain or the maverick Churchill, whose anti appeasement rhetoric was overlaid by bitter memories of his role in the General Strike, his admiration for Mussolini, his strident campaign against Indian self-government, and his bellicose anti-communism.

Between April and June 1940, the European situation was transformed. Germany conquered Denmark, Norway and the Low Countries, and the impending collapse of France led to the 'miracle' – in fact, the near-disaster of Dunkirk. A Tory rebellion removed Neville Chamberlain and reluctantly brought Churchill to power on May 10. The Labour leaders, who had made it clear that they would not accept office under Chamberlain, now joined a coalition with the Churchill wing of the Tories. The interests of that section of the ruling class that was determined to fight Germany to the finish – for its own motives – temporarily intersected with the determination of the working class - or at least a majority of it – to fight to defend its very existence.

Alexander Sloan was a Scottish miners' leader and the Labour MP for South Ayrshire, and had signed the Labour Peace Aims manifesto. He underlined this point when he seconded a motion to the miners' conference on July 1 calling for the removal of everyone associated with Chamberlain, and for the establishment of a Labour government:

> 'The working classes are fighting because they believe they are fighting for freedom. The possessing classes are fighting for their own interests. Ten per cent of the population possesses 90 per cent of the wealth. France was defeated because 200 families of France possess nearly the whole of the country.'

During the critical days in May, many observers reported a wave of defeatism among the upper echelons of society. Yet Mass-Observation's reports tended to find workers more stoical and determined. Had Britain fallen, the likelihood is that resistance whenever it arose would have been predominantly – although not exclusively - plebeian in character.

The anti-war left was on the horns of a dilemma. Where Marx and Engels had approached the wars and potential conflicts of the 19th century from the standpoint of what outcome was most favourable for the development of the working class internationally, the Bolshevik tradition argued that the advent of the imperialist epoch had rendered this approach obsolete. The Communist International opposed national defence in the major capitalist powers, and refused to take sides in any conflict between the major capitalist powers.

But if it was legitimate to fight in the event of a German invasion, and participate in resistance movements if it was successful, why was it not permissible to fight to prevent one happening? Maxton was challenged along these lines in a parliamentary debate in December 1940 and could not give a convincing answer.

What, for instance, would have been the consequence of the ILP's call for an armistice? Churchill warned Roosevelt on May 21, 1940, that if he were replaced as a result of military reverses – presumably by Halifax's supporters – 'the sole remaining bargaining counter with Germany would be the fleet'. Hitler would probably have allowed Britain, like Vichy France, to keep its colonial empire, in return for surrendering its fleet and becoming what Churchill described as a 'vassal state'.

You didn't need to have any illusions in the democratic nature of the Royal Navy to understand the dire consequences. Having acquired the most powerful navy in the world, Hitler's hold over the European continent would have been enormously strengthened and large quantities of men and military hardware would have been released to strengthen the drive to the east against the Soviet Union.

Without a single European ally, the United States might well have stayed out of the European conflict, and an alliance with the Soviet Union would have been much less likely, whether or not war with Japan had still taken place. Fascism might have held sway for decades before it decayed under the weight of its own contradictions. During that time, it would almost certainly have acquired nuclear weapons, and at the time of writing there is a lively academic debate as to how close Nazi Germany got to achieving this by the end of the war.

Trotskyism and 'defeatism'

The weakness of the anti-war left in Britain was that it tended to pose 'socialism' in one form or another as the answer to the threat of fascist invasion. Even Trotsky and his followers – by far the most perceptive representatives of the Marxist left remained straitjacketed within a dogmatic perspective.

Testifying before the Dewey Commission, Trotsky had stated: 'The situation is such: either capitalism will abolish human culture through fascism, or the working class will win power and create a new basis for the new civilisation. *This is the only possibility.*' [my emphasis, RP]

The main resolution of the Emergency Conference of the Fourth International held in May 1940 looked into the abyss. It acknowledged that the defeat of Britain and France would immeasurably strengthen Germany, and that this would dramatically shift the relationship of forces against the United States. But from this stark perspective, it drew the most abstract conclusions – that the duty of revolutionaries was to oppose US intervention; that intervention was nevertheless almost inevitable, and that it could only be prevented by revolution.

The WIL wrestled with the problem of how to remain true to Lenin's perspective – witness the tortuous reasoning of the following passage from its thesis *War and the Fourth International*:

> 'Lenin's formula: "defeat is the lesser evil" means not that defeat of one's own country is the lesser evil as compared with the defeat of the enemy country; but that a military defeat resulting from the growth of the revolutionary movement is infinitely more beneficial to the proletariat and to the whole people than military victory assured by "civil peace". Karl Liebknecht gave an unsurpassed formula of proletarian policy in time of war: "The chief enemy of the people is in its own country." '

Revolutionary defeatism hedged round by this many caveats ceased to make much sense except as a means of defending the honour of the revolutionaries. In any case, there was no significant revolutionary movement in Britain in 1940, nor was there in any other European country for that matter. And there was an even bigger problem – the most dangerous enemy of the British working class was manifestly not Churchill the reactionary, but Hitler the Nazi.

Another definition of revolutionary defeatism was made by those who argued that it simply meant pursuing the class struggle in wartime as in peacetime, without regard to the consequences for the military position of your 'own' armed forces. But a strike wave that, for instance, crippled the war industries at the time of the Battle of Britain or in the run-up to D-Day would unavoidably have had the effect of assisting the other side – something few trade unionists would have been prepared to support.

In June 1940, under the immediate threat of invasion, the WIL's paper *Youth for Socialism* raised the slogan 'Arm the workers'. While this could not have any more than propaganda significance given the weakness of the left, at least it showed that the WIL had a better handle on reality than the RSL, the official section of the Fourth International, which saw this as incipient chauvinism.

But even where the WIL could get a hearing for its politics there were problems, as one participant recalled:

> 'The working class *was* opposed to Hitler and they were worried about the very real possibility of a German invasion, particularly after the collapse of France. They saw no other way to de-

feat fascism than to pursue the war . . . the workers who thoughtfully considered the programme of revolutionary defeatism did not see how this was possible.'

The RSL's abstract revolutionary purity was a strange mixture of ultra-leftism and semi pacifism. At its conference at Easter 1939 it adopted a policy condemning air raid precautions as 'imperialist war preparations', calling on workers to 'expose their social chauvinist character'. During the summer, it called for conscription to be smashed and supported the Socialist Anti-War Front. During the phoney war it echoed the Communist Party and ILP's calls to stop the war. And polemicising against the WIL, the RSL charged that:

'. . . their slogan, nowhere explicitly stated in the document it is true, but implicit in it and their other propaganda is "turn the imperialist war into a workers' anti-fascist war". In other words their main attack is directed not against the British bourgeoisie, but its rivals, the fascist regimes.'

More abstract still was the third-camp position adopted by Max Shachtman's Workers Party of the United States. Like the RSL it denounced the SWP's 'proletarian military policy' as capitulating to social chauvinism, with the added twist that it no longer defended the Soviet Union against imperialist attack. The cover of Shachtman's *New International* for April 1940, under the headline 'For the Third Camp', carried a cartoon of a large-scale worker with a rifle strapped to his back and a placard bearing the words 'Join the army of international socialism'. To one side are two small, moustachioed figures next to a Berlin-Moscow axis placard, while on the other are two equally small figures in top hats representing the Paris-London axis. The most charitable thing you can say is that the third camp with its proletarian legions must have been easier to imagine from the safety of New York than it was in Europe.

James P. Cannon, the SWP (US) leader prosecuted in November 1941 for his party's anti war stance, did not attempt in his trial defence to disguise the fact that Nazism was the main enemy, but argued that the Allies could not defeat it:

'We consider Hitler and Hitlerism the greatest enemy of mankind. We want to wipe it off the face of the earth. The reason we do not support a declaration of war by American arms is because we do not believe the American capitalists can defeat Hitler and fascism. We think Hitlerism can be destroyed only by way of conducting a war under the leadership of the workers.'

The Trotskyist movement, despite its small numbers, strove to uphold the struggle for international socialism. Its members experienced repression at the hands of fascists, Stalinists and democratic imperialists, and it suffered out of proportion to its size. All the more tragic therefore that it repeatedly exhibited dogmatic and ultra-left traits.

Caught between its depiction of fascism as pre-eminently dangerous to the working class on the one hand, and its emphasis on what fascist regimes had in common with other forms of bourgeois rule on the other, disputes raged in almost every European section of the Trotskyist movement over its tactics in wartime. These included:

- whether it was permissible to participate in resistance movements;
- whether revolutionary defeatism should be applied towards the Allied armies after the liberation;
- whether the restoration of bourgeois democracy in western Europe was possible;
- whether the Allied armies would install Bonapartist regimes.

So committed was the FI to Trotsky's perspective that the war would end in revolutionary upheaval that it rejected the kinds of partial and democratic demands that might have gained it a wider audience in the heady atmosphere of 1943-5 in favour of maximalist propaganda for the overthrow of capitalism as an immediate object.

Greater and lesser evils

While the British and American Trotskyists were preoccupied with the need to maintain a rather fictional class independence from their own governments, George Orwell – never one to dwell unduly on socialist theory – depicted the consequences of *not* defeating the Nazis with considerable accuracy in *The Lion and the Unicorn*:

'If Hitler wins this war he will consolidate his rule over Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and if his armies have not been too greatly exhausted beforehand, he will wrench vast territories from Soviet Russia. He will set up a graded caste-society in which the German *Herrenvolk* ("master race" or "aristocratic race") will rule over Slavs and other lesser peoples whose job it will be to produce low-priced agricultural products. He will reduce the coloured peoples once and for all to outright slavery. The real quarrel of the Fascist powers with British imperialism is that they know that it is disintegrating. Another twenty years along the present line of development, and India will be a peasant republic linked with England only by voluntary alliance. The "semi apes" of whom Hitler speaks with such loathing will be flying aeroplanes and manufacturing machine-guns. The Fascist dream of a slave empire will be at an end. On the other hand, if we are defeated we simply hand over our own victims to new masters who come fresh to the job and have not developed any scruples.'

Britain's entry into the war was not prompted by a desire to defend democracy *per se*. It was to defend its national and global interests. Having sat back while Hitler dismembered democratic Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain intervened on the side of dictatorial Poland. But the implications of the war went much further than the blinkered perceptions of Britain's rulers. Even then, the choice in Britain was not between socialist revolution and imperialism. The task, as Orwell's friend Cecil Day Lewis put it, was 'to defend the bad from the worse'.

The debate over whether and under what conditions socialists should support one bourgeois state or representative against another has resurfaced regularly ever since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 – think of the controversies surrounding the Kerry/Bush and Chirac/Le Pen presidential contests in recent years. Critics of what has become known as 'lesser evilism' argue that opting for the lesser evil inevitably strengthens it and correspondingly weakens the struggle for independent class politics.

The temptation for much of the left has been to try to deal with complex situations by retreating into dogma and fetishising programmatic demands ahead of making a concrete analysis of concrete conditions.

In any conflict between bourgeois forces, there are a number of calculations that cannot be answered *a priori*. These include:

- what is the scale of threat of the greater evil?
- what are the likely consequences of the victory of the lesser evil?
- to what extent can the workers' movement intervene as an independent force?

Those who tried to make a Marxist case for opposition to the war invariably failed adequately to answer one or more of these questions.

Of course, the position outlined above will not seem satisfactory to those on the left who want their politics pre-packaged in Aristotelian categories. But while wars between imperialist countries and oppressed countries carry a much clearer set of principles, clashes either between rival bourgeois forces within a single imperialist country or between rival imperialist countries are invariably more complex and need consideration on a case-by-case basis.

If it is possible to formulate a 'rule' it is that the lesser evil is always preferable, except in conditions where the workers' movement can intervene as a third force in its own right, capable of altering the bal-

ance of forces decisively in its own interests, or there is a realistic possibility of it being able to do so before the greater evil inflicts a decisive defeat upon it.

In the First World War, Lenin had been unequivocal that: 'A revolutionary class cannot but wish for the defeat of its government in a reactionary war, and cannot fail to see that the latter's military reverses must facilitate its overthrow.' Any attempt to apply this kind of rigid 'defeatism' in countries attacked by the Nazis failed to address workers' legitimate fears of defeat at the hands of fascism. Even with the modified stance adopted by the SWP and the WIL, workers still thought that opposition to the war meant at the very least a degree of indifference to its outcome. Workers may have longed for the war to be over, they may have mutinied to get out of the forces as soon as they could when the war ended, but after 1940 they overwhelmingly wanted to win it.

The consequences of war

In the First World War, military defeat for Russia, Germany and Austria was followed by revolutionary upheaval, while victory in Britain and France tended to strengthen reaction. Those who advocated a 'revolutionary defeatist' policy in the Second World War assumed something similar would occur. But the results of the war didn't fit any simple pattern.

In defeated Germany, the working class, atomised under Hitler, decimated by war and divided by the occupying powers, was unable to regain its pre-Nazi militancy, and the Social Democrats became the undisputed leaders of the labour movement.

In Japan, the traumatic experience of defeat, together with the opportunities for trade union organisation under the American occupation, fuelled the rise of working class militancy from 1946 onwards, reaching a high point in January 1947, when MacArthur banned a threatened general strike. However, the combination of anti-communist purges and US-supported economic take-off after 1950 decisively ended this radical phase.

In victorious Britain, working class militancy, while far from revolutionary, was sufficient to evict Churchill from Downing Street and, against most expectations, elect the most radical Labour government in history at the 1945 general election.

But the end of the war saw Britain facing what Keynes called a 'financial Dunkirk'. Far from solidifying Britain's colonial empire, the war fatally undermined it. Within two years, Britain was forced to concede Indian independence, and its weak post-war economic position encouraged the development of independence movements throughout its African and Asian possessions.

France's empire was similarly weakened. On VE Day in Sétif in Algeria, a nationalist demonstration erupted in violence, and in the subsequent repression by French forces, aided and abetted by vigilantes and supported by the Algerian Communist Party, an estimated 6,000 Algerians were butchered. It would take an independence struggle lasting until 1962 to achieve independence, but the writing was on the wall.

The seeds of France's humiliating defeat in Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 were simultaneously being sown. In March 1945, Japan finally dispensed with the services of the Vichy colonial administration, and five months later the Viet Minh took power in the wake of the Japanese surrender. In spite of all the obstacles and brutal repression that lay in the way of decolonisation, most of the colonies accumulated by the European powers over the previous four centuries were independent within 20 years.

Of course, the victory of the Allies was far from being an unmitigated victory, even for the European working class. The brutality of the Red Army's advance across Eastern Europe, vividly documented in Anthony Beevor's *Berlin 1945*, led directly to the installation of pro-Moscow Stalinist regimes, which, while they uprooted capitalism, in the longer term served to discredit socialism and communism. The workers' movements of Eastern Europe were bureaucratically strangled by Stalinism, and would not re-emerge for another 45 years, by which time capitalist restoration had become a fact.

Even on the western front, the experience of liberation could be a bitter one. Robert Lilly, in his recent book *Taken by Force*, suggests that American and British troops committed a minimum of 10,000 rapes after the liberation. Hunger, shortages and economic dislocation haunted much of Europe for years.

For those European Jews who survived the Holocaust, liberation often brought only the most meagre benefits. Eva Kolinsky, in *After the Holocaust: Jewish Survivors in Germany After 1945*, has documented the fate of those who escaped the death camps only to be humiliatingly herded into displaced persons' camps for years. This propelled most of them into the arms of Zionism and emigration to the nascent state of Israel, built upon the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their homeland. Palestinians became the victims of the victims.

The real victor among the western Allies was the United States. It emerged from pre war depression and isolationism to a global military and economic reach unprecedented in human history. The dollar displaced the pound as the world currency, and, as Britain's empire began to crumble, the United States took over most of its spheres of influence. Britain found itself reduced to the rank of a second-rate power, both militarily and economically.

Those who attempt to justify the policy of revolutionary defeatism can argue that it was not possible to predict in advance that 1943-45 would have far fewer revolutionary opportunities than 1917-19. But neither was the enormous impulse to the fortunes of US imperialism a foregone conclusion.

But if we accept that the war had the by-product of greatly strengthening the United States, does this lend strength to the anti-war case? I think it is better to see it as an unavoidable overhead. None of US imperialism's many crimes over the past six decades compares to the industrialised killing that the Nazis committed. Nor has it been responsible for devastation on the scale of 1939-45. For all the horrors that the war entailed, there was no realistic course of action to defeat Nazism other than through an Allied military victory. There was no prospect of Nazism abdicating, and there was no force within Germany capable of overthrowing the Nazis and ending the war.

To argue that this perspective left no possibility for social revolution simply misunderstands the sequence of events. Pre-revolutionary situations arose in Italy in 1943 and in France in 1944 as a result of successful Allied invasions and the collapse of the occupying power, with the result that armed resistance movements, largely under communist leadership, filled the vacuum during the chaotic transition.

Even if the Stalinists succeeded in dampening down the very radical mood in both countries, it doesn't alter the fact that revolutionary opportunities were far more likely to develop out of the defeat of fascism than they ever were out of either a stalemate or from fascist victories.

Defeating fascism and defending workers

So was it possible for socialists in Britain both to support the defeat of Nazi Germany and advance the struggle for socialism? Angus Calder – probably the best chronicler of the home front – argues that in 1940-41: 'Had the CP supported the war and attacked the government, it might indeed have snatched the leadership of large sections of the Labour movement from Attlee and Morrison.'

The potential for a radical critique of the wartime coalition was shown in the brief history of Common Wealth, the party founded in July 1942 out of a merger between J.B. Priestley's 1941 Committee and Sir Richard Acland's Forward March

group. Formed at the time of military reverses in North Africa, it called for socialist measures to be introduced to win the war and opposed the electoral truce between the governmental parties.

Common Wealth's programme called for:
- the common ownership of major industries and the land;
- industrial democracy;
- the immediate implementation of the Beveridge report;
- an end to secret diplomacy;
- electoral reform;
- Scottish and Welsh devolution.

Although its membership never grew beyond 15,000, it had some spectacular successes in wartime by elections, nearly winning the safe Tory seat of North Midlothian, winning two rural seats from the Tories in Cheshire and the Yorkshire dales, supporting an independent socialist candidate who won in West Derbyshire, and, just before the end of the war, overturning a huge Tory majority to take Chelmsford.

Common Wealth enjoyed significant support in the armed forces, particularly among radicalised young officers, and it was estimated that a fifth of its membership was in uniform. In the elections for the 'Cairo soldiers' parliament' in February 1944, it polled 24 per cent of the vote and applied to become the official 'opposition'. In March 1944, the newly-elected Common Wealth MP for Skipton, Hugh Lawson, tried to amend the Army Act by removing the political restrictions on serving members of the armed forces.

But by the time of the 1945 general election, with the wartime truce over, Common Wealth's time had been and gone. It stood in 23 seats, losing deposits in the 16 contests where it faced Labour opposition and only holding on to Chelmsford. Most of its members who remained active in politics then joined the Labour Party.

For all that its membership was largely middle class and its 'socialism' was a form of radical liberalism, Common Wealth's vision of a new classless society at the end of the war struck a real chord, and was symptomatic of a growing radicalisation that wanted to win the war on the basis of radical social policies, and win the peace that followed.

Churchill's most consistent wartime critic was Aneurin Bevan, and his record illustrates the possibility of combining support for the war with defence of workers' rights in a way that was, in contrast to Common Wealth, rooted in the Labour movement.

Bevan had been expelled from the Labour Party in March 1939 for supporting Sir Stafford Cripps's petition calling for the formation of a popular front. When war came six months later, Bevan and Cripps called in *Tribune* for a struggle on two fronts – against the Nazis and against Britain's capitalist government. It was the duty of socialists, they argued, to assist anti-fascist forces, to demand a change of government, and to prevent the war from degenerating into 'a simple struggle between rival imperialisms'.

Bevan, who represented the Welsh mining constituency of Ebbw Vale, was no respecter of reputations and at the height of Churchill's popularity in August 1940, he warned against 'idolatry' and 'the abandonment of critical judgement' towards the prime minister. In January 1941, Bevan led a group of 15 Labour MPs in opposing the banning of the *Daily Worker* under Defence Regulation 2D. In the summer of 1944, he led the opposition to Regulation 1AA, under which unofficial strikes could be punished by heavy fines or imprisonment, and rallied to the defence of Trotskyists prosecuted under the Trades Disputes Act for furthering a strike by Tyneside apprentices. In December 1944, together with Sir Richard Acland, he forced a bitter debate in the House of Commons on the suppression by British troops of the Communist-led resistance in Greece. Bevan repeatedly intervened throughout the war to defend trade union rights, on occasion criticising the trade union leaders for failing to defend their members, and called for the nationalisation of the mines. His wartime record made him the natural leader of the Labour left in the post-war years. Any suggestion that Bevan's support for the war tied him to the Churchill wing of the ruling class would have been greeted with some amusement in Westminster.

In their different ways, both Common Wealth and Bevan illustrated the openings that existed for those on the left who were prepared to support the war but oppose the government on key class issues. A correct policy on the part of Marxists, directed first and foremost at the ranks of the Labour Party, the trade unions and the armed forces, and fought for within all of them, would have held the greatest opportunities, but there were too few critical socialists who were adequately positioned in both.

It was entirely possible to oppose many aspects of the government's emergency legislation and dictatorial powers over labour, and yet support winning the war. It was also possible to take up trade union demands for higher wages and the nationalisation of key industries such as the mines by tapping into the widespread public feeling for 'equality of sacrifice' and a 'conscription of wealth'.

The question of Britain's imperial role could be addressed by demanding independence for the colonies – a demand given added weight because of the participation of many colonial forces in the war. Despite the patriotic atmosphere, it was nevertheless possible to get a hearing for opposition to war guilt being visited on entire nations after the war.

Although any call for Labour to break with Churchill in 1940 when the spirit of national unity was at its peak was seen as simply divisive, by 1944 the situation had changed, with the trade unions and the army swinging to the left. Even so, a break-up of the coalition never looked likely at governmental level before the summer of 1945. But there was considerable support for an end to the electoral truce on the ground, and the discontent it generated found its way into the electoral process. At successive by-elections, all sorts of candidates to the left of Labour received significant votes.

A correct policy would have focussed that discontent within the Labour Party itself. As the war progressed, growing trade union militancy was accompanied by a wide-ranging national debate on the kind of society that would be reconstructed after the war. Armed with a programme that combined the defence and improvement of working class living standards and conditions with demands for steeper taxation of the rich, immediate introduction of the welfare state, and for an internationalist approach to the post-war world and colonial freedom, the left could have been in a much better situation to take advantage of the Labour landslide in 1945.

As it was, several tens of thousands of socialists were outside the main arena, spread between the Communist Party, the ILP, Common Wealth, the Trotskyists, the anarchists and a few other sects. The result was that the Labour left was too weak, lacking both a strong trade union base and any real intellectual rigour. Within a few years, Attlee had marginalised it. The Labour left wouldn't revive until Bevan's resignation from the government in 1951.

The war and the colonial world

So far this article has mainly been concerned with looking at the attitude of socialists within the British labour movement towards the war with Germany. But, as Ernest Mandel pointed out, there were five distinct and relatively autonomous elements to the war on a global scale:
- an inter-imperialist conflict between Britain, France and the United States on one hand and Germany, Italy and Japan on the other;
- a war of self-defence by China against Japan;
- a war of national defence by the Soviet Union against Germany;
- a series of national liberation struggles

of oppressed colonial peoples against British, French and Japanese imperialism;
- a series of resistance struggles against Nazi occupation.

Many colonial countries were fought over by rival imperial powers and 'native' troops were pressed into action. The duty of socialists in the imperialist countries was clear enough - to support the independence struggles of those oppressed by their own ruling classes – although this was shamefully abandoned after 1941 by the Communist parties, who urged the cessation of independence struggles pending an Allied victory.

But the situation for socialists and anti-imperialists in the colonial countries was fundamentally different to that in Britain. The decision many independence movements faced was whether to take advantage of their imperial masters' weakness, or whether in doing so they would strengthen an even worse oppressor in the shape of one or other of the Axis powers.

This dilemma was posed especially acutely in the Indian subcontinent and in all the countries affected by Japanese expansion. Japan was itself an oppressive imperialist power. Its subjugation first of Korea, and then of large areas of China, was conducted with great brutality. The war against China cost perhaps 15 million Chinese lives, with the murder of 300,000 people during the Rape of Nanking in December 1937 probably the largest single civilian massacre in human history. Terrible atrocities were carried out by the infamous chemical warfare Unit 731 in Manchuria.

The position was complicated by American support for Chiang Kai-shek after Pearl Harbour, and in the new situation the Chinese Trotskyist movement split, with one wing considering – mistakenly in my view – that China's war of resistance had now become a sub-plot of the inter-imperialist war and could no longer be supported.

On the other hand, Japan played an anti-colonialist card of its own, setting up the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, offering support to countries oppressed by western imperialism and, in several cases, arming anti-imperialist movements. As the war in the Pacific intensified, Japan redefined its relationship with some of the countries it occupied, and towards the end of the war put forward a plan for independence of the former Dutch East Indies, albeit under Japanese tutelage. During this period of Japanese occupation, Sukarno became the unchallenged leader of Indonesian nationalism.

In the Philippines, which had been a US colony for four decades, the Japanese occupation was more brutal and the situation was more complex, with every shade of opinion, from the Huk guerrilla fighters to active collaborators and many more ambiguous shades in between. Significantly for the future politics of the country, both the Marcos and Aquino families belonged to these grey areas. Despite Japan setting up a nominally independent republic in October 1943, the majority of Filipinos wanted the Americans back, not out of loyalty, but as a means towards genuine independence.

The war sounded the death knell of British rule in India. Britain had unilaterally entered India into the war without consulting the Indian people. The Indian National Congress leadership attempted to trade support for the war in return for independence but was rebuffed. In July 1942, Congress passed a resolution calling for complete independence and launched the Quit India campaign, which won huge support and transcended the passive resistance tactics advocated by Gandhi, although it was opposed by the Muslim League and the Communist Party. Strikes, demonstrations and in some places a semi-insurrectionary movement developed. The authorities responded by arresting over 100,000 people and imprisoning the main Congress leaders. Although order was restored by early 1944, British rule had been fatally undermined.

Meanwhile, the radical Bengali nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose had formed the Indian National Army with German and Japanese support. The INA fought in Assam, Bengal and Burma as Japan advanced to the borders of British India, but lost thousands of men through disease and inadequate equipment.

To this day Bose remains a controversial figure. But while it is possible to criticise Bose for tactical and political mistakes, it is hard to criticise him for seeking Axis support on moral grounds. After all, the British authorities had presided over the terrible Bengal Famine of 1942-43, in which over three million people died through a combination of agricultural pests, the diversion of food supplies to the British army, inflation, and bureaucratic indifference and incompetence.

The war produced a large number of such conflicted figures, caught to some degree or another between rival imperialisms. The Grand Mufti Amin al-Husseini – a distant relative of Yasser Arafat – had led the 1936-39 Palestinian revolt against British rule. He fully embraced the Axis cause and, having earlier met Mussolini, made his way to Berlin in 1941, where he was warmly received by Hitler. For the rest of the war he remained on intimate terms with leading Nazis, including Himmler and Eichmann, and helped raise a Bosnian Muslim unit of the Waffen SS.

Bizarrely, the ultra-Zionist Stern Gang was simultaneously exploring the possibility of an alliance with Nazi Germany. In a document dated January 11, 1941, Stern proposed that common interests lay between the 'New Order in Europe' and the 'true national aspirations of the Jewish people' in creating a Jewish state, and offered to enter the war on Germany's side. Although nothing came of the overture, it shows the danger of orienting oneself on the basis of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'.

In July 1940, the left-wing Irish republican Frank Ryan, who had led the Irish contingent of the International Brigades, was spirited out of a Francoist prison by Abwehr agents, who thought he might prove useful. There is no evidence that Ryan was remotely sympathetic to Nazism, yet he accepted German assistance to get to Ireland by U-boat, although the mission had to be aborted. He spent the remainder of the war in Berlin, where he died in 1944. For Ryan, the cooperation was simply the latest instalment of the old republican motto, 'England's adversity, Ireland's opportunity'.

The principled position for socialists was to defend the right of colonial peoples to seek military assistance from the enemies of the western imperialist powers. That being said, it did not necessarily follow that it was advisable or desirable to seek such support.

To what extent, then, could the potentially conflicting interests of the European working class to defeat fascism and of the colonial peoples for liberation from imperialism be harmonised? From the argument advanced above, it will be clear that neither Leninist 'revolutionary defeatism' nor the 'world front against fascism' proposed by the Communist parties after 1941 sufficed. If anything, both demonstrated the danger of global schema that failed adequately to distinguish between the different though simultaneous forms of struggle.

The bottom line for socialists in the imperialist countries was that they had a duty to champion the cause of colonial independence. Socialists in the colonial countries, while they could not afford to ignore the war being waged in Europe, had to utilise the opportunities afforded by inter-imperialist conflict but avoid being turned into the pawns of one side or the other. **WA**

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