

Join the anti-war demo on 19 March pages 3 & 10

Bring the troops home

19.3

Demonstrate Saturday 19 March central London 1pm

The great pensions robbery pages 8 & 9



Venezuela: Chavez turns left page 11



CANCEL THE DEBT

The head of the Royal Bank of Scotland has a bonus of £4,000 a day



Fred is looking forward to the end of the month. He is expecting a bonus in his pay packet. His bonus payment this year is £1.5 million. That will give him an extra £4,000 to spend every day of the year.

Perhaps Fred will celebrate his bonus payment with a drop of champagne at Claridge's. After all it only costs £44 a glass.

Sir Fred Goodwin is the Chief Executive of the Royal Bank of Scotland, which has just announced a £7 billion profit, part of £30 billion profits expected to be made by high street banks this year.

These record profits follow on from those declared by oil companies last month: Shell made £9.3 billion, BP £8.7 billion and the US based Exxon Mobil £13 billion. This year Exxon Mobil became the world's most valuable company, increasing its share price by 40 per cent. The company is now worth £380 billion. That's more than the gross domestic product of Spain last year.

Fred Smith goes to a school in Camden, just up the road from Claridge's. And while Fred Goodwin enjoys his £44 glass of champagne, Fred Smith is eating his school dinner. A school dinner for children in London costs just 37p. Of course for that amount of money you can't expect much nutrition, let alone vitamins - just reconstituted meat bunged in a burger.

Still, perhaps young Fred should be grateful. After all, a fifth of the world's population live

on less than 50p a day. If Fred lived in Africa he would be lucky to be alive. Ten million children die unnecessarily every year. Of the 20 countries with the highest infant mortality rate, 19 are in Africa. Life expectancy has fallen in 34 countries over the past 15 years.

And if Fred was unfortunate enough to live in one of the 70 poorest countries in the world he would have to shoulder his part in the \$80 billion those countries owe in debt. Of course living on 50p a day, it might take some time to pay it off. But don't worry. The rich countries give \$65 billion dollars a year in aid, which leaves the 70 poorest countries in the world still trying to find an extra £15 billion.

What the jet-setting finance ministers will not be stressing at the press conferences, where they tell everyone how generous they are, is that they extract a heavy price for this "aid": the wholesale privatisation of the poor countries' industries and services. Enough to make a loan shark blush.

The \$15 billion the poor countries have to find - assuming all the world's aid goes to them - is less than a third of the profits British banks expect to make this year. In other words, just a handful of banks could pay off the debts of the poorest countries and still have £20 billion in change - and that buys a lot of champagne even at Claridge's prices!

Make poverty history? Gordon Brown, don't make us laugh. Make capitalism history!

This Kenyan child survives on less than 50p a day



MAKE CAPITALISM HISTORY!

Life under Labour: have things really got better?

By GR McColl

In June 1997 Tony Blair went to the Aylesbury estate in Southwark, south London, shortly after moving into Number 10 and promised the earth as he launched his commitment to tackling "social exclusion", the euphemism that the European Union had coined for what most of us had called poverty.

The prime minister declared he wanted to instil a "will to win" among the most deprived and to encourage them into work in the mainstream economy. He promised "empowerment not punishment" to the 10,000 residents of this giant estate that had become a symbol of inner city blight, with high levels of unemployment, vandalism and what has since been dubbed "antisocial behaviour".

Blair's fellow architect of New Labour, Gordon Brown, assumed his role as Chancellor with a pledge to collect a windfall tax on super-profits and put the revenue towards a "New Deal" for unemployed young people as part of a drive to reduce joblessness. Brown also committed New Labour to the eradication of child poverty by the year 2020 in a nation that had the worst record among the then 15 member states of the European Union (EU). Nearly 30 per cent of all children in Britain were growing up in homes with less than 60 per cent of average income in 1996. (One of the most controversial measures of Labour's first year of office was a cut in child benefit provision.)

After eight years of New Labour in government numerous policy think tanks across the narrow spectrum of mainstream British politics from the Institute for Fiscal Studies through to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have produced detailed assessments of how the government has performed against its pledges in reducing poverty and "tackling inequality". The most accessible and in some ways comprehensive work appeared this month with the publication of *Did Things Get Better, Part II?* by Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee and the paper's



Gordon Brown claims to have tackled poverty. Has he?

main analyst of social welfare statistics, David Walker.

Toynbee and Walker are sympathetic critics of New Labour and many of its works, though their book reveals a record that is at best mixed even when compared to an agenda that rarely had the veneer of radicalism.

In line with the conclusions of several other studies, the Guardian writers suggest that there has been undeniable progress in reducing the levels of child poverty, though from a very low base. By 2003 Britain had climbed the "league table" within the old EU from 15th (last) to 11th.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies indicates that single parent households have benefited from the combination of tax credits and other interventions over two terms of Blair and Brown. Though there are sharp regional variations, few studies have taken serious account of the dramatically higher housing and childcare costs in London and the South East of England. When considering the impact of the capital's exorbitant rents (even in social housing) a study for the Greater London Authority assessed that nearly 40 per cent of London's chil-

We demand

- Tax the rich, not the poor
- £7.40 an hour minimum for all
- Maximum 35 hour week with no loss of pay
- All benefits set at minimum wage
- For a massive programme of council house building and renovation - end all stock transfers

dren were still growing up in impoverished households in 2001.

The Government has, however, all but abandoned redistribution of income and wealth through progressive taxation as a tool for alleviating poverty. In the absence of any increases in income tax and with considerable cuts in taxes on corporate profits there is little doubt that the very rich have had a very good eight years and the government has seemed as comfortable with some people getting filthy rich as

arch Blairite, Peter Mandelson. The top one per cent of people in Britain enjoy 23 per cent of society's income: a rise from 17 per cent in 1996.

Meanwhile, the evidence is hardly straightforward but it appears that the overall tax burden on more affluent sections of the working class and the professional middle class has increased marginally by a little over 2 per cent, according to Toynbee and Walker. Brown has borrowed policy wheezes from Bill Clinton's presidency, with a heavy emphasis on tax credits rather than direct benefit payments, and the increasing use of punitive sticks to drive people into the labour market.

The various tax credit programmes have undoubtedly made some difference but their complexity has kept a rising number of welfare rights advisers very busy in local authorities and Citizen Advice Bureaux. In essence, the tax credits are an indirect state subsidy to bosses paying poverty wages, though there is no calculation as to the size of this gift from the Treasury.

One of the most heralded promises of New Labour on coming to office, and an achievement still cited by many

a trade union official, was the introduction of a legally enforceable national minimum wage. Blair, early in the first term, announced the formation of a Low Pay Commission, composed of a mixture of bosses from key industries, academics and union bureaucrats queuing for the House of Lords. Two years later Britain finally had a minimum wage, covering virtually all employees above 21 years of age but set at the miserly sum of £3.20 an hour with no floor at the outset for workers below 19 years of age.

On 25 February, Blair, in a transparent attempt to appeal to a reluctant core vote, finally announced a rise to £5.05 an hour, still more than a third below the EU decency threshold. This has provoked a mock chorus of protest from the bosses' organisation the CBI, but big capital has been quite comfortable with the minimum wage. Fewer than 1.5 million workers have benefited with each small increase, indicating that only the very poor are effected. Enforcement has also been lax and there is an army of unorganised migrant workers who receive substantially less.

Leaving aside the issue of pensioner poverty, which the Government has not begun to address, what little progress that has happened has come against the background of relatively high economic growth rates and with tax receipts still rising. The signs are that a third term will see significant cuts in public sector expenditure for a range of social welfare programmes such as Sure Start and Supporting People - in fact, these cuts have already begun prior to the announcement of the Budget on 16 March.

Gordon Brown is proud to boast that he is sticking to his "Golden Rule" that the government will not borrow more than it receives in revenue over the business cycle. When it comes to tackling poverty, this has two results. First, it means that in the good years, the rich get richer. And, second, that the coming recession will, as always, hit the poor far harder than it hits the rich, as programmes get wound up.

Government targets the disabled

By Keith Spencer

The government has proposed measures to drive disabled people back to work in order to cut the £7.7 billion incapacity benefit bill. The benefit is paid to those unable to work either because of physical or mental health problems. The numbers claiming it expanded massively in the 1980s as the Tories took people off the unemployment register and put them on incapacity benefit.

Rumours abounded last year that the Prime Minister wanted to stop paying incapacity benefit after six months. Tony Blair made it known that his preferred option was to pay incapacity benefit only for six months. But it seems that Gordon Brown's "carrot and stick" approach won the day.

The carrot is the Pathways to Work scheme where disabled people supposedly have personal advisers to help them

find work and a top up of £40 a week if they take a job.

A disabled person who enters the Pathways to Work scheme will be paid £74 a week if they undergo a medical examination, which is meant to occur within 12 weeks of claiming. Those who have severe health conditions - the government says the worse 20 per cent - will receive a higher benefit of £80.

Those who don't opt for the examination will be treated to the "stick": a drop in benefit to £55 a week.

But what are the criteria that are going to determine whether a person's disability prevents them from returning to work?

Alan Johnson, the works and pensions secretary, said that: "For many conditions such as back pain and depression, working is much healthier than being inactive." And it is doctors and nurses that the government

sees as a block to getting disabled people back into work.

Jane Kennedy, minister at the Department for Works and Pensions, said at the end of last year that doctors had told two-thirds of the 2.7 million people on incapacity benefit not to work. Kennedy was addressing the right-wing Social Market Foundation think-tank and said that most people on the benefit had common complaints such as "mental health problems and mobility problems", adding that health professionals had a culture of "protecting their patients from work". In order to help doctors and nurses make the right choices, employment advisers will also sit in on GP surgeries to drive people back into work.

Apparently, those with terminal cancer or in a persistent vegetative state will be exempt from Pathways to Work schemes.

The TUC as well as disability and mental health campaigners have

attacked the reforms. The Disability Alliance has said that, if the Pathways to Work is so successful, why then use threats of withdrawing benefits?

There are concerns that people with mental health problems will be put under too much stress by interviews or appear to be unhelpful and so have their benefits cut. The mental health charity Mind has criticised the proposals as a threat to people with mental illness in particular.

One spokesperson for the charity said: "It's monstrous that people with mental problems could be punished by having their benefits cut for appearing unco-operative." It also said that incapacity benefit was a safeguard and that people on it must feel that they are being helped back not forced back into work - currently only 18 per cent of people with diagnosed mental health problems are in work.

The Department for Works and Pen-

sions proposals come at a time when it is actually proposing to cut 30,000 jobs. So, rather than employ more staff and train them to be sympathetic and helpful, it is reducing the numbers of staff who will be on the front line.

Most people on incapacity benefit would like to go back to work. But the best way to do this is to offer real jobs that pay well and support them with extra benefits and advice from carers and health professionals - not schemes to put pressure on ill people and their doctors to get them back into the workforce as cheap labour.

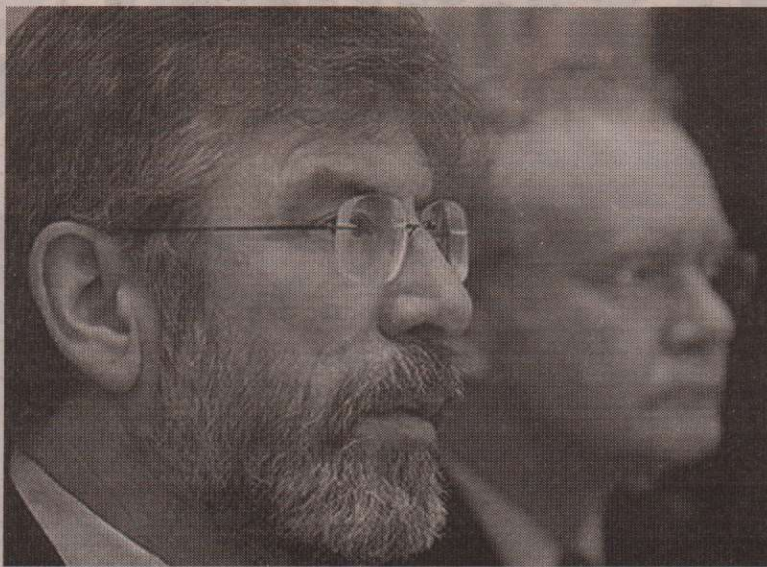
The government has brought in some important disability discrimination legislation making it easier for disabled people to physically access buildings and protecting their rights at work. But that costs very little. It seems that in return the government wants to drive disabled people and those with mental health problems into work.

Hands off Sinn Fein!

The British and Irish governments are trying to criminalise the Irish republican movement. They are doing it to reduce its political support in Ireland, north and south, in the run-up to an expected general election in May. They hope thereby that, after the election, renewed negotiations over the complete disarming of the IRA - which broke down last December when the main unionist party in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party led by Ian Paisley, demanded the publication of a photographic record of decommissioned weapons - will see Sinn Fein and the IRA weakened and under pressure from its own supporters to "go the extra mile" and cave in to the DUP's demands for complete surrender and public humiliation.

The saga began with the breakdown of the negotiations last December when it seemed that a Dublin-London document on new power sharing arrangements had been agreed between the DUP and Sinn Fein, but for the last minute demands from the DUP. Then, on 20 December, a huge bank raid on Northern Bank in Belfast netted the robbers £26 million and the blame was immediately put onto the shoulders of the IRA. It was suggested that the IRA had completely degenerated into a criminal not political organisation. No proof has been offered by the police or British government; no charges against any individual have been laid. The IRA denied it and continues to deny they had any part in the bank raid.

More pressure was then put on Sinn Fein and the IRA when IRA members were alleged to be involved in the pub stabbing and murder of Robert McCartney in Belfast in January. The IRA in fact



Adams and McGuinness: must lead resistance to Dublin and London pressure

urged those responsible to surrender themselves; in late February they expelled three members believed to be involved.

But this attempt by the IRA leadership to distance itself from thuggery did not lead to any let up in the co-ordinated offensive against Sinn Fein's leaders to "break with the IRA once and for all".

New financial sanctions will be implemented against Sinn Fein by the British government. Parliamentary allowances - amounting to £500,000 - will be denied to SF's four Westminster MPs and a further £120,000 will be taken away from their Stormont assembly members. This will hinder their ability to represent their constituents and strengthen their opponents in the run up to a general election campaign.

This filthy attempt by the unionists

and the British and Irish governments to isolate and intimidate republicanism must be resisted. In fact, despite the allegations, support for Sinn Fein among its established base is holding up well. Even in the south the latest poll on 25 February showed Sinn Fein support holding steady at 9 per cent, only one point down on November.

Sinn Fein must take the lead in resisting the unionists' attempt to criminalise, marginalise and fracture the republican movement. So far Sinn Fein has preferred to confine its protests largely to the airwaves - very little has been seen on the streets. Sinn Fein should organise mass protests throughout Ireland and call on socialists and democrats to do the same in Britain.

Hands Off Sinn Fein!

Editorial: Troops out now

"One dirty infection": this phrase was uttered in a military court room in Germany to describe Camp Breadbasket, a supposed humanitarian relief operation run by the British army on the outskirts of Basra in southern Iraq. They came from the mouth of Lance Corporal Daniel Kenyon, a platoon commander, in the Royal Fusiliers, who along with two other squaddies faces two years in a military prison for his part in maintaining a regime of torture, beatings and humiliation.

Kenyon was convicted in late February of a series of offences against Iraqi prisoners, accused of looting, documented in a roll of film shot by another young soldier, who received a lighter sentence for his testimony. But the roll of film he naively took to a Staffordshire film-processing lab revealed only a small sample of the camp's debased culture. While there can be no doubt of the soldiers' guilt, their court martial at Osnabruck, Germany served as a smokescreen to conceal the role of officers higher up the chain of command, who had given an explicit order to "work hard" the Iraqis they had rounded up. One of the senior officers implicated, a Major Dan Taylor, has actually received a promotion.

The trial also revealed the British army's own investigative team, the so-called Redcaps, as either hopeless incompetents or stooges in a cover-up. Their months of probing failed to produce a single Iraqi victim of the brutality at Breadbasket, yet a journalist for *The Independent* was able to identify two credible Iraqi witnesses within a day.

In the week prior to the court martial verdicts, a 28-year-old Iraqi doctor provided the most detailed account yet of the horror inflicted by the US Marines as they devastated the city of Fallujah, some 50 miles east of Baghdad. Dr Salam Ismael has been refused entry to the UK - doubtless because his eyewitness testimony would tear another gaping hole in the tissue of lies still promoted by George Bush and Tony Blair in their attempt to promote the war that commenced two years ago this month as a battle for democracy and the liberation of ordinary Iraqis.

Even as some Iraqis queued to vote in late January's election, the stench of rotting flesh from decomposing corpses filled Fallujah's air more than two months after a combination of air strikes, shelling and ground assaults had reduced two-thirds of a city that had housed some 300,000 to rubble.

Amid the continuing occupation of Iraq, now almost entirely by British and US forces, with the support of Australian troops, Fallujah and Camp Breadbasket are two of the most horrific symptoms of the "infection" that has swept this long-suffering country in the wake of Saddam's fall. The occupation is the immediate source of the infection, but its ultimate agents sit in Whitehall, Downing Street, the Pentagon and the White House.

The demonstration organised to mark the second anniversary of the shooting war against Iraq must serve as a launch pad for a revitalised movement against the occupation. The turnout on recent protests called amid the carnage in Fallujah and on 15 February has been pitifully small, a weak reflection of the revulsion and outrage that many feel at the ongoing war to which Blair had committed Britain.

Antiwar activists need not only to build for a massive demonstration but also to carry the argument back into their workplaces, community organisations and many other groups that the troops must be pulled out now, that the occupation must end. We need to set as our clear objective the defeat of US and British imperialism in Iraq and the region as a whole, and in the meantime build practical solidarity with those forces in Iraq such as the Southern Oil Workers Union fighting to oppose the privatisation of Iraq's oil wealth.

Firefighter speaks out

"The issue of a workers' party is as relevant as ever - it's how we achieve it" says Steve Godward, sacked firefighter. Steve spoke to Workers Power about his victimisation, the current state of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the recent election of the left winger Matt Wrack to the post of Assistant General Secretary.

Workers Power: You were sacked during the firefighters' dispute. John Prescott has ruled in your favour. Where does that leave you?

Steve Godward: Prescott ruled in my favour one year and two weeks ago. Not only was I innocent, but I should not have been charged in the first place. Now the Fire Service has put pressure on and Prescott is supposed to be re-looking at his decision. He can't change his decision since it was made under an Act of Parliament; it's a legal document, our discipline code. We are hoping that he will give more reasons why I was innocent which will help me in my Employment Tribunal against victimisation for trade union activity by the West Midlands Fire Service.

WP: Do you think that the settlement of the pay dispute explains the present attacks on jobs and conditions that you are experiencing in the Fire Service?

SG: I think that what we have got now is an aggressive and bullish management who think we lost the dispute. Basically they're rolling us back to the year zero, to before the 1977 strike.

WP: Any sign of a fight back?

SG: There was a swell that came about from a group opposed to the signing of the blank cheque, the 2004 agreement. They formed Grassroots FBU. It was an organisation of people who were worried about the way the dispute was

being run, how the strikes had been called off and how we were not using the power of an 88 per cent postal vote, the largest in our history.

Grassroots was subsequently banned by the executive in what was seen as a McCarthyite witch hunt with many about the far left trying to take over the FBU. This is not right. If the SWP can still be called far left, which is debatable, they have a publication, as did Grassroots, they have a membership which Grassroots never had, but they were not targeted. Possibly the lack of SWP's assistance to Matt Wrack in London - they didn't support him - might be the pay-off from them not being attacked.

WP: What positions did Matt, a candidate from Grassroots, stand on in the recent election?

SG: Matt's position was very much Grassroots' position, which was transparency, accountability and democracy within the union. He also stood on a workers' wage which would mean taking a 50 per cent pay cut, half of £50,000, very much putting your money where your mouth is, putting your principles where your mouth is.

WP: How do you see Grassroots in terms of a rank and file movement?

SG: Grassroots is now a proscribed organisation within the FBU. We are now called Phoenix - arisen from the ashes of Grassroots. The only way you are going to change anything is from the bottom. People have to see where the attacks are coming from, they have to identify the class struggle. The only way the trade unions are going to be reclaimed is if the members themselves reclaim it, but members will need to put some hard work in. Not just bleat about the leadership but stand for positions in branches and start changing at grassroots.

WP: How would you describe Matt?

SG: Matt is definitely a man of action and very much a man of intelligence. The reason he was voted in was not from some far left conspiracy theory, but because he's actually stood up and argued his positions with Gilchrist at conferences. He doesn't hide behind anybody. He stands up and is prepared to be counted. He realises that a leader is only as good as the membership allows him to be, as such he recognises that we have to start building the FBU back up to a position of strength.

WP: And the election for General Secretary is coming up?

SG: Yes. I believe Matt Wrack will be standing and obviously Andy Gilchrist is standing.

WP: The FBU disaffiliated from New Labour. Are there any moves to build a new workers' party within the union?

SG: Not that I know at present. I know Essex FBU has given £1,000 to Respect for the election and possibly that may be replicated in some areas where the SWP are strong, so London might give some money. The issue of a workers' party is as relevant as ever; it's how we achieve it. There are different organisations of the left who are trying to do it through particular ways. Some I agree with, others I oppose.

Everyone knows my opposition to Respect. But I would like to take a stick to the back of the legs of the left since it seems a lot easier to scrap with each other, than it does to scrap capitalism.

I thought that the Socialist Alliance was a massive step forward. When everyone was on board, the Socialist Party walked out. I know you can't turn the clock back, but there is a crying need for a workers' party.

Rekha Khurana looks at the five-year immigration and asylum plan which will fuel racism

You are being lied to about immigration - once again

Following the Tories latest scaremongering, Labour has opted for two tier points for would be immigrants.

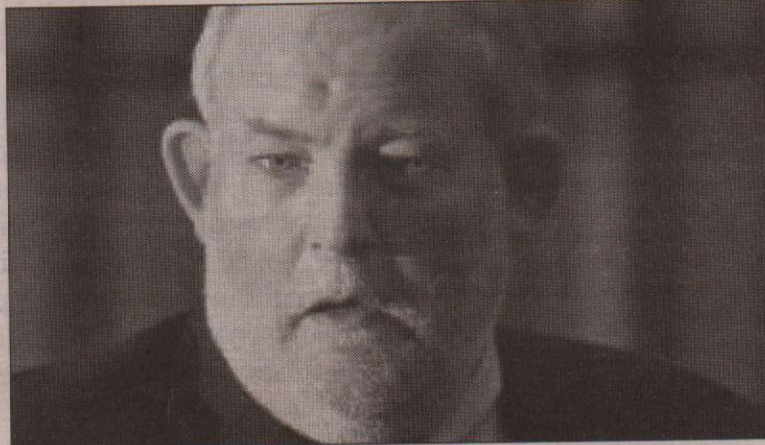
Tier one: Highly skilled workers, including doctors, engineers, finance and IT experts. They will be able to come to the UK without a job offer. Points will be based on graduate qualifications, work experience and salary, with extra points for skills in areas of short supply.

Tier two: Skilled workers, with A-level equivalent qualifications or higher, including teachers, nurses and administrators. They will be able to come if they have a job offer and if an employer cannot find the skills they offer within the EU.

Tier three: Unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Current quota-based schemes for non-EU nationals in agriculture, food processing and hospitality sectors will be phased out. Extra labour may come from new EU accession countries, such as Poland, to meet demand. Non-EU nationals will only be allowed in on small-scale quota schemes in specific shortage areas, with guarantees that they leave at end of their contract. Tier Three workers will not be able to bring their families over to join them.

Tier four: Students and specialists, such as footballers and workers representing overseas companies in the UK. This covers those groups where there is no significant competition with the domestic labour force, and also contains specific provision for exchange teachers, gap-year students, voluntary workers and various kinds of work experience and training. Tier four visas will be temporary, with no route to settlement.

People in tiers two to four will need a sponsor who will be expected to report if they leave a job or fail to attend college. Those coming under tier three and some tier four schemes will only be allowed to



Clarke's plans will increase racism

come if there is a "returns agreement" with their country.

Appeals will be abolished for those refused entry to work or study. Hitherto, appeals have proved very effective. Migrants, who were unsure of their rights and with inadequate access to lawyers first time round, often win their appeals. Now Charles Clarke wants them abolished.

Settlement and citizenship

Only skilled workers in tiers one and two will be able to apply to stay in Britain, and only after five rather than the present four years. They will have to pass English language and UK knowledge tests. Low-skilled workers will be barred from the route to citizenship and will be expected to leave after five years; they will be entitled to free school education and some healthcare but banned from claiming welfare benefits.

The government will also end the practice whereby those who settle in Britain can bring in dependants who then bring in further family members in their own right.

Enforcement

All applicants for visas are to be fingerprinted by 2008 and health checks with selected screening for TB will be carried out for those from high-risk areas.

A new borders programme will be implemented with travellers checked before they arrive in Britain, as they enter and as they leave. Foreign nationals here for more than three months will have to carry ID cards from 2008.

There will be more measures to enforce compliance and deportation and the introduction of £2,000 on-the-spot fines per employee on companies that use illegal migrant labour.

Welcome migrants

Clarke has dispelled any lingering doubts over his political credentials by rushing out a set of proposals that his predecessor David Blunkett would have been proud of. He has set out the government's five-year immigration and asylum strategy in a paper, entitled, *Controlling our borders: making migration work for Britain*. It includes

increased detention, border control, tagging and more forced removals.

Migrant labour is not a problem in Britain today. Migrant workers contribute far more to the wealth of the country than they take by way of access to services and so on. This is true of construction workers just as much as it is of doctors and IT engineers. For a country like Britain that has a low birth rate and an ageing population, immigration is in fact a necessity.

Unlike the widespread anti-asylum racism, most people accept the need for migration. A recent poll commissioned by *The Economist* found that just 12 per cent thought that migrant workers were undesirable, compared with 86 per cent who thought asylum seekers were problematic. In other words, Clarke and New Labour are whipping up racism, not simply accommodating to it.

These measures will import the German "guest worker" system, where migrant workers have no rights, but are expected to do the job and leave. Even workers born in Germany to migrant parents are denied citizenship rights. Inevitably, this makes it nearly impossible for guest workers to organise against "gangmaster" employers: stick your head above the parapet, and you're out!

A divided workforce, where one set of workers is paid less, enjoys fewer or no benefits, can be dismissed and removed from the country in an instant, is obviously an evil, not just for the workers discriminated against, but for all workers. Labour's new rules will drag the wages, conditions and union strength of all workers down. That's why it's not just a humanitarian duty, but in the best interests of the whole working class to fight against these draconian laws and for full rights for all migrants.

By making a distinction between

WHAT WE SAY

- Full citizenship rights to all asylum seekers and migrant workers
- Smash all immigration controls: if capital can roam the globe looking for workers, why can't workers do the same?
- Tax the rich and re-nationalise the privatised services to fund a regeneration programme under workers' control

skilled workers and middle class professionals on the one hand, and unskilled labourers on the other, Clarke is playing to the most abject racist prejudices of *Daily Mail* reading "middle England".

As the politicians pull out the race card in the coming months, we need to explain that mass migration is the inevitable result of globalisation. The same Western governments and corporations that are waging military and economic war on the poor around the world are also responsible for privatisation, spending cuts and attacks on wages and conditions over here.

If Labour challenged the racists, and taxed the rich who profit from the system of wars and super-exploitation in the Global South, then there would be enough work and sufficient housing for all who wish to come and live in Britain. Indeed, if we are to believe the bosses when they talk about a "pensions crisis" then we should welcome working age migrants and their families, not just as fellow workers but as sisters and brothers in the class struggle.

Lib Dems: left of Labour or orange Tories?

By Andy Yorke

It was May 1997. The Tories had been in power for 18 union bashing, welfare cutting years. You wanted them out and were over the moon when New Labour was elected. Now it's eight years later, and you've had it up to here with Tory Blair. So are the Liberal Democrats a good bet?

Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy would like you to think so. Their September 2004 Conference showcased a host of progressive policies from withdrawing troops from Iraq to higher taxes for the rich and an end to university top-up fees. What's more, Kennedy says your vote won't be wasted, because the Lib Dems are moving from a "party of protest to a party of power", capable of challenging the cycle of Tory and Labour governments.

Maybe, maybe not. But will the Lib Dems do what they say? And which Lib Dem party is the real one, the left-of-Labour face put forward by the Lib Dem electoral machine or a government-in-waiting of orange Tories?

The Lib Dems have a host of policies that look better than Labour's.

- Replace the hated council tax with a progressive local income tax.
- Raise the tax rate on earnings of more than £100,000 a year to 50 per cent.
- Cut class sizes for the youngest children.
- Abolish hidden waiting lists in the NHS.
- Meet the Kyoto targets and dramatically raise recycling rates and energy from renewable sources.
- Increased benefits for new mothers.
- £25 a week rise in the state pension.
- Abolish university top-up fees.
- Troops out of Iraq.

This sounds a lot like what people expected from Labour! There are three basic problems, however.

First off, the Lib Dems are not in power yet, and like all mainstream capitalist parties, much of this will prove to be nothing but spin and broken promises. The Lib Dems are nowhere near winning a general election and, like all parties out in the political wilderness, make all sorts of claims that they won't honour if they became the government.

Second, many of their policies are anti-working class, such as putting 10,000 more police on the streets. The withdrawal of troops from Iraq is con-

ditional on putting in the UN - the same troops but in Green Berets, and continuing to oversee the privatisation of the Iraqi economy. The Lib Dems have promised to cut even more civil service jobs than the 100,000 Labour is threatening. And they want to privatise the Post Office. No thanks!

Finally, the yawning gap between the Lib Dems' national policy and what they would actually do when they got into power is there for everyone to see because they are already in power in nine local authorities and share power in others.

• Lib Dem-led councils will this year impose the highest rises in council tax in Britain: 25 per cent in Cardiff, 10 per cent in York. Last year they also held the record: a whopping 28 per cent rise Shepway, Kent.

• In Leeds, they promised to protect public services. Now they share power with the Tories and Greens and have shut two hostels for the homeless and axed weekend opening at four elderly people's day centres.

• In Birmingham, the millionaire Lib Dem deputy leader John Hemming is preparing to cut jobs. In Inverclyde, Scotland, the Lib Dem leader has just

pushed through school closures. In Swansea and Liverpool they have provoked strikes with their job cuts.

But the worst could be to come. An influential group of young party activists has set out to reassert neoliberalism as the guiding economic principle of the party. Their Orange Book of proposed policies includes bringing private health insurance into the NHS to establish a two-tier system of "standard range" services and "enhanced" services for those that can afford them.

Although this was rejected by conference, the authors' influence is deepening. Charles Kennedy added his seal of approval for their out-of-the-box thinking by writing the forward to the pamphlet. Their latest proposal, due to be debated in this month's spring conference, would permit the government to ban strikes that could "cause far-reaching damage to the economy and the national interest".

These orange Tories have impeccable big business credentials, and they are on the rise. David Laws was managing director at Barclays Bank, Vincent Cable was Shell's chief economist, Mark Oaten was managing director of Westminster Public Relations. All three are

now in the shadow cabinet.

They are the real movers and shakers in the Lib Dems, and the bigger the party gets the more big business will vet their policies, and the more influential will this wing of the party become. After all that, imagine just for a moment the Lib Dems get in. What could you do to stop them from following their policy?

Labour continues to have real links to the working class via the trade unions. Bureaucratic and weakened though this link is, workers can pressure Labour to deliver the minimum wage and union recognition laws. Strikes and protests against New Labour policy don't just shake the government from without, but also from within. Our aim here is to break the grip on the bulk of the working class that the Labour Party and its supporters among the union leaders hold.

But what reason is there to vote for the Lib Dems? Rather than let these orange nobodies in, now is the time to argue more than ever to prevent their growth and instead build the kind of alternative to Labour that the working class needs - a new, revolutionary workers' party.

How to make poverty history

By Keith Sellick

Trade Justice. Drop the debt. More and better aid. These are the three demands of Make Poverty History, a global campaign to fight for a fairer deal for the poorer countries in 2005. It has been launched with press and TV ads, wristbands and celebrity backing. It boasts the support of U2's Bono, Bob Geldof, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Stephen Fry.

At its heart is an array of NGOs: Save the Children, Oxfam (where you can buy your wristbands), Cafod and Care International and many others.

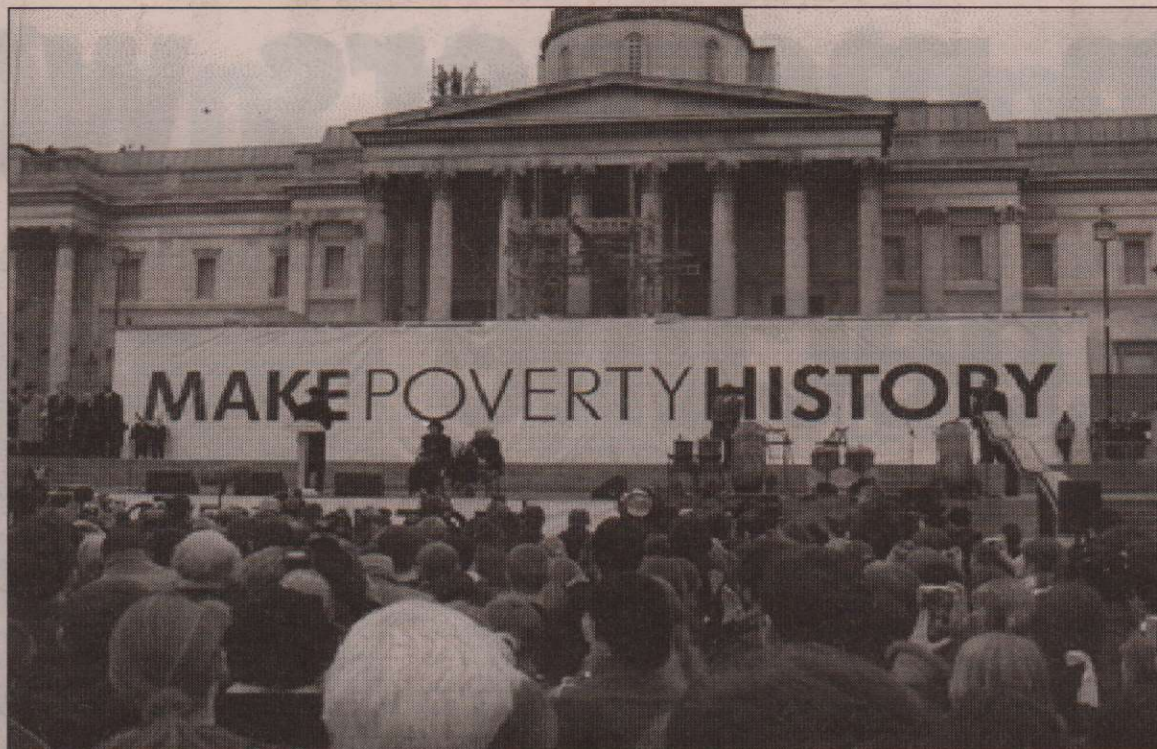
It is also in political solidarity with the Jubilee Debt campaign, which has been active since the late 1990s pressuring governments to cancel the debt and which played a part in the creation of the UN's Millennium goals.

The campaign has had particular resonance here in the UK, which this year holds both the presidency of the EU and chair of the G8. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have already announced they want to use these two positions to reduce poverty throughout the world.

More than 20,000 turned up to the campaign's launch in Trafalgar Square last month to hear Nelson Mandela call for cancelling third world debts.

It aims to use the months leading to the G8 summit at Gleneagles, Scotland, to pressurise the government into action on world poverty and to reform the trade laws and institutions such as the World Trade Organisation and IMF. It is building for a demonstration in Scotland on 2 July.

Make Poverty History is gaining support, even receiving a sympathetic ear from Tony Blair and his African Com-



The launch of the Make Poverty History campaign in Trafalgar square

mission. The campaign's manifesto highlights the role of trade subsidies in enabling rich countries such as the US and those in the EU to dump cheap subsidised foodstuffs on the world market thereby undercutting third world farmers. It criticises free trade as being detrimental to poor countries because of the economic and political power of the advanced countries. Instead, it calls for poorer nations to protect their own agriculture and industry to enable them to provide for their own people.

Make Poverty History also attacks the WTO, IMF and World Bank for foisting onto third world countries disas-

trous structural adjustment policies that have forced poorer countries to sell off state industries, cut welfare and education and reduce any other social benefits they may have provided: the result has been an increase in poverty and misery. "Poor countries should no longer have to privatise basic services or liberalise economies as a condition for getting the debt relief they so desperately need."

On debt, Make Poverty History says: "Rich countries and the institutions they control must act now to cancel all the unpayable debts of the poorest countries."

In place of loans it calls for more

grants. It demands \$50 billion of grants immediately and a clear timetable for rich countries to increase their spending on aid to 0.7 per cent of GDP. It calls for more aid to develop healthcare and education, and for poorer countries to be allowed to plan their own strategies. "Aid should therefore no longer be conditional on recipients promising economic change like privatising or deregulating their services, cutting health and education spending, or opening up their markets," it says.

Some of this chimes in with what G8 countries are already saying; some goes further, reflecting how reformist

NGOs have developed a critique of international capitalism.

But there are still weaknesses in the manifesto. All debts owed to rich countries and private firms and banks should be cancelled, not just ones that cannot be repaid. The IMF, WTO and World Bank cannot be reformed; they must be destroyed. New rules of international trade are utopian.

But the biggest weakness is that the campaign says nothing about how it hopes to implement its demands. There are media campaigns, celebrities and a demonstration on 2 July... but what then? The campaign pins all its hopes on lobbying governments and international capital to make concessions, working behind the scenes or in front of them in the case of the actors and actresses.

The proof of the weakness is the campaign's website where it links to the Jubilee Debt campaign. That campaign says that it was instrumental in formulating the UN's Millennium goals - a set of reforms that were to be implemented over a 10-year period. Both Jubilee Debt and Make Poverty History now say that 2005 is the crucial year to implement these reforms. Of course, if the campaign had actually secured real commitment to goals by the rich countries, then the campaign would not be needed now.

If we are to make poverty history, then we need to see action on the streets on the scale of the mass demonstrations against the war on Iraq. Social forums should be built to channel the campaign onto the streets and into the workplaces, schools and colleges. Mobilisations of millions in cities around the world campaigning for cancellation of debt would really be a goal of the Millennium.

Women are marching around the world

To mark International Women's Day this month, women will start marching around the globe with the Women's Global Charter for Humanity. *Karen Marshall reports*

In December last year women from all around the world met in Kigali, Rwanda, and adopted the Women's Global Charter for Humanity. The conference was the culmination of four years campaigning to publicise the 17-point platform of women's and global rights, which was agreed by various women's organisations in 2000.

The charter was launched at the World Social Forum in January this year. It calls for equality, freedom, solidarity, justice and peace. And after four years campaigning, women are setting off again taking the global charter with them.

The charter is being relayed across the world starting in Sao Paulo, Brazil, this month. From there it will travel across the globe taking in 53 countries; it will be in Latin America in March and April, move into the US and Canada then go over to France in May before taking in South Korea and Laos in July and ending up in Burkino Faso in October.

The charter's launch is also inspiring other events around the world. Women in Belgium will be using the opportunity of the 19 March demonstration in Brussels against neo-liberalism, war and racism to launch a week of activity from the 14 to 20 March popularising the charter and its demands. In the Philippines, women will launch their own campaign about the charter to coincide with the official launch on 8 March. Women in India will be holding meetings to launch the charter this month and will hold a march in Delhi during July when the charter arrives on the sub continent.

The charter has the headings of Solidarity, Peace, Justice, Freedom, and Equality under which it lists a number of affirmations: of all people being equal, against any form of domination or discrim-

ination, of the freedom of all people - especially women - to live without fear of physical or sexual violence or to be held in slavery.

Under justice it affirms that: "Social justice is based on the equitable redistribution of wealth to eliminate poverty, limit wealth acquisition, and satisfy essential needs to improve the well-being of all people."

Under solidarity it states: "A society's economy serves the women and men composing that society. It is based on the production and exchange of socially useful wealth distributed among all people, the priority of satisfying the collective needs, eliminating poverty and ensuring the balance of collective and individual interests. It ensures food sovereignty. It opposes the exclusive quest for profit to the detriment of social usefulness, and the private accumulation of the means of production, wealth, capital, land, and decision-making power by a few groups and individuals."

Under freedom it affirms: "Women are free to make decisions about their body, fertility and sexuality. They have the choice about whether they will have children."

Under equality it wants: "All unpaid, so-called feminine tasks related to supporting life and social maintenance (household labour, education, caring of children and intimates, etc.) are economic activities that create wealth and that should be valued and shared."

Under peace it says "All human beings have the right to live in a world free of war and armed conflict, foreign occupation and military bases. No one has the right to decide on the life or death of individuals and peoples."

The main call of the charter is for women and men of all oppressed peoples and groups in the

WOMEN IN THE WORLD

- Women possess roughly 1 per cent of the land in the world
- Today only six countries can boast the following: close to complete sexual equality in the area of secondary education, 30 per cent representation of women in elected government positions, roughly half of non-agricultural jobs occupied by women
- In nearly 100 years, only 24 women have been elected as head of state, and only one in 10 of all the seats in the world's parliaments are held by women
- Around 80 per cent of the 27 million refugees around the planet are women
- Two-thirds of the 300 million children who have no access to education are girls
- Officially, 110 million girls worldwide between the ages of 5 and 14 are in work, and this does not include domestic tasks

world to transform their world and change the social structures of capitalism.

What could give the charter mass support is the great expansion over the past few years in women in the world's workforce. It is no coincidence that it is starting in Brazil and travelling through the shanty towns and factories of Latin America; or that it is passing through the newly industrialised countries such as India and South Korea on its way to Africa.

The charter points out that there are 850 free economic zones in the world - the driving force behind so much new industrialisation around the

world. And in these areas nine out of ten workers are young women working long hours for poor wages in dangerous conditions and often subjected to physical and sexual violence by managers.

Meanwhile in the home, women carry out 70 per cent of all work often without pay or any other form of benefit. The International Labour Organisation estimates that women in developing countries contribute 31 and 42 hours of unpaid work a week often on top of their jobs - men contribute five to 15 hours of unpaid work.

Yet women are not the passive stereotypes so often portrayed in the bosses' media. All round the world they are organising in unions, in community groups or in their own organisations - as this charter and march demonstrates. The charter also recognises women's struggle for a better world goes hand in hand with the fight of their male brothers among the workers and poor peasants of the world.

This year sees many initiatives against war, neoliberalism, debt and poverty all over the world: from Make Poverty History and the war on global poverty, to the struggle against the occupation in Iraq and the fight against privatisation in Latin America. The Women's Global Charter for Humanity is yet one more campaign against global capitalism. And yet if this is not to be a year of wasted opportunities all these struggles must come together under the World Social Forum to build a new revolutionary socialist international to fight for an end to the rule of capitalism once and for all.

● More information about the march can be found at www.marchmondiale.org/en/charter3.html



Future of the unions

Two of Britain's biggest unions, the TGWU and Amicus, are engaged in merger talks. The GMB is watching with interest and has kept the option of joining the process open, *Mark Hoskisson* reports

Union mergers won't stem decline

On the face of it merging unions looks good: the bigger, the better. The more members, the more the union will be able to do to protect those members. And this is how the leaders involved are packaging the fusions.

Tony Woodley, elected general secretary as the anti-Blair left candidate in the TGWU, recently argued: "We could now put behind us pointless inter-union competition and focus on fighting for our members in the workplace as one powerful union. Today's announcement is a message of hope for every worker who needs strong trade unionism, and a warning to employers that we intend to match the power of capital with the power of united labour."

Strong stuff. And maybe even enough to woo doubtful left wing activists in the union to subscribe to the emerging "one big union" philosophy. Except Woodley, with the "strength" of 800,000 members already behind him, has had ample opportunities to match the power of capital with a working class fight back, not least in the car industry at Rover and Jaguar recently. But he hasn't done this. He has dodged more fights than he has waged.

Is this because the TGWU is not big enough? Hardly. It is because Woodley, for all his anti-Blair rhetoric, has embarked on a strategy of collaboration with the Labour government and the containment of any class struggle that threatens it.

This should cause activists to think again about what the proposed merger between the TGWU, Amicus and possibly the GMB is really about. Would the merger strengthen the hand of the working class in the fights that lie ahead? On past experience of the union bureaucracy's sporadic bouts of merger mania the answer is no (see box).

The reason for the intensification of this process is fundamentally the same as in the 1980s. Despite prolonged economic growth the unions have not significantly grown. The TGWU has lost 70,000 members over the last period. The GMB, with 615,000 members, is lagging behind the other big three. And the organising drives of the late 1990s – drives that were bureaucratically conceived and bureaucratically led – have not brought in thousands of new workers.

Rather than examine whether this failure is down to timid accommodation to the bosses and undemocratic running of their organisations, the top layer of bureaucrats are returning to an old solution. More mergers. Derek Simpson, Amicus general secretary, admitted as much when he said: "We don't need to organise – that has failed. The way to grow our union is through mergers."

The Amicus way of organising – going along to corporate induction days and telling new recruits that Amicus can offer them a cheap holidays service – may have failed. But class struggle

organising has not failed.

Indeed, if you look at other unions, almost all led by left wingers, where there has been struggle there has been growth – the postal union, the CWU, the rail union, the RMT and most notably the civil servants union, the PCS.

The leaders of these unions, Crow, Serwotka and Hayes, have misled fights and remain tied to the interests of the whole bureaucratic caste at the top of the unions. But they have led struggles and have argued for trade unionism based on the collective principles of solidarity. The result: these unions are now stronger.

In other words, it is not the size of the union that matters; it is what it does for the working class. The smaller unions have done more for their working class members than the four giant general unions.

The great advantage of industrial unionism, from the standpoint of the class struggle, is that it unites all workers in an industry

And there is a structural element in this. The CWU, PCS and RMT are far closer to being industrial unions – unions that organise all workers, regardless of grade or skill, in the sector in which they organise.

The great advantage of industrial unionism, from the standpoint of the class struggle, is that it unites all workers in an industry. The relationship of one workplace to another, even if they are owned by different companies or

run by different government departments, is clearer.

The need for, and the potential to deliver, immediate solidarity is more tangible in an industrial union. If you are a rail worker for Virgin or a rail worker for Arriva, it doesn't matter which platform you stand on or what colour train you operate – you are rail workers immediately affected by rail issues.

Industrial unionism is a more effective means of promoting trade union struggle and therefore has clear advantages over huge general unions in which one section of members are completely removed from another. So, before supporting a merger of the TGWU and Amicus, and possibly the GMB, we need to conduct a fight in favour of industrial unions, combined with class struggle action and effective rank and file organising drives, as the way forward, as the examples of the PCS, CWU and RMT, albeit in a limited way, prove.

Of course the fight for industrial unions today will have to be conducted differently to how we did it before the mergers created the big four. These unions exist. We are not in favour of simply splitting them. But we are in favour of radically restructuring them.

Each merger was carried out on a bureaucratic basis. Parity for the former executives was carefully maintained, but rank and file democracy was savagely undermined. In Unison, Nalگو's tradition of not holding regular branch meetings was adopted, while Nupe's democratically elected lay executive was ditched. In the AEEU, the most democratic constitution in the union movement (that of the AEU) was ripped up and the most undemocratic union of the lot, EETPU, imported its rotten structures into the new outfit.



GMB members, and those of other trade unions involved in merger talks, would be better served by class struggle unionism not bureaucratic merger

The first task, then, is to place these unions under the control of the members via democratic branch meetings, stewards' committees, regional committees, lay executives and representative sovereign annual conferences. The bureaucrats must be stripped of their privileges, paid the average wage of the workers they represent, and subject to regular election and to recall by the members.

But as well as this we have to organise the sectors of each of the unions into autonomous industrial wings with the right to determine their own policies and, above all, the right to decide for themselves when to take action. By these means we can recreate the strength of industrial unionism within the general unions.

Last, but by no means least, we should fight to turn the TUC – with representatives elected onto it from each union and from each industrial sector of the big general unions – into a genuine co-ordinating body. It must be turned into the general staff of the whole movement, uniting the different industrial and service wings into one movement. This would have the added advantage of ensuring that those unions

which most closely resemble and act like industrial unions – generally the smaller unions – do not see their influence and role within the movement diminished by the financial and political power of the big guns.

In current circumstances the fight to transform the unions in this way will be harder to win if the Amicus and TGWU merger goes ahead. It will go ahead on a bureaucratic basis, making the organisation – projected to be 2.5 million strong (bigger if the GMB joins) – ever more remote to its rank and file members.

Politically, it will tie the new giant (along with Unison) to Blair's Labour Party even more firmly than now. Simpson and Woodley are both committed to maintaining the unions' subservience to Labour and would use their enhanced "super union" status to "prove" that this strategy is paying off. At a time when the RMT and FBU are outside of Labour's ranks and discussion on the need for an alternative to Labour is widespread in the ranks of the union movement, an unthinkingly pro-Labour super-union would weaken the chance of ending Labour's monopoly over the unions.

TGWU and Amicus activists should say that, unless both unions are overhauled and rank and file democracy and industrial union organisation of the sectors become the norm, then the merger should be opposed.

Derek Simpson claimed of the proposed merger that: "A union with this level of influence has the potential to make a difference to the lives of every working person in the United Kingdom. Today we have taken a giant step forward in shaping the future for working people."

Actually, the emergence of a number of joint union committees to better prosecute the pensions fight has made far more difference to the lives of ordinary people. These committees, built, staffed and organised by rank and file activists, did far more than any bureaucrat to convince fellow workers and the public that unions were still in business.

Unity in action, rank and file democracy, industrial unionism and class struggle policies – these are the future of British trade unionism. Bureaucratic merger mania is a leftover from the days of Thatcherism. It is part of the past of British trade unionism.

Merger mania in the 1980s

Back in the late 1980s, there was a fashion for union mergers. Declining union membership meant declining income. Anxious about their bureaucratic fiefdoms, sections of the trade union leadership decided that uniting their organisations into ever bigger general unions was the way forward.

The leaders of the time – gripped by fear of struggle – turned the unions away from the basic principles of solidarity and towards the provision of "services" for members (credit cards, insurance, free wills and cheap holidays) combined with an emphasis on legally protecting individuals in the workplaces.

To provide these types of services – and maintain bureaucratic privilege – bigger organisations with more assets and income were required. Hence the turn to mergers. It did not matter to the union bosses that the organisation they created was so general that its fighting capacity was undermined. They weren't interested in fighting, full stop. One union, for many disparate industries or sectors, was the goal.

The result of all this was the end of many industry specific unions and the creation of new

outfits that, significantly, tended to drop the very word union from their titles. First was the white collar MSF; the civil servants, then led by hard rightists, created the PCS; the old rail union, the NUR, fused with the seafarers to create RMT.

One merger that retained the word union was the AEEU. But it was a product of an undemocratic fusion of the engineers' union, the AEU, with the scab electricians' union, the EETPU. The EETPU should have long since been expelled from the movement for its role in breaking both the miners' and the printers' strikes in the mid-1980s.

This first wave of mergers encouraged others. John Edmonds of the GMB set out his vision clearly at the end of the 1980s: "By the 1990s there will be three or four big general unions potentially competing for members."

The race was on. The GMB went through several mergers. The TGWU swallowed up smaller unions. The public sector unions created Unison. The AEEU and MSF formed Amicus. Edmonds' prediction of four giant unions came true by the start of the new century.

Organise the rank and file: transform the unions!

Unions in Britain need to be rebuilt but not in the old bureaucratic fashion, argues *Jeremy Dewar*

For the past 20 years of the last century, the trade unions have been under attack. Thatcher successively defeated the strongest sections of the British working class movement: the steel workers, miners, printers and dockers.

On the broken backs of millions of workers she implemented the most draconian anti-trade union legislation in the world. She largely smashed both the organisational power of the working class and its faith in trade unions as the means to defend its gains.

Strike figures sank to their lowest ever levels. Membership declined from more than 13 million to under seven million.

But the unions retain the power to reshape society in our interest. So long as capitalism continues to slash wages, ratchet up the rate of exploitation and rule by fear and intimidation, workers need unions. Inevitably, renewed trade union battles provide the opportunity to reunite the class and rebuild fighting trade unions. A mass unionisation drive, especially among the youth, is a key slogan for today.

These new or renewed unions must be built on a new model. The working class has repeatedly and valiantly fought to defend its interests. It could have smashed Thatcher's offensive. But it lost; betrayed by the trade union and Labour Party leaders. The betrayal continues today.

Tony Blair, elected with the money and votes of millions of trade unionists, may have appeared more union-friendly than the Tories. He even implemented reforms, such as the minimum wage, union recognition laws and working families tax credits. But Blair has left intact all of the essential elements of the Tories' anti-union legislation. In his heart he is every bit as anti-union as Thatcher.

Now has New Labour got away with it? Don't leading trade union officials sit on Labour's ruling NEC?

Our trade union leaders have agreed every step of Tony Blair's New Labour project. They have blustered and complained about the odd point, but like Blair they do not want a return to the "bad old days" of the 1970s. They accept and support most parts of Thatcher's anti-union legislation.

The union leaderships form a distinct bureaucracy with material interests separate from the mass of their members. The leader of Unison Dave Prentis was paid £107,369 in 2003: a handsome 15 per cent rise over the previous year, while most of his members were coping with rises of inflation-plus-a-few-quad.

The average wage of a Unison official is around £30,000 plus expenses and car. These trade union officials are not simply "labour brokers"; their treachery does not simply spring from their role as negotiators between the bosses and the workers. Their trade unionist politics - the attempt to win "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work" - have a material basis. To transform the unions, the control of this caste must be broken and replaced with the power of the rank and file.

After the Tory years, most union members were content to give New Labour the benefit of the doubt. But, when Blair and Brown continued the



Rank and file members on Bolton pensions demonstration last month

assault on public sector wages, jobs and conditions, when Labour watched on as manufacturing jobs disappeared to cheap labour zones abroad, workers took the first step towards re-invigorating their unions by electing new leaders.

The "awkward squad" - as they were dubbed in the press - was the result of a new mood of optimism and militancy among the union rank and file, and in turn led to further militancy. Bob Crow (RMT), Billy Hayes (CWU), Andy Gilchrist (FBU) and Mark Serwotka (PCS) all ousted "new realist" leaders, skilled in collaboration with the bosses and bureaucratic manoeuvres against the members. Their elections were followed by increased strikes, and, in most cases, increased membership levels as new workers saw that it was worth joining the unions again.

But, when put to the test, many of these leaders were also found wanting. The post office and civil service have continued to shed jobs and pay poor wages, with only inadequate and often rank and file led strike action in response. Even Bob Crow's leadership has failed to stop privatisation on the London Underground. Worst of all, however, has been Andy Gilchrist who misled the firefighters pay dispute to a dismal defeat, and then compounded matters by launching a vicious witch-hunt against the union's most steadfast members, like Matt Wrack.

The state of the unions in Britain today remains one of a slow and uneven recovery. Just over 900,000 days were lost to strike action in 2004; this represents a rise compared with the last 15 years, but it is still far from the high-point of the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these strikes were victories, like the Yorkshire First Bus drivers; others were led from below, like the British Airways baggage handlers; still more, like the Scottish nursery workers and the Liverpool child care workers, were sold out by their union leaders. Together they show that workers, after two terms of Labour, are beginning to take the struggle into their own hands.

Every revival of militancy takes place in different circumstances and with a different backdrop. The strikes of the 1970s and 1980s came after a steady rise in shop floor organisation achieved in the years of the "long boom". While comparison with these years is useful in charting how things stand today, it would be wrong to expect a similar trajectory to today's rising curve of struggle.

The explosion of union militancy in the 1890s came about when new, unorganised workers joined the unions en masse. After World War One, the horrors of the trenches and the inspiration of the Russian revolution spurred workers to militant self-organisation. In Poland and South Africa in the 1980s, new unions and factory organisation overcame conditions of illegality and burst onto the scene overnight.

Britain today has the ingredients of many of these historical examples. But there are new factors at work. Globalisation requires a global response. Workers are beginning to organise on a European wide and international level. Blair's New Labour has served the class struggle to the extent that it has exposed the illusions many workers have in reformist parties and reformist politics.

Whether these factors will combine to produce a movement that can rock the capitalist system depends on the politics of the rank and file militants.

The central task in the unions today is to build a rank and file movement to renew the unions and organise the unorganised. Such a movement would fight with the officials where possible, but would be ready to fight against them where necessary. Its main task would be to break the stranglehold of the bureaucratic caste, winning full democracy for the union membership and committing the unions to militant politics of class struggle.

A rank and file movement is not a replacement for the organisation of revolutionaries and militants in workplace or union cells and fractions. But only a rank and file movement across and within the unions will be capable of forging the alliance between revolutionaries and workers needed to wrest control of the unions from the caste of officials.

We need a rank and file movement with a revolutionary socialist leadership. Only such a leadership will be capable of breaking the hold of the bureaucracy once and for all and leading the trade unions on from their day to day struggles to the struggle for socialism itself.

We need a revolutionary party with its own cells and fractions in the unions, to fight for the rank and file movement against the bureaucracy and take its stand in the front rank of all workers' struggles against the capitalist system.

BUILDING A RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT

As the class struggle continues to recover, union militants should fight for:

- A mass unionisation drive directed above all at young workers.
- Recognition for all union members at all workplaces.
- Rank and file control of unionisation from day one.
- Stewards to be elected and accountable to their members.
- For strikes and occupations to win recognition.
- For a national minimum wage of at least £7.40 per hour with no exceptions.
- This to be the minimum in all wage negotiations and for strikes and occupations to win it.
- For full workplace rights from day one and permanent contracts for all.
- The establishment of workplace branches and branch meetings in work time with provision for childcare.
- For the right of all black, women, lesbian, gay and disabled workers to caucus.
- Opposition to any discrimination at work or in the union.
- For all industrial action to be under the control of the rank and file, through elected strike committees.
- For the rank and file to control all strike pay.
- Strike pay to be set at the level of the minimum wage.
- Mass meetings to take all decisions over negotiations and veto all settlements.
- Establish cross and inter union bodies, including workplace committees, to control joint action and decisions.
- Joint action committees to defeat the government's attack on pensions.
- A closed shop. Join the union or join the unemployed.
- A national rank and file movement within and across the unions.

ORGANISE THE RANK AND FILE

In Britain today we should commence the transformation of the unions by campaigning for the following platform.

Democratise the unions

For the annual election of all officials. Officials subject to recall by their constituency. Officials to reflect the social composition of the membership. Stop bankrolling New Labour: democratise the political funds and fight for a new, anti-capitalist workers party.

End Bureaucratic privileges

All officials paid no more than the average wage of those they represent. No excessive expenses. Second class travel only. No luxury hotels.

For Direct Action

For strikes and occupations against attacks and to win decent pay, conditions and recognition. Link up with the anticapitalist and anti-war movements.

Fight the anti-union laws

Demand New Labour repeal anti-union laws. Defy the anti-union laws wherever necessary. Recognition and strike pay for all unofficial strikes. All out action to defend any striker prosecuted under their provisions and defiance of any fine or sanction.

Build Workplace Organisation

Stewards elected and accountable to section meetings. Action subject to mass meetings. Strike committees elected at mass meetings. All negotiations under mass meeting control. No secret negotiations between the bosses and officials. Publication of any proposed deals.

For industrial unions

Joint stewards committees and co-ordinating committees across workplaces and industries. Industrial wings in general unions with full control over decisions.

No to class collaboration

No union involvement in management schemes. No faith in "independent" committees or boards. For collective bargaining. Tear up "no strike" deals.

International solidarity

Cross-European rank and file organisations. Transform the European Social Forum into a co-ordinator of struggles. International solidarity with workers everywhere and the victims of capitalist oppression.

Build a rank and file movement

A rank and file movement could unite the entire membership of the trade unions around this programme. Not just militants, socialists, Labour or Communist Party activists but the mass of rank and file members who want to fight back and who desperately need trade unions ready and able to defend their interests.

THE GREAT PEN

Jeremy Dewar looks at what is driving the attacks on pensions in the UK and Europe and outlines a programme of action to beat the attacks

If you read the news and listen to the politicians about pensions, you would think the problem is not that of mass poverty in old age, but the number of old people we have. This crisis is, apparently, our fault for living too long, spending too much of our wages instead of saving, and expecting far too much in retirement. How can this be true?

The technological revolutions over the past 25 years have massively boosted humanity's productivity. Indeed, these changes in how we produce wealth have recently led to record company profits and enormous salaries, bonuses – and pensions pots – for the fat cats that run them.

But, instead of this wealth "trickling down" and benefiting the poor, the big bosses and their government backers are demanding a bigger and bigger slice of the global cake. Taxes – VAT, council tax, National Insurance contributions – may have gone up for most of us, but the super-rich and the corporations now pay less in tax than they have for a generation.

By simply reversing the changes in taxation over the past 25 years, the government could solve the pensions "crisis" overnight. But they won't. Why?

Attacking our social gains

The attack on pensions is part of a wider attack on the social gains won by the working class after the Second World War.

Along with universal provision of healthcare, education, housing, sick and unemployment benefit, decent pensions for all formed part of the post-war

settlement. Workers, who had borne the brunt of hardships during the war, demanded the right not to have to return to mass unemployment, slumdwellings and impoverishment in their old age. Fearing revolution from a population recently trained in the use of firearms, the bosses reluctantly agreed.

Over the past 20 years, however, all of these welfare benefits have been attacked.

Not because they are inherently evil (no one has ever been able to show that universal benefits lead people to become scroungers or lazy, quite the opposite).

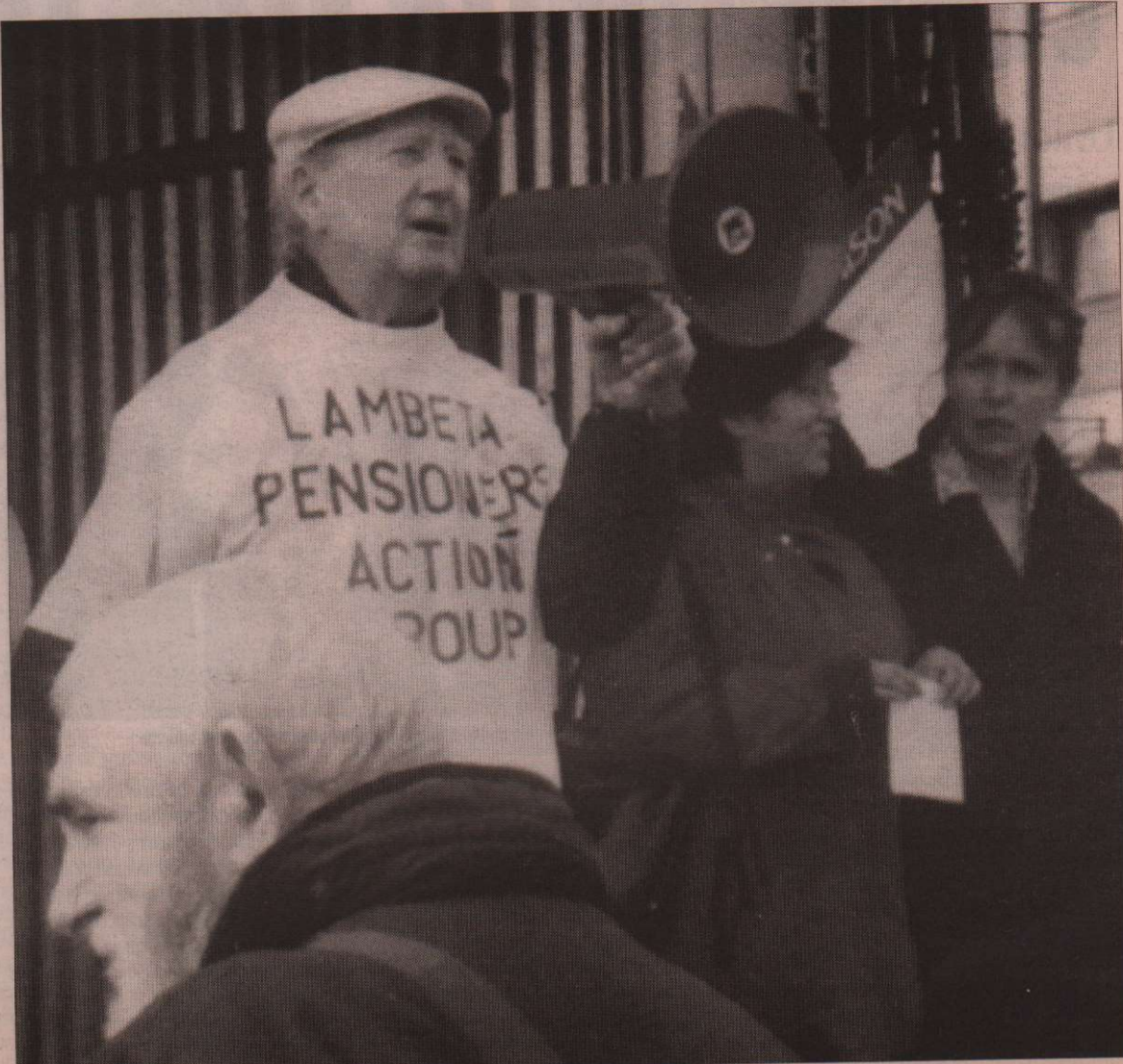
Not because society has got poorer and can no longer afford to treat the old, the sick and the jobless with dignity (again, quite the opposite).

But because competing capitalists want to increase their profits and pay out less to their workforces. The Economist recently reported that profits in Europe and America today account for a higher percentage of gross domestic product than at any time in the past half-century, admitting that "profit growth is built on the impoverishment of workers". The pensions grab is yet another step in this direction.

In short, this is a crisis caused by greed.

Pensions: paying more for less

The basic state pension, paid for from our NI contributions, has been steadily eroded from the time the Tories ended the link between earnings and the pension. As a result it fell from 25 per cent of average earnings in the 1970s to 17 per cent today. Within 20 or 30 years it is predicted to fall to 10



Lambeth Pensioners Action Group led the TUC protest outside Lambeth Town Hall on 18 February

per cent. This attack has left a generation of pensioners who face grinding poverty in their retirement years after a lifetime of hard graft.

The Labour government's answer to this growing "pensions crisis" was not to restore the link with earnings, but to encourage workers to take out private schemes instead, ones linked to investments and lightly regulated – the "stakeholder" pension schemes.

These "stakeholder" pension schemes were a failure, as most workers, especially the low paid, could not afford to put aside significant amounts of their pay to contribute to the schemes. An average worker in his or her thirties would have to put aside 30 per cent of income over the next 30 years to achieve a decent pension. It would be like paying a second income tax.

Stakeholders were launched, ironically, just around the time of the worldwide collapse of the stock markets at the turn of the century. Like other private pension schemes, stakeholders' funds are invested on the market. Few workers felt like gambling their life savings away on a system that had just crashed, leaving millions of investors with a fraction of the amount they were expecting to retire on. Instead, these schemes mainly benefited the middle classes searching for a cheaper second private pension.

Many employers took this as their cue to abandon the link to final salaries as "too expensive". These schemes were replaced with "money purchase schemes" that are dependent on a return on the investments made with pensions funds. If the stock market or property investments go badly down goes your pension pot. Thus the link between a worker's final salary and their pension was broken for many workers.

Some pension funds also collapsed as companies went into bankruptcy, leaving pensioners with no pensions or

having to settle for a fraction of their entitlements as part of a settlement with other creditors. In response to such bankruptcies, the government has set up an inadequate "pension guarantee fund" that pays out only part of the lost pensions.

These attacks on private sector pensions have provoked some protest strikes, for example in the steel industry, but have not yet produced a generalised response. Now that the public sector has been targeted, many in the private sector will want to join a united fightback.

The current attack

The current attack on public sector pensions is designed to:

- Further push workers to supplement occupational pensions with private pension schemes.
- Change the balance of funding within the workplace schemes from the employer to the employee.
- Reduce the benefits accruing to the employee on retirement, such as from "final salary" to "average salary" formulas.
- Increase the number of years the employee has to work, and continue to pay in to the fund before s/he is entitled to draw any funds.

Similar attacks have been taking place all across Europe – and even as far away as Brazil – over the past few years. This has provoked massive strikes in Germany, France and Italy where millions of workers have come out on strike to defend their pensions.

The public sector has always had some of the better occupational pensions provisions. Indeed, this is generally regarded as a bit of a pay-off for lower wage rates.

The employer and worker contribute to a fund, and the workers are guaranteed a pension related to their final salary

and the number of years worked, normally payable at 60 years of age. Some of these pension funds are invested, others, like the Teachers Pension Scheme, are "notional funds" with pensions guaranteed by the government.

The stock market boom of the 1990s boosted the value of pensions funds. Many companies and public sector organisations took "contributions holidays" (usually for the employer, not the employee) in these years: a fact they try to ignore now that they want to claim there is a "crisis".

Crisis? Whose crisis?

The arguments being put forward by the government, pension fund managers and the bosses for the reason for this "crisis" are just propaganda. Let's look at them one by one.

The so-called "demographic time bomb" refers to a combination of a low birth rate and steadily rising life expectancy, brought about by improved medical technology. This, we are told, means that each year fewer active workers are "supporting" more pensioners.

This conveniently ignores the fact that pensioners have already paid for the right to a decent retirement through years of contributions. The fact that workers can enjoy more years in retirement simply means that bosses, the Treasury and pension fund managers are able to cream off a smaller amount of "unused" pensions.

Who ever heard politicians and accountants 20 years ago complain that workers were not living long enough to enjoy the full fruits of their pension pots?

The "savings gap" argument claims that workers today have no savings culture and that the pensions crisis is our fault for failing to provide for ourselves – as if we were not already spending our wages on today's expenses:

Who pays for pensions?

Occupational pensions are generally paid for by so-called "employer" contributions and "employee" contributions. This falsely gives the impression that somehow the worker benefits from a kindly gift from the boss.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Both the employer's contribution and the employee's come from the same source: the wealth created by the enterprise as a whole. And who generates this wealth? Why, the workers do, by turning raw materials – steel, electrical components, data, etc. – into finished goods. This is also, by the way, the source of the company's profits.

So, when the employer contributes to the workers' pensions, all s/he is doing is returning some of the wealth created by the worker in the form of future pensions. In other words, pensions are merely wages, deferred until the worker reaches retirement age.

And when the employer demands that the employee contribution is increased and the employer contribution decreased, it is the same as demanding a pay cut.

PENSIONS ROBBERY



Workers in Bolton demonstrate against pension attacks on 18 February

mortgages, travel costs, raising children, and so on.

The average working class household in Britain has debts running into tens of thousands of pounds. Yet there are few signs of accumulated wealth on our housing estates. So we can only assume that our lack of a "savings culture" is intimately bound up with the bosses' lack of a "paying culture".

These are typical lies thrown in to make the bosses' crisis look like the workers' fault, and to turn one section of workers against another. It is the right of every person after a lifetime of productive social labour to enjoy a comfortable retirement free from financial insecurity or poverty relative to the rest of the population.

Tax the rich

If the government can spend £4 billion on invading and occupying Iraq, then it can't cry poverty when it comes to pensions provision. The wealth gap under Labour has grown enormously. Corporations have enjoyed a lengthy boom, including the biggest profits in UK history for the year 2004, and the lowest taxation rates for generations. The rich also enjoy the lowest personal tax rates for many decades. They can and should provide for the workers they have exploited for a lifetime through a steeply progressive wealth tax and by taxing big business.

Union fightback

Pressure from below has forced the leaders of the public sector unions at least to be seen to be doing something about this class-wide attack. But at best, they have merely sought the defence of the status quo, and proposed a series of more or less co-ordinated one-day strikes to achieve this.

Even so, this campaign has already raised awareness about the injustice of the government's attack, and is bringing together many unions as well as pensioners' groups.

The 18th February day of action, called by the TUC, was a rousing success in towns as far apart as Ipswich and Bolton.

Unison, TGWU, Amicus and Ucat

(local government) as well as the PCS (civil service) have followed this up by balloting for a strike on 23rd March. Up to one and a quarter million workers could take part officially and many more refuse to cross picket lines. The sheer numbers involved will raise workers' horizons about what can be achieved in the defence of their rights.

On 14th April, Natfhe (college lecturers) will join the fray, and may be accompanied by the NUT (teachers) and the civil service and the local government unions again. The FBU (firefighters) is also consulting its members.

The cross-union nature of the campaign is to be welcomed. It can help break down divisions that usually see workers standing apart. Now we need to make sure that this good start is followed through.

Defend the pensions we have, fight for the pensions we need

The attack on pensions is an attack on the whole working class: on public and private sector workers, on employed and unemployed workers, on pensioners, those in work and those yet to join the labour market. It needs a class-wide response.

The attack on pensions is a capitalist attack. The bosses are using a smokescreen of statistics about affordability, savings culture, and demographics to disguise an attempt to place the major burden of surviving after working age on the workers themselves. It needs an anticapitalist response.

The attack on pensions is a nationally and internationally co-ordinated attack, hitting workers from Brazil to Belgium. It is part of the neoliberal offensive of privatisation, deregulation, welfare cuts. It needs a national and international response.

We demand the government guarantees of all existing pensions schemes at their current level, or at the level they were before the current round of attacks. The government should demand that private pension funds and private companies deliver on this guarantee or face nationalisation without compensation.

The government must legislate so that in all companies going into liquidation the pension fund has first call on all assets, i.e. before other creditors, the banks and shareholders. The pension guarantee fund must provide 100 per cent of pensions for these workers where the assets are insufficient paid for by taxing the rich.

The basic state pension should be raised immediately to two-thirds of the national average wage (£250 a week net). It should be index-linked to wages and prices, as monitored by unions and pensioners' organisations.

Occupational pensions are a form of deferred wages, but the employer controls all the levers of them: when they are paid out, how much is paid in and out, what percentage the employer pays, how they are invested. The funds must be taken out of the hands of the bosses and placed in a trust under the democratic control of the elected union representatives of the workers and the existing pensioners from the sector, industry or company concerned, operating under government regulation.

All pensions schemes of top executives and the super rich with "pension pots" of more than £500,000 should be nationalised without compensation and used to bolster the pension guarantee fund.

All workers should, on retirement, receive two-thirds of their final salary or the basic state pension, whichever is greater, and this should be index-linked into the future.

Pension funds are in fact great big blocs of capital, usually invested on the stock exchange. This makes them doubly dangerous.

1. They are subject to the vagaries of the market, which can leave workers facing financial ruin without notice.

2. They are used as weapons against workers. They shift investment around the world in search of the lowest labour costs and worst conditions. They trade in debt and the arms industry. In times of crisis, they tend to withdraw from productive investment (i.e. useful work) and speculate on the markets, often inducing slumps that wreck millions of workers' lives.

All pension funds, including private ones, should be nationalised and be used

Decent pensions for all?

Members of Parliament

Last year MPs voted through an improvement in their own pensions arrangements, allowing them to retire on two-thirds of their salary after 27 years. As a result, MPs can expect to eek out their twilight years on £38,000 a year. Not bad after a lifetime of slashing workers' benefits.

Judges

Judges, on the other hand, only receive half of their final salary with their annual pension. But since their final salary is between £113,121 and £205,242, that ain't all bad. They will also receive a lump sum worth two and a quarter times their final salary so that they can buy that little villa (or two) in the sun.

Fat cats

Last year, a survey of the top 100 UK firms revealed that 255 directors have already built up pensions entitlements of more than £100,000 a year. More than 50 of them could retire tomorrow and receive more than £300,000 a year for the rest of their lives.

Local government workers

The average local government pension is worth just £3,800 a year. Certainly not enough to live on. Yet the fat cat is lobbying the MP to push through changes that will significantly undermine even this figure. And, no doubt, if the union fightback continues to develop, we can expect the judge to rule our strikes illegal and try to legislate us back to work!

to invest in a programme of useful public works under workers' control.

Against the attempt to raise the retirement age to 65, we demand its lowering to 55 for both men and women.

How do we organise the fightback?

The strikes called for 23rd March, 14th April and future ones must be used as launching pads for a campaign that should rapidly build into indefinite strike action across the unions.

We should argue for the most militant form of action possible, such as staying out on 24th March. We need to make sure that all protest strikes involve as many workers as possible in activity: militant picket lines, demos and road blockades, occupation of government offices and pension fund buildings, and so on.

So far, public sector unions are to the fore. Together, they should form a united front. However, we should continue to emphasise that this attack hits private sector workers as well (for example, most recently, employees at the department store, Allders).

In Italy, France and elsewhere general strikes have been called to defend pensions. We need to build for united indefinite strikes – up to and including a general strike – to defend our pensions and demand that the government implement a working class solution to the crisis.

To make this a real possibility, we should demand that all unions join in the strike days called by other unions and that the co-ordination of the action becomes unbreakable until all have won their demands.

Despite public displays of unity by the union leaders, this remains a real danger. Unison activists were left on tenterhooks just hours before the 18th February protests, as General Secretary Dave Prentis entered into secret talks with deputy prime minister John Prescott. Many believe the closeness of most union leaders to the Labour government could lead them to call off embarrassing strike action before the general election.

We say, No holding back just to get Labour re-elected. No behind the scenes' deals. All negotiations with the government should be held publicly. Rank and file representatives should be present at all negotiations.

In France, militant strikes, co-ordinated from below, nearly brought the government down. But their national leaders, who alone were in a position to negotiate on everyone's behalf, betrayed the activists.

To combat this, we must build elected, cross-union strike committees, and a national delegate meeting of strike committees to provide an alternative authority to the trade union leaders.

The first step towards such an alternative is to build local and regional public sector action groups or action committees. These should draw in delegates from local unions and workplaces, from neighbourhoods, from pensioner groups and other anticapitalist, youth and campaigning organisations. This army of activists can then take the campaign out to other workplaces and community organisations (tenants associations, student groups, and so on.)

These committees can take the lead in spreading the strikes and generalising them to the private sector, wherever possible by linking up with their grievances and struggles. These committees should develop links both nationally and internationally, with workers in Europe in struggle over pension attacks, using their union structures where possible, the structures of the European Social Forum and anticapitalist movement and developing rank and file links with European trade unionists.

These action committees should link up with the European and World Social Forum movement, both at the base and by intervening in the preparatory meetings of the ESF and other social forum events to hammer out an international plan of action to coordinate the fightback against pension attacks.

They should identify themselves as social forums and seek to establish a UK social forum, using the G8 mobilisation to raise the issue of the great pensions robbery on an international stage.

Cracks appear in Forum

Luke Cooper and Dave Stockton report on the political tensions that emerged at the WSF in Brazil

The fifth World Social Forum (WSF) that took place in Brazil in late January brought together 155,000 people for six days of discussion, debate and demonstrations on the fight against war, racism and neoliberalism. Though it was the biggest WSF yet, its division into "self-organised spaces" meant that it was even less able to focus as a body on formulating a strategy for achieving "another world".

This fragmentation of debate was no doubt a deliberate ploy by the organising committee, dominated by the Brazilian Workers Party (PT). It aimed to stifle criticism of their president, Lula, who is busy carrying out neoliberal "reforms" in Brazil, but it could not prevent the cracks appearing even within the formerly united self-appointed "leadership" of the movement.

The large plenaries, the only meetings in which the entire movement could come together, had been abolished. Of course, they were always dominated by the "big names" of the NGOs, by radical academics and journalists and the disguised representative of big reformist parties. But they did, to some extent, debate competing strategies on the way forward.

But politics abhors a vacuum. Into it stepped two Presidents – Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) of Brazil and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela – and this despite the hypocritical ban on "political parties" at the WSF. Chávez's star was in the ascendant in 2005; Lula's, the star of the 2003 WSF, was in a steep decline.

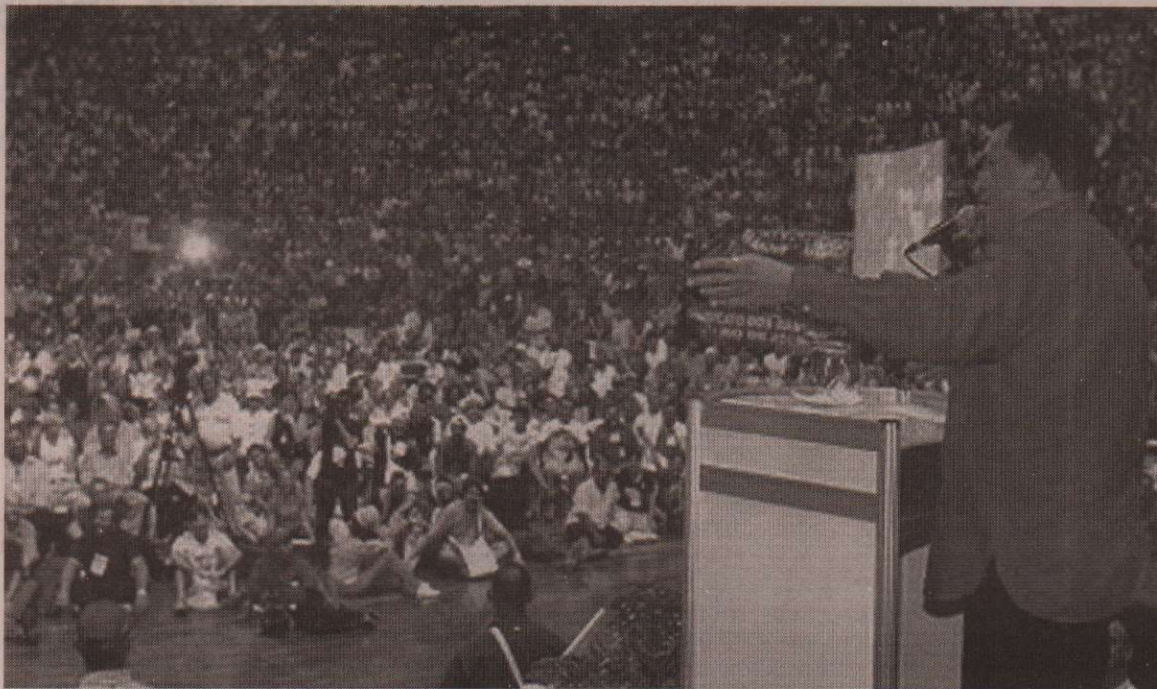
Cheers fade for Lula

On the first morning of the event, Lula spoke to a meeting of 12,000 in the Gigantinho stadium on the "Global Call to Action against Poverty" (GCAP), a campaign aimed at pressuring the G8 governments to fulfil promises they have repeatedly made and broken since the year 2000 to "eradicate poverty" in the world.

Lula, like Gordon Brown, has signed up to this attempt to use world public opinion to pressure the G8 into making yet another promise, which will be broken just as the promises extracted by the Jubilee 2000 campaign were broken. Outside the same stadium where Lula was mouthing platitudes about ending poverty, around 3,000 activists, organised by public sector trade unions and leftwing parties like P-Sol and PSTU, showed their militant opposition to his neoliberal reforms that have hit students and workers alike.

In sharp contrast to Lula's performance, at the end of the forum Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez addressed 17,000 wildly cheering activists packed into the same stadium. Chávez' audience was probably divided in half between pro- and anti-Lula supporters. But all of them cheered Chávez. The reason: he has used his country's oil wealth, \$4 billion so far, to activate healthcare and literacy programmes, making him a hero right across Latin America and enraging the United States. Lula, on the other hand, has attacked sections of workers so he can continue paying the country's huge debt to the World Bank.

During his 90-minute speech, Chávez savaged the United States, its war in Iraq, its exploitation of the global south and its repeated interventions in Latin American countries, including Venezuela. He intervened directly in the debate about where the WSF should be going. "It is time to take a step and this fifth WSF could be the beginning



Chávez addresses the World Social Forum

of a new phase, and the next five years should be accompanied by a world social agenda. To that agenda we must add a strategy of power." And he added to enthusiastic applause, "It is difficult to work within this capitalism system – we need socialism."

He confirmed that Venezuela would host the next Hemispheric Social Forum in 2006, which was greeted with a roar of approval. Chávez has called for a "new International" during his recent visit to Spain. Who knows, he may even be contemplating some sort of re-founding of the 1964 Tricontinental Conference of his hero Che Guevara.

Cracks in the WSF leadership

Since its foundation in 2001, the World Social Forum had been dominated by the most openly reformist sections of the movement, having been established by Lula's Workers' Party (PT) in alliance with Attac, based in France, and a worldwide coalition of radical NGOs. They have consistently sought to sideline the more openly "anticapitalist" elements within the movement.

In 2005, this alliance began to crack apart under the strain of Lula's neoliberal record in government. Chico Whitaker, the PT's main ideologue in the social forum movement, advocates the WSF remaining only an "open space" for ideas and debates. He argues strongly against its development into a movement that could organise a struggle against capitalism and war.

The fear of being discredited by the Lula presidency and leaving the field open to the more radical elements, like Chávez or the militants of the Assembly of the Social Movements led most of the Attac France leaders to join more radical figures to produce an attempted "consensus" of policies for the movement as whole.

Nineteen academics and journalists produced what they called the Porto Alegre Consensus: a programmatic declaration they believed everyone at the social forum could agree on. They include Nobel prize winning novelist José Saramago; long time development theorists like Eduardo Galeano, Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein; key writers from *Le Monde Diplomatique* like François Houtart, Ignacio Ramonet, and Bernard Cassen; and anti-war and anti-capitalist writers and activists such as Tariq Ali and Walden Bello.

That Bello and Ali are impatient with



Youth were the overwhelm

the paralysis of the WSF is no surprise, but when Cassen from Attac abandons the defence of the WSF as purely a "space" we can see that something is wrong.

The declaration, as might be expected, includes a series of mild reforms, such as cancelling only the state debt of the countries of the South, adopting the Tobin Tax, food sovereignty, fair trade, and so on. But there is not a word about how these reforms can be realised. No strategy for power, to use Chavez' own words. But the most staggering omission is the failure to even mention the Iraq occupation, the US threats against Iran, Venezuela, North Korea or Cuba. And even more remarkable there was no mention of the Palestinian struggle.

A call to action

It was left to the World Assembly of the Social Movements meeting on the last morning in Porto Alegre to issue a call for an international antiwar day of action on 19 March in a resolution endorsed by a meeting of more than a thousand militants.

After sharp criticism of the WSF from delegates of the Iraqi National Resistance, the Assembly came closer to explicit support for the anti-imperialist struggle against the US/UK occu-

pation. It also demanded the evacuation of illegal settlements on Palestinian land and the pulling down of the Apartheid Wall (see box for extracts from the resolution).

The fifth World Social Forum was thus marked by increasing polarisation – even if this was probably far from clear to many of its participants, because of the lack of a mass debate over these differences.

The idea of the WSF giving birth to an anti-imperialist International, with agreed policies and co-ordinated action, was invoked by Chavez and others. Bernard Cassen, Walden Bello and company cautiously hint at recreating reformist or third world nationalist "internationals". The old Stalinist parties are linking up too. The fragments of the Fourth International were well represented in the Assembly of Social Movements.

There is a revolutionary alternative to all attempts to revive these dead Internationals. It is to transform the new mass internationalism and anti-imperialism into a new world party of socialist revolution. In Porto Alegre we made the call for a Fifth International wherever we had the opportunity and we found that it met with a warm response from rank and file activists and provoked serious discussion.

Assembly of Social Movements

We print below some extracts from the declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements.

- "The enormous success of a plural and massive participation in the WSF gives us the possibility and the responsibility to improve and increase our campaigns and mobilisations, to extend and to strengthen our struggles ...
- "Agenda of struggle ... to build together a campaign for the immediate and unconditional cancellation of the external debt of the South ...
- "Two years on from the invasion to Iraq the global opposition to war is larger than ever. ... We call on the movements to mobilise on 19 March in a great global day of action to demand the withdrawal of the occupation troops from Iraq. No more wars!"
- "We support all the campaigns for disarmament and de-militarisation, campaigns against the military bases of the United States around the world, campaigns for nuclear disarmament, for the control of arms trade and the slashing of military expenditure."
- "We call for a mass mobilisation against the summit of the G8 in Scotland from 2 to 8 July. We will take to the streets and participate in the countersummit in Edinburgh and Gleneagles."
- "We support the fight of the Palestinian people for its national and fundamental rights, including the right of return, based on international law and the resolutions of the UN. ..."

What we think

Unlike the "Consensus of Porto Alegre" which studiously avoids any mention of action, the resolution correctly issues calls to militant mass protest. The weaknesses of the Assembly resolution lies in its failure to identify

- The capitalist system as the enemy.
- The working class as the force that must come to the leadership of the movement, with both the interest and the power to overthrow capitalism.
- Socialism as the only possible basis for the "other world" it aims to build global revolution as the only means of defeating capitalism
- Any steps to creating a world coordination of struggles, let alone a leadership to unite and direct them to victory. In short the resolution does not escape the limits of a radical populist reformism.

Venezuela: Chavez turns left

Imperialist pressure is forcing Hugo Chavez to seek new allies among the poor, writes *Stuart King*

In the middle of January, addressing a crowd of 10,000 and standing under a huge banner declaring "Free land and men – War against the Latifundia", President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela announced a new decree to speed up land reform in the country. The slogan was not his but a 19th century peasant leader's, Ezquiel Zamora, after whom the decree was named.

The measure brought howls of protest, not just from Washington, but also from the British Embassy in Caracas. It was no wonder; a few days earlier peasants had taken over a farm of one of the largest British landholders in Venezuela – the Vestey Group's 32,000 acre El Charcote estate (it also has 13 other estates in the country!).

This was just the latest in a wave of land seizures by groups of peasant farmers across Venezuela and it was this pressure that Chavez was responding to.

LAND HUNGER

Venezuela, like other countries in Latin America, has massive inequality in land ownership. There is plenty of land but it is owned by a tiny, wealthy minority. In Venezuela 60 per cent of all farmland is owned by 1 per cent of the population; meanwhile, 75 per cent of all landholders share 6 per cent of the land – and most live in poverty.

An earlier Land Reform Law, passed in 2001 and aimed at redistributing underused government lands, was one of the laws that led directly to the coup attempt against Chavez in April 2002. The new law is still a moderate one. It is aimed at the big estates of more than 5,000 hectares (12,000 acres) which are not using (or are underutilising) land and offers compensation for land given over to the peasants. It also puts these estates under investigation as to whether they have real titles to the land. Many large landowners in Venezuela just seized land from the indigenous Indian population or peasant farmers. Others took over government land under corrupt deals with local officials.

It is this, and the land occupations, that strikes fear into multinationals like Vestey. They demand the right not only to hold massive farms and ranches but also to produce on them or not, depending on the whim of the international markets' demand for their products. Meanwhile, Venezuela has to import more than 60 per cent of its food – even for the staple diets of the poor like beans or pulses.

Part of Chavez' programme has always been to redress this unbalanced economy and develop the country's agriculture, reducing its dependence on oil as the major driver of the economy. Nine out of 10 of Venezuela's 25 million population has ended up in the cities as a result of the collapse of agriculture since the 1970s – and half of them have to survive in the informal economy because of the lack of real jobs.

While the imperialists and multinationals have threatened the government with an investment boycott in agribusiness if "seizures" go ahead, Chavez has done his utmost to promise that the "rule of law" will be followed and proper compensation will be offered to companies involved.

RADICALISATION

Chavez's victory over the reactionary opposition in last August's attempted recall referendum has radicalised the country. This was swiftly followed by crushing victories in the state elections at the end of October, which left the pro-US elite in control of only two states



Hugo Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro

in the country. New state governors, under pressure from the peasants' occupations, and encouraged by Chavez, have taken the lead in pressing forward the land reforms.

Chavez, who has suffered several coup attempts and a two month long bosses' strike and lockout in 2002-3, is taking advantage of the opposition's disarray. The opposition's main strength remains its backing by imperialism, in particular Washington's determination to try and remove Chavez.

Condoleezza Rice has declared

Chavez a "negative force in the region" and, while Venezuela has not quite reached the heady heights of an "outpost of tyranny", it is regularly briefed about as an "authoritarian democracy". The CIA, in a recent report to the Senate Intelligence Committee, declared Venezuela to be a "flashpoint" for 2005 because of its "meddling in the region" and its support for Cuba.

Flashpoint it certainly is. Judge Danilo Anderson, who was investigating the leading politicians involved in the 2001 coup and their links to the US,

was killed by a bomb placed under his car last November. Recently Rodrigo Granda, the foreign representative of the Colombian guerrilla movement Farc and a Venezuelan citizen, was kidnapped from the capital after security forces in the Colombian government bribed Venezuelan military police to arrest and deliver him to their agents.

Chavez's response to these provocations emanating from Washington has been to deepen the Latin American perspective of his "Bolivarian Revolution"; using the oil wealth and growing

economic strength of the country to solidify an alliance against "the colossus to the north" and against its neoliberal drive in the region.

He has developed important economic links to Cuba (much to Washington's disgust). For example, 15,000 Cuban doctors have been sent to run 300 new medical clinics in Venezuela's slums and rural areas, providing much needed medical help to a section of the population always denied it in the past, and bolstering Chavez' support among the poor. In return Cuba receives at least 53,000 barrels of oil a day on extremely favourable terms, helping to undermine the US blockade of the country.

LINKS WITH LATIN AMERICA

Chavez has gone out of his way to develop economic links with Brazil and Argentina and sponsor joint development projects in energy, oil and industry – counterposing his "Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas" to the US project of a neoliberal Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

Recently Venezuela has announced plans to purchase Brazilian fighter jets as a result of US delays in servicing its US F15s. Washington has also criticised its lack of transparency in arms deals with Russia. Apparently Venezuela has put in an order for at least 100,000 AK47s and other small arms – Chavez has obviously been watching the Iraqi resistance!

Most dramatically, at the World Social Forum, Chavez clearly made a bid for the ideological leadership of the movement. There were 15,000 crammed the Gigantinho Stadium to hear his speech – much of which was a denunciation of US government policy and neo-liberalism. He declared that US imperialism was "not invincible" and invited the audience to look at Vietnam, look at Iraq and Cuba resisting. "Everyday," he said, "I become more convinced that it is necessary to transcend capitalism... But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion as the Soviet Union". Instead he posited a "new type of socialism, a humanist one".

But it is also a very muddled one. Chavez might be moving left under the pressure of the masses, and to defend himself against the offensive of imperialism, but his "socialism" and internationalism remains of the reformist variety. He defended Lula's presidency in Brazil, suggesting his critics were too "impatient". He declared that, with Lula, Nestor Kirchner of Argentina and Tabare Vasquez of Uruguay, "we will be opening the path to realising the dream of a united Latin America". He even declared Putin of Russia a "good president".

He might not like the "perversion of the Soviet Union" but clearly Chavez' foreign policy has much in common with Stalin's "socialism in one country" – there must be no criticism of allies who are useful in the struggle with the US.

The defence of the revolutionary situation in Venezuela, the gains the masses have made on the streets and in the countryside, can only be made permanent by expropriating the capitalists and landowners, by disarming the counter-revolution and establishing a workers' and peasants' republic of Venezuela. In this struggle Chavez will turn out to be a fickle ally. The real allies of the Venezuelan people in this struggle against imperialism and capitalism will not be the bourgeois and reformist presidents of Latin America, but the workers and poor farmers of the continent, mobilised arms in hand against imperialism.

Struggle in the unions

The trade unions in Venezuela are very weak. Only half of all workers are employed in the formal sector and, of these, only 14 per cent are in unions, mainly in the public sector. The Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) was for decades the single trade union centre. By the 1990s it was a largely unaccountable body, tied to the dominant ruling party, and in a "strategic alliance" with the employers federation Fedecamaras.

The union greeted the victory of Chavez and his Bolivarian movement in national elections in the late 1990s with hostility. Leaders of the CTV were involved in the military coup that tried to oust Chavez in 2002. The CTV led the two month lockout alongside the employers, which attempted to bring down the government in 2003.

As a result Chavez has made no secret of his determination to destroy the CTV as a force in the country. After the defeat of the lockout the government sacked 18,000 workers who had paralysed the oil industry, many of them skilled blue and white collar workers, delivering a serious blow to the CTV. Demands by the International

Labour Organisation for their reinstatement resulted in Chavez famously telling them "they could go and fry monkeys" as far as he was concerned.

By May 2003 opposition unionists within the CTV formed a new federation, the National Union of Venezuelan Workers (UNT). This union federation has grown rapidly in the past 18 months and now claims to be larger than the CTV. The UNT has been riven with disputes however, largely between those close to the Chavista movement and government and those who argue for a more autonomous stance.

Workers have taken the opportunity to throw out the bureaucratic union leaders. Unions, normally organised on a plant by plant basis, are required by law to hold recall elections if the workers demand it. Oppositionists within the unions have used this law to great effect – a victory replaces the old union with the new one. The government has greatly aided this development by introducing a moratorium in April 2003 on laying off low-paid workers. This allows workers to organise without fear of sacking. All nine referendums held in 2004 were won by new unions, often with the help of the UNT, and

included factories belonging to Coca Cola and Ford.

In a number of factories the crisis caused by the two month long lockout in 2003 led to bankruptcies or a refusal to compensate workers. The new unions have been winning back pay and often leading demands for bankrupt factories to be nationalised under the control of the workers. The UNT slogan is "No to globalisation, yes to worker management". Most recently a major paper mill Venepal went bankrupt despite a government rescue package to the employers. Now it has been nationalised and it is to be run on a "co-ownership" basis between the workers and the government.

Chavez' project of promoting a "third way" socialism of co-managed enterprises and rural co-operatives, existing alongside multinational capital, is only possible thanks to the large subsidies he can provide via the oil industry. If the workers seek to extend their control throughout the economy, they will not only find themselves in struggle with the multinationals, but facing Chavez demanding restraint because of the economic costs to his government functioning within the world market.

Elections did not free Iraq

Constrained by the rules imposed by the US/UK occupation authorities, the new “democratically elected” Iraqi government’s role is to split and fragment resistance to the illegal occupation, reports *Sean Murray*

To much fanfare from Bush and Blair the final results of the elections to the Iraqi National Assembly were announced on 17 February. The Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) won the 30 January election with 48 per cent of the vote, was allocated 140 seats. The Kurdish parties, which came second in the poll, have 75 seats and interim PM Iyad Allawi’s party 40 seats.

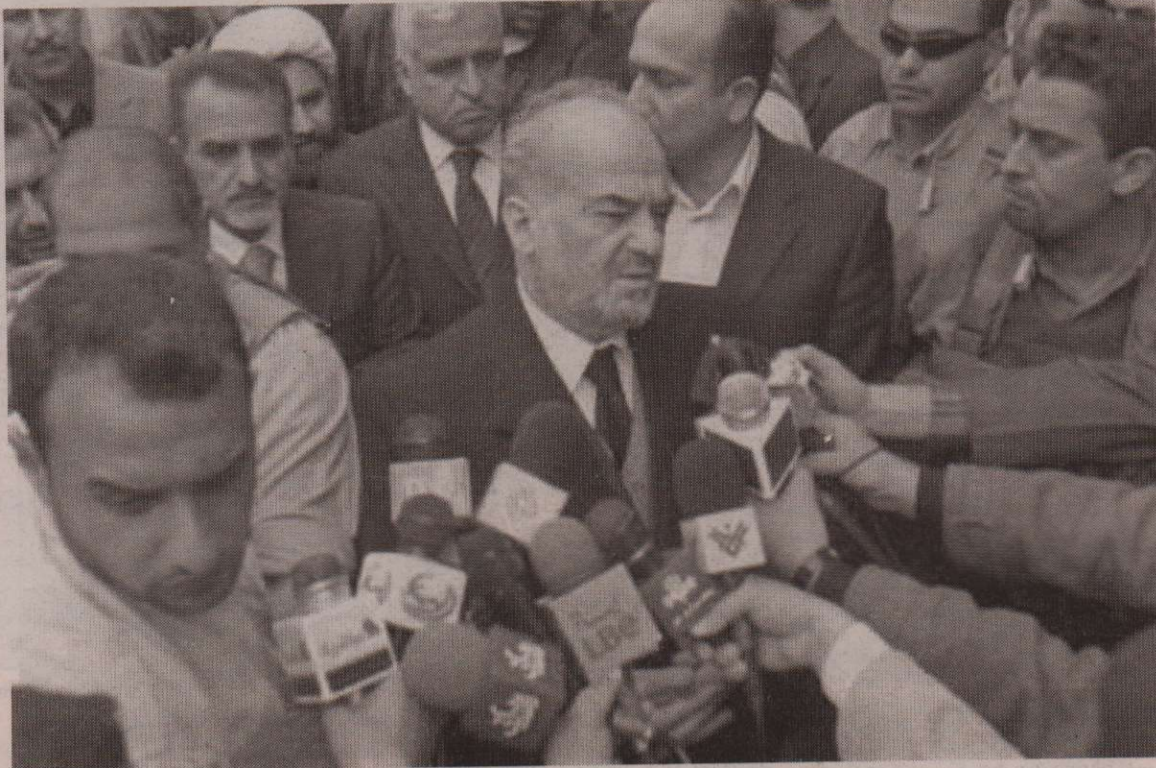
The 275-seat National Assembly will first have to choose a largely symbolic President and two Vice-Presidents. They will in turn appoint a Prime Minister – the most important position in the new government – and a cabinet.

Negotiations are still continuing as to who will be the new Prime Minister. The front-runner is the current interim Vice-President, Dr Ibrahim al-Jaafari, spokesperson for the Islamic Dawa Party.

But even as the results were being announced, Bush and Blair were confirming that the new government would continue to be subservient to the US/UK occupation. Opinion polls report that 80 per cent of Iraqis want the US/UK forces to leave now. The second point on the platform of the UIA calls for “a timetable for the withdrawal of the multinational forces from Iraq.” But four days after the Iraqis voted – the majority presumably in favour of this point – Bush stated that “you don’t set timetables.” And while Tony Blair called the elections “magnificent” he dismissed a firm timetable out of hand.

Other statements in the platform of the UIA guarantee a job to every Iraqi; proposes social security and compensation to workers; state support for the building of houses for homeowners and the provision of health services, medicine and medical insurance. It also supports women’s participation in politics, the economy and social life; support for youth and for families; developing industry and agriculture and education. In addition it calls for an independent foreign policy. All these can also expect a veto by Bush, Blair and the real power in Iraq, US ambassador John Negroponte – a man who organised death squads in Latin America in the early 1980s.

While Allawi and his government were also rejected at the polls the former finance minister in the interim government, Adel Abd al-Mahdi, looks set to continue to be an important



Ibrahim al-Jaafari, front runner for Iraq's Prime Minister

figure in the new cabinet.

Al-Mahdi is the Bush administration’s man in the UIA. In October, he told a gathering of the American Enterprise Institute that he planned to “restructure and privatise [Iraq’s] state-owned enterprises”, and in December he made another trip to Washington to unveil plans for a new oil law, “very promising to the American investors”. It was al-Mahdi himself who oversaw the signing of a flurry of deals with Shell, BP and ChevronTexaco in the weeks before the elections, and it is he who negotiated the recent austerity deal with the IMF.

The “independent” government is anything but. The US occupiers completely control the national budget – both the oil sales revenues and reconstruction and other funds allocated to it by the US administration. The US and British occupiers of Iraq have 150,000 service personnel, 20,000 private “security” contractors, a budget of \$50 billion a year. They have four permanent military bases and 10 more are planned.

Before he handed over to the collaborator Allawi, US pro-consul Paul Bremer enacted one hundred or more rules

and “transitional administrative laws” which the Iraqi parliament and the incoming government cannot change. These impose permanent low tax rates, an open door to US investment, and privatise huge chunks of state-owned property: in short the full neoliberal agenda, ensuring US corporate domination.

Bremer not only chose the interim Iraqi government, he purged its permanent bureaucracy, selected its judges, and imposed contracts in these ministries, lasting years ahead. The National Assembly can change the ministers but will have to operate within this strait jacket until presidential elections next December. And this too will take place under the same conditions as the recent election. Only the utter slavishness of the western billionaire media conceals this shameful fact from the population in the occupying countries.

But even this fraudulent victory would not have been possible without concession wrought out of US as a result of the mass uprising in 2004.

The election results testify to a strategic concession the US-UK occupation authorities made to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, in return for

undermining the movement of resistance to the occupation during the siege of Najaf last year.

It provides the only possible basis for Bush and Blair to claim that the elections represents the democratic will of the Iraqi people and endorses the war and occupation. In fact opinion polls continue to show 80 per cent of Iraqis oppose the occupation. Events over the coming months will make it abundantly clear that the results are not an endorsement of the occupation.

The price of victory for George Bush was to sideline the large Sunni Arab minority from whom the rulers of Iraq have been drawn since the foundation of the state.

The conservative Shi’a clerics around Sistani could hardly refuse the historic offer of power, though they will have to share this power with the Kurdish nationalist leaders, the other excluded grouping in the traditional arrangement. No matter to the Americans that by creating a different excluded minority out of the former Sunni dominant élites they have laid the basis for an ongoing conflict that could degenerate into a bloody confessional and ethnic

civil war. If it happens the main criminals will not be the Iraqi Islamists or Ba’athists but Bush and Blair.

Last autumn they faced the nightmare of the collapse of their occupation strategy as radical Shi’as and the varied opposition forces within the so-called Sunni triangle came together to oppose the occupation arms in hand. The US occupiers and the puppet regime pulled all the dirty tricks they could to split this alliance, including bombs in the different communities’ mosques, assassinations of leaders and so on. The elections were also devised as a way to split the population because Bush and company knew the Sunni population would boycott the poll.

Part of US/UK’s strategic aim to split the popular resistance was to bring the Shi’as to power under their most conservative leaders. Now the Iraqi people will have to pay the price. The only way to shorten this process and save the Iraqi people from the poisonous “divide and rule” policy designed by the Anglo-American occupiers is to drive them out as quickly as possible.

Guerrilla warfare – now confined in its support to a minority section of the population – is not the solution. Class struggle is. Of course armed resistance to the occupiers remains not only important, but also unavoidable. In the south and the north, in the Shi’a areas of Baghdad, in the southern oil-fields, resistance can take a mass form on the streets and in the workplaces. It must do so. Radical Islamism can only divide the resistance, alienate women, youth, intellectuals and above all workers.

That is why a workers’ party, secular, socialist and revolutionary, must emerge in Iraq committed to the total and immediate expulsion of the occupiers and the mobilisation of the country’s resources for reconstruction of homes, schools, factories, roads and rail links. Such a party must be internationalist, linked to the Palestinian struggle, to all progressive forces in the Middle East and central Asia and to the antiwar and anticapitalist movement in the west.

A resurgent international movement could undermine the US and UK rulers’ support at home, and the morale of its troops in the field, helping to bring about a defeat for imperialism and a massive impulse to revolution everywhere.

Iraqi trade unionist tours Britain

Hassan Juma’a is the Chair of the Southern Oil Company trade union, based in Basra. He has been touring the country talking to anti-war groups and trade unionists. Below are excerpts from a transcript of a translated talk he gave at the University of London Union on 8 February.

Q: What kind of links do you have with other Iraqi workers?

HJ: The aim is for one oil union. We are currently the biggest, in terms of numbers and in terms of production. We have links with workers in Nasiriyah, Kirkuk and many other areas.

Q: How much agreement is there between the Iraqi unions on, for example, the question of independence from the state?

HJ: There are three trade union federations in Iraq. The state, under pro consul Paul Bremer, recognises the first – the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) – as the sole official federation. Under the rules of the International Labour Organisation this is illegal. The IFTU is formed by the principle of coalition – 5 representatives from Allawi’s party, 5 from the Communist Party, 5 from the Arab Socialist Movement. Rasim Allawadi is the president – he is a deputy for Allawi’s party.

The second claims to be independent and has representatives from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution and the Dawa party [both major Shi’a religious parties].

The third is led by Falah Awan and the Worker-Communist Party leads it.

The Arab Labour organisation invites delegates from all three federations.

We are co-ordinating on shared aims – to gain workers’ rights and to plan how to expel the occupation.

Q: If the trade unions are independent from politics, do they still have an impact on politics and the occupation? For example I have heard about a strike that was organised during the US attack on Najaf.

HJ: Our work ranges from Shipping in Basra to operations north of Baghdad, and it was the workers at the BS3 plant within the Najaf area who stopped work. As a union, we have the power and the muscle to make the government listen by halting work.

Q: Your region is occupied mainly by British forces. Have British forces intervened in favour of the private companies? And what actions are

legitimate for trade unions in order to end the occupation?

HJ: There was a strike by Khurafi welders (traditionally highly paid) who had not got their wages. They were told if they did not go back to work US forces would be used to break the strike. During another Khurafi strike, tanks came and put themselves between the company management and strikers. These incidents are not reported because of the occupation’s clamp down. With regard to trade unions acting against the occupation, all forces that want an end to the occupation must unite. Trade unions are like any other who wants an end to the occupation – by all available means. We back all Iraqis, because we want to be inside the arena of struggle, we do not want to be outside

Q: I heard that the SOC union was once within the IFTU – what happened? And

also, can trade unions help the unemployed?

A: We were never part of the IFTU, because we questioned their legitimacy. Abdullah Muhsin [UK representative of the IFTU] often tells people here that we are part of the IFTU. I say now, let him know that I have been nominated to the board of co-ordination between Iraqi and Iranian oil trade unions by the Arab Labour league. So how can we be affiliated to the IFTU if the Arab League deals with us separately. In fact I have a document issued to the IFTU declaring that the IFTU will dissolve itself after the election of a new Iraqi government. On the other question, we do not organise with the unemployed but we try to find them work!
• For more on the tour or Iraq go to www.iraqoccupationfocus.org.uk

New roadmap is new trap

The latest ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza may renew hope that there will be a just peace. But it is the strengthening of Israel and imperialism that has allowed this to take pace, writes *Keith Harvey*

Since the death of PLO leader and Palestine Authority leader Yasser Arafat last November, events political and diplomatic have moved swiftly. On 9 January Abu Mazen was elected President of the PA in a popular vote inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Early in February a formal ceasefire between the PLO and Israel was announced at a summit between Abu Mazen and Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at Sharm al-Sheik.

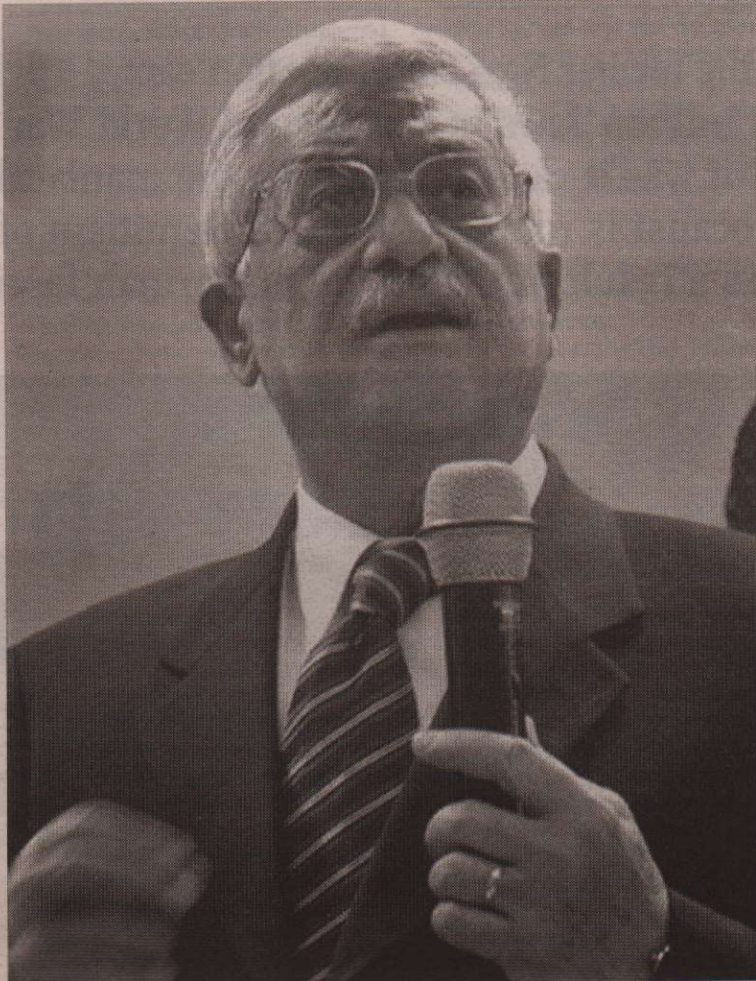
The ceasefire conditions on the Palestinian side include a halt to attacks on Israeli civilians, settlers and army by Palestinians, and a commitment by Abu Mazen's new administration to crack down on "extremists" in Hamas and Islamic Jihad. For his part Sharon agreed to suspend targeted assassinations of Palestinian militants by Israel, withdraw IDF forces from five West Bank towns, ease border movement between Gaza and Egypt, and release hundreds of the 7,000 Palestinians in Israel's jails.

But why now, four years after the start of the Palestinian uprising (intifada) provoked by Sharon's visit to the Muslim holy shrine in Jerusalem, after 3,000 Palestinian deaths – many of them young children – and 1,000 Israeli deaths, most in Israel itself and targeted in retaliation for the ongoing repression and butchery by Israel's occupying forces?

Essentially, the timing is a result of three factors. First, the re-election of George Bush in the USA in November allowed for a new diplomatic initiative in the Middle East to try and stabilise the running sore of the Palestine-Israel conflict. On the military and diplomatic defensive in Iraq and having inflamed Muslim and Arab opinion in the entire region after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the second Bush administration desperately needs to be seen to working towards producing a settlement that gives the Palestinians some form of independent state for which they have been striving for nearly 40 years.

Secondly, Israel has an interest in securing a period of relative calm while it undertakes its withdrawal from the Gaza strip and consolidation of its grip on the West Bank by means of the completion of the "separation wall" which divides Israel from the West Bank. In late February Sharon's cabinet agreed to pull out all 7000 Jewish settlers from the 17 settlements in the Gaza strip (as well as four settlements in the northern West Bank – all by 20 July). The same meeting agreed the route of the separation wall south of Jerusalem, underlining Israel's determination to annex whole swathes of the West Bank and permanently swallow up its 120 Jewish settlements and 230,000 settlers into Israel proper.

An Israeli withdrawal from Gaza while under fire from Hamas and other fighters would be a major propaganda blow to Sharon, allowing the Palestinians to portray the Gaza withdrawal as a victory for armed resistance. In fact Israel has decided that there is little by way of resources (water, land, minerals) to be had by holding onto the Gaza Strip and it is best left as an open prison, formally under the "control" of the PA and Hamas but with no sovereignty over its borders, airspace or even internal security forces. The removal of "refusenik" settlers may produce unsightly scenes but they will all be



Abu Mazen

handsomely compensated and relocated into entrenched West Bank settlements.

Thirdly, the death of Arafat and the election of Abu Mazen as his successor give both Bush and Sharon an opportunity to tilt the PA towards a more compliant and pro-imperialist stance. Abu Mazen was and is a public opponent of the intifada. He has taken steps to overcome the fractured, warring and corrupt Palestinian security services – loyal only to Arafat's patronage. Under the new control of Nasser Youssef as interior minister the security services are in the process of being unified, purged and directed more and more to the prevention of attacks on Israel by Hamas and Islamic Jihad rather than the defence of Palestinians from attack by the IDF. The CIA and Shin Bet (Israel's secret service) will have a greater role than before in "assisting" this process and "professionalising" the embryonic repressive apparatus of the Palestinian mini-state. The London summit this month hosted by Blair and Condoleezza Rice for Israel and Abu Mazen had little else on its agenda but how to get the PA to crack down on forces that refuse to respect the ceasefire – especially relevant coming days after the 25 February suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, the first since last November.

In this context socialists cannot welcome the ceasefire, renouncing as it does the right of Palestinians to defend themselves against brutal and ongoing attacks by the IDF. During the weeks of the ceasefire, Israeli violations (for example killing of young stone-throwers) have been common. In addition, the ceasefire entirely serves the political interests of Sharon and Bush and has not a hope in hell of being used to advance the main goals of the intifada.

And this is the poison chalice in the hands of Abu Mazen. He remains committed publicly to the three fundamen-

tal planks of the PLO and PA policy: a sovereign and independent Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders, free of Jewish settlers; the release of all Palestinian prisoners; right of return of all those Palestinians who have been expelled from their homes and land during and since 1948 and the recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state.

Meanwhile Bush – while rhetorically on record as favouring an independent Palestinian state within contiguous territory – has made it very clear that he backs Sharon's stance that the West Bank settlements in the main are "here to stay", thus making Sharon very happy and such a Palestinian state impossible. Likewise Sharon has reiterated time and again that Jerusalem "will remain united and Jewish" and that those prisoners "with blood on their hands" can expect to serve out their sentences.

So the ceasefire, even if it lasts until the Gaza "disengagement", will not lead smoothly on to a "final status" agreement on the nature of a Palestinian state. And the ceasefire may well not last. In the June-August ceasefire of 2003 (when Abu Mazen was briefly Prime Minister under Arafat) the Israelis demanded as a precondition that the PA waged war on Hamas and closed it down – a provocative and unrealistic call for Abu Mazen to ignite a civil war. Israeli provocations reached a crescendo in August with the killing of a moderate Hamas political leader, Ismail Abu Shanab, forcing Hamas to abandon the ceasefire.

But whatever the short term fate of the ceasefire Palestinian hopes for a just two state solution to their aspirations for self-determination will founder on the nature of the Zionist project itself. As a state specifically for Jews, with privileges for its Jewish citizens and second class status for the 18 per cent of its population who are

Intifada timeline

DECEMBER 1987: Hatem al-Sisi, 17, shot dead in Gaza Strip after a group of youths throw stones at Israeli soldiers during a protest. Palestinian uprising known as the Intifada (shaking off) begins. Uprising is characterised by stone-throwing, strikes, demonstrations, refusal to pay taxes and civil disobedience. PLO leadership in exile in Tunis has no contact with forces involved and tries to defuse the movement. Later, the PLO will attempt to control it and use it as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Israel and the US.

AUGUST 1990: Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait. He is ejected by US-led forces in February 1991, following which US President George H Bush pledges to impose a new order on the Middle East, calling for a peace conference between Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states. The PLO, weakened by its support for a defeated Iraq, attends. US pressure forces Israel under hard-line Likud PM Yitzhak Shamir to eventually attend.

SEPTEMBER 1993: After a change of government in Israel, Labour PM Yitzhak Rabin signs the Oslo accords with a weakened and exhausted PLO. Accords grant limited autonomy to Palestinians in small areas of the West Bank and Gaza and a promise to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in future "final status" talks. In return, PLO recognises Israel's right to exist as a specifically Jewish state and promises to prevent Palestinian attacks on Israel. Intifada comes to an end as Yasser Arafat returns to Gaza to set up new Palestinian Authority (PA).

Peace deal puts an end to the fighting, but leaves unresolved problems, including the question of the right of return of Palestinian refugees, now numbering around 3.7 million. Jewish settlements in the occupied territories continue to grow while Israel strings out and delays negotiations to create more settlements. Likud government of Binyamin Netanyahu from 1996 onwards carries out provocations against Palestinians resulting in growth of the Islamic Resistance Movement ("Hamas") in opposition both to the Israeli occupation and to Oslo and the Palestinian Authority. Ehud Barak's Labour government later tries to resume negotiations.

Arab, Israel can be neither democratic nor at peace with a Palestinian neighbour.

To keep the Jewish character of the Zionist state intact when demographic trends ensure an Arab majority inside the territory under Israel's control in 20 or so years, demands two things: first a desperate attempt to tempt the Jewish diaspora to come to live there – already foundering badly after ten years of hoovering up Russian and East European Jews. Secondly, it means further repression of Arabs in Israel. Already the voices of those who seek to make ethnic cleansing an acceptable facet of domestic policy are gaining more and more of a hearing. Why not drive them out into other countries like Jordan, Egypt or the Gaza strip?

JULY 2000: Peace talks collapse as Barak and US President Bill Clinton try to pressure Arafat into accepting an ultimatum that would allow Israel to annex most of the West Bank following "final status" talks. Explosive situation is ignited in September when Barak provides massive police protection to provocative demonstration led by Likud leader Ariel Sharon to Muslim holy site in Jerusalem. The "Al-Aqsa intifada" begins.

New uprising sparks worldwide solidarity actions and protests globally. But it has none of the mass character of the first Intifada, and is characterised by the use of suicide bombs by Hamas and other groups against Israeli military and civilian targets. Israel responds to uprising by "targeted killings" of Palestinian activists, imposing a state of siege on the inhabitants of the occupied territories and by incursions into PA-run areas that leave many civilians dead. Following Ariel Sharon's election as prime minister, Arafat is imprisoned in his compound in Ramallah as Israeli troops invade Palestinian cities to smash Palestinian resistance.

APRIL 2003: After US invasion of Iraq, President George W Bush announces his "Roadmap for Peace" in the Middle East, in recognition of the fact that the oppression of the Palestinians was a major contributing factor to the growth of "international terrorism" and Islamism. Proposal makes several demands on the Palestinians, the first being the dismantling and disarming of all "terrorist groups", and the other being reform of the PA to weaken Arafat and "professionalise" its security forces.

FEBRUARY 2004: Ariel Sharon announces his plan for a unilateral Israeli withdrawal (or "disengagement") of all Israeli soldiers and settlers from Gaza. This is to take place alongside the building of a massive "security fence" that will separate the West Bank from Israel while annexing large swathes of Palestinian territory.

NOVEMBER 2004: Arafat dies after prolonged illness and is replaced by former PM Mahmoud Abbas (aka Abu Mazen) in Palestinian elections in January 2005. Abbas begins negotiations with Sharon on withdrawal from Gaza and an end to the Palestinian uprising.

And of course the swelling numbers of Jews need somewhere to live and the only places they can go are to land occupied by another people – Palestinians in the West Bank. In short, Israel is a settler expansionist state and until its Zionist foundations are destroyed and replaced by a bi-national secular state peace and justice cannot be combined in Palestine-Israel. But since this cannot be done – given competing historic claims over land and resources, there can be no solution based on capitalist private property. Only a socialist state based on the expropriation of land and key industries under the control of the working class can underpin a state with no privileges for any religious or ethnic groups and democratic rights for all.

The Holocaust

The 60th anniversary of the liberation of the former Nazi extermination camp, will be remembered across the world this year. The massacre of six million Jews in the Second World War was one of the most brutal events of the twentieth century. But was it caused simply by the maniacal anti-Semitism of one man? Dave Stockton argue that the Holocaust is rooted in the anti-Semitism of the imperialist epoch and the genocide must be understood as a result of the nature of German fascism and its war aims

The massacre of six million Jews in the Second World War was one of the most brutal events of the twentieth century. But was it caused simply by the maniacal anti-Semitism of one man? The Holocaust is rooted in the anti-Semitism of the imperialist epoch and the genocide must be understood as a result of the nature of German fascism and its war aims.

National Socialism was a regime of extreme crisis. In the 1930s it reduced unemployment to zero through temporary means such as militarisation. But by 1938 the signs of impending economic crisis were clear. The state faced the prospect of bankruptcy. Without breaking free of the restraints imposed on Germany by the Allies after the First World War, Hitler's regime would have faced a social explosion. No anti-Semitic demagoguery could have avoided this.

The only way out – the way that Nazism had always envisaged yet was a massive expansion of territory, the acquisition of lebensraum (living space). The principal steps were the Anschluss (annexation) of Austria (March 1938), the gaining of the Czech borderlands in October of the same year and less than one year later the attempts to get the Polish corridor and Danzig by similar coercion.

This led directly to war against Britain and France. Hitler had hoped for a settlement with these powers that would leave him free to attack the USSR. His attack on France was necessitated by the fact that such a power could not be left intact at the rear.

It was the war in the east – first against Poland, and then from 22 June 1941 against the USSR – that set in train the events that led to the destruction of between five and six million of the Jewish people of Europe. Bourgeois historians in general and Zionist influenced historians in particular try to present the Holocaust as simply the step by step carrying through of a pre-ordained plan.

Bourgeois historians wish to unload onto the person of Hitler or onto the Nazi elite the whole responsibility for the genocide. This is very convenient. It excuses the capitalist and imperialist system.

But the holocaust – horrific and unparalleled as it is as an act of policy by a modern bourgeois state – is not exempt from historical materialist analysis and understanding. German imperialism's particularly concentrated military brutality was a product of both its economic dynamism as a "young capitalism", and at the same time a result of its exclusion from a share of the spoils in the division of the world from the 1880s onwards.

One attempt to rectify this – the First World War – not only was a failure but despoiled Germany of its existing colonies and even its own national territory. Reparation and disarmament



merely crammed down the lid on the pressure cooker. The new and dynamic productive forces of German industry and finance could not reproduce themselves within their own national framework.

Hitler's territorial ambitions were eastward. These ambitions – the farming lands of Poland and the Ukraine, the oilfields of Moldavia and the Caucasus – were "traditional" objectives for German imperialism. In addition the Germans aimed at clearing lebensraum for German settlement – hence the forced population transfers and the destruction by starvation and massacre of millions of Poles and Russians.

The unexpectedly total success of the Nazis' war efforts in 1939-40 gave them control of nearly the whole continent west of the borders of the USSR. In this phase the rounding up of the Jews in Germany proper and their transfer to concentration camps began. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, was appointed Reich Commissioner for the strengthening of "Germandom" and put in charge of the deportation and resettlement of the Jews.

Although Hitler, in his infamous speech to the Reichstag of 30 January 1939, had talked of "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe", no trace has been found of an actual plan or order to do this in that period. Rather there appear to have been plans either to create a "reservation" for Jews in Eastern Europe, or later to drive them across the Urals into Asia. Of course these proposals were themselves semi-genocidal, as was the alternative – deporting of all European Jews to Madagascar. Some Nazi officials even considered deals with the British and the

Zionists to deport Jews to Palestine.

The Nazis immediate objectives were a "Jew free" Germany and Europe. After the occupation of Poland some three million Jews came under Nazi rule. The first mass pogroms were carried out by the SS during the clearance of the new German Province of Warthegau in Western Poland.

The SS Einsatzgruppen (Special Forces) brutally drove out 90,000 Poles

Bourgeois historians wish to unload onto the person of Hitler or onto the Nazi elite the whole responsibility for the genocide. This is very convenient. It excuses the capitalist and imperialist system

and Jews. The rest of Poland became a province of ghettos, concentration and eventually death camps. In Warsaw and Lublin huge ghettos were founded to which the Jews of Germany, Holland and other western occupied zones were gradually sent.

The preparation for the mass destruction of Jews was, however, part of the plans for the invasion of Russia. The Einsatzgruppen had the clear task of eliminating Jews in the areas behind the advancing Wehrmacht. With the rapid advance after the 22 June 1941 surprise attack they fanned out, encouraging local peasants in Lithuania and the Ukraine to carry out "spontaneous"

pogroms against the Jews. Whilst some did occur and the Lithuanian and Ukrainian nationalist forces did participate in them, this was not enough for the Nazis. The Einsatzgruppen soon resorted to mass killings themselves. The most infamous of these occurred in September outside Kiev, where 33,771 of the city's Jews were brought to the ravine of Babi Yar. A witness recalled: "They found themselves on the narrow ground above the precipice, twenty to twenty-five metres in height and on the opposite side there were the Germans' machine guns. The killed, wounded and half alive people fell down and were smashed there. Then the next hundred were brought, and everything repeated again. The policemen took the children by the legs and threw them down alive into the Yar."

But every major town and village witnessed its own massacre. So horrific were they that they began to take their toll on the nerves of their perpetrators. For this reason a method of mass murder which was, "less gruelling" for the Nazi henchmen was sought. The answer was found in special lorries capable of gassing 80 people at once with the vehicles' own carbon monoxide fumes.

Nearly two million Jews perished at the hands of the Einsatzgruppen, the Wehrmacht and the Ukrainian and Lithuanian militias. But an unexpected military fact forced the Nazis to go one step further. Disastrous as the Soviet defeats in the summer and autumn of 1941 were, they did not as everywhere else lead to a lightning victory.

The Nazi and Wehrmacht chiefs had confidently expected total victory before the winter set in, but the Nazi advance

was halted outside Moscow in December. Now the Germans had to face a long drawn out war of attrition. All resources, all food stores had to be concentrated on this. Clearly there was no hope of simply driving the Jews into the steppes of central Asia. The Nazis had neither the desire nor the logistical resources to keep them alive. At Wannsee in the Berlin suburbs a conference planned the setting up of a series of death camps: Auschwitz, Birkenau, Chelmno, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. Auschwitz, the largest, stood at the hub of a railway network to which cattlewagons crammed with men, women and children trundled from all over the Nazi empire.

In this gigantic factory of death four huge gas chambers and crematoria "processed" arrivals. A small proportion of those fit for labour worked in factories associated with the plant run by I G Farben.

Was this all simply an irrational nightmare – the product of one man's or even one party's limitless power? Certainly in the last two years of the war, once the SS machine was working at full stretch, it began to clash with the rational pursuit of war aims. It occupied railway timetables, freight wagons etc, that the Wehrmacht needed for the pursuit of the military campaign. But it was no more dysfunctional than the continuation of the war itself once the tide had turned on the Eastern Front between the winter of 1942 and the summer of 1943. The Allies ruled out any kind of negotiated peace settlement, and the Nazis were doomed to go down themselves in the impending defeat.

In this situation the dictatorship of the SS turned to an ever more frenzied pursuance of its anti-Semitic pogrom. The military justification of the massacre in the earlier period was no longer tenable. The virulent ideology of anti-Semitism in the SS now became their primary justification for the continuing Holocaust.

The Jewish people were the main victims of Hitler, in that he sought their physical annihilation and succeeded in destroying 67 per cent of European Jewry, nearly six million in all. But not all those that perished were Jewish. It is estimated more than 500,000 Roma, one third of Europe's total population, died. In addition substantial numbers of "useless" Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals and "racially useless" persons were included.

The numbers of Slav "sub-humans" destroyed, not in death camps but by fire, pestilence, famine and the sword, exceeds even the six million Jews. The conclusion we can draw from this is that the fate of the Jews was inextricably tied up with the destiny of the whole socialist workers' movement and the fate of all other racially oppressed peoples.

● This article was first reprinted in *Workers Power* 132, July 1990

Stop state terror in Colombia

Dear Comrades

On Monday 21 February 2004 in Rio Mulatos, armed and uniformed soldiers who identified themselves as belonging to the 11th Brigade of the national Army detained Luis Eduardo Guerra, his 11-year-old son Deiner Andres Guerra, Deyanira Areiza and another four as yet unknown people – all members of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado. They took them to a farm. One of the captives managed to escape from captivity.

The following day, the person who had escaped, set out to look for the other captives. At the farm, he found blood stains and what looked like a grave. He removed some of the earth and found

the mutilated body of Deiner Andres Guerra. He went immediately to the town of San Jose de Apartado where he informed the Peace Community Internal Council of what had happened. Other campesinos from the area also informed the Council that they had found a grave.

The whereabouts of the other captives remains unknown. Initial information points to a mass killing by the army of members of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado.

Luis Eduardo Guerra is a well known leader from the Peace Community Internal Council, and since October 2000 had been acting as one of the negotiators with the government over the implementation of the special security meas-

ures that had been ordered by the OAS Inter-American Court of Human Rights. On three occasions he had met with Vice President Francisco Santos who had personally assured him that the security measures would be implemented.

On 20 February at about 4pm. The army arrived in the village of Nieves near San Jose de Apartado. Two hours later they entered the house of Gladys Guzman Palacios and her four-year-old daughter, and started shooting. They killed the child's father who the army later claimed was a guerrilla from the Farc. They also shot the young girl who is now in hospital. The 33 counter-guerrilla unit of the 18th Brigade of the Colombian Army operate in the area.

On 22 February in the rural areas surrounding San Jose de Apartado, army helicopters carried out an indiscriminate bombing of various villages, putting the lives of 200 villagers at risk. The communities had already been forcibly displaced in December 2004 and again in January 2005 by atrocities committed by the army.

We ask that you immediately request that the Colombian government immediately send officials from the National Unit for Human Rights, the Attorney General's Office and specialists in forensic medicine to properly investigate these events.

That no member of the 11th Brigade be allowed to participate in the investigations, so that they cannot manipulate

the evidence and the investigation itself. That the Colombian army cease all activities against the civilian population in the area of San Jose de Apartado.

- Send messages of protest to:
- President Alvaro Uribe Velez auribe@presidencia.gov.co
 - Vice President Francisco Santos fsantos@presidencia.gov.co
 - Attorney General's Office contacto@fiscalia.gov.co
 - Ministry of Defence siden@mindefensa.gov.co
 - Colombian Embassy in London mail@colombianembassy.co.uk

Yours, Andy Higginbottam
Colombian Solidarity Campaign

Defend council housing

Dear Comrades

Your article in WP 293 on the future for council housing made some important and correct points in terms of how New Labour is preparing the end for an historic social gain in this country. The demands you made on the Unison leadership were also very welcome, although the trade union movement has given good support to struggle against housing transfer.

However, as a council tenant who was centrally involved in the campaign in Birmingham which led to tenants smashing wholesale stock-transfer plans in 2002, I feel a number of things in your piece need addressing. For instance, you claim that the then Labour council in Birmingham spent £6 million on a pro transfer campaign when the actual figure was £11 million! Indeed, had the vote gone through that figure would have risen to a massive £36 million and this money came from tenants' rent payments!

Furthermore, last year's Labour Party conference did not vote 8-1 "against transfer" as your article claimed. The 8-1 vote was to support what is known as a "level playing field" for tenants who have rejected transfer of their homes so they are not discriminated against.

Sadly, no mention was made in your piece about the Defend Council Housing Campaign's call for the fourth option. This entails the demand for large scale public investment into social housing with no strings, no loss of security of tenure and no privatisation. This is in direct counter position to all arms length management organisations, private finance initiatives and stock transfers.

Unfortunately, some analysis of DCH would also not have gone amiss in your piece as the campaign, while important, is a virtual SWP front and this may explain the increasingly cross class alliance the SWP aided and abetted by allowing the opportunist Liberal Democrats to effectively hi-jack the campaign in various parts of the country. This is the same Lib Dems who have pioneered housing transfer in many towns and cities up and down the land for some time now.

Fraternally,
G Smith
Birmingham



More than 70 people demonstrated in front of the Instituto Cervantes (Spanish cultural centre) in Berlin, to stop the repression against youth in the Basque Country. Forty-two activists from the leftist Basque youth organisation SEGI are on trial in Madrid, charged with "supporting terrorism" and "provoking violence". They are facing a total of 654 years in prison. The protest, which was organised by the socialist youth Revolution Berlin, the anti-repression campaign Red Aid, and the Basque group Oihuka. All three denounced this trial as political persecution and demanded the immediate release of the accused.

TV exposes Home Office asylum violence

Dear Comrades

For years anti-detention and anti-racist campaigners have been highlighting alleged violence and abuse against immigration detainees by Home Office contractors during detention and the removal process.

Many of our allegations have been substantiated by various government reports but little has changed.

For the past nine months we have provided input into the BBC's 60 minute *Asylum Undercover* documentary which will be broadcast on BBC1 Wednesday 2 March at 9pm.

"The Real Story goes undercover to expose evidence of racism and violence at the heart of UK's asylum system. Over a period of three months, two BBC journalists worked undercover in a detention centre and for a company that escorts asylum seekers and immigrants around the country. Their investigation uncovers disturbing evidence of a

culture of violence, abuse and assaults against detainees and contains very strong language.

Despite a wealth of reports from detainees, anti-detention campaigners, government officials, and independent monitoring bodies – perpetrators of violence and abuse against detainees have not been adequately held to account and, indeed, the private profit making companies involved have been rewarded with further lucrative contracts, the details of which often remain "commercially confidential".

No less significant than racism and physical violence are the less visible abuses which undermine asylum claims – unreasonable asylum determinations based on flawed material, lack of legal representation and the erosion of access to appeal rights.

- *Asylum Undercover* – investigation exposes violence & abuse – 60 mins documentary – BBC 1, 2nd March 9.00pm

Yours
Emma Ginn
National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns
1 Delaunays Road, Manchester
M8 4QS
Tel 0121 554 6947 or go to www.ncadc.org.uk

Defend young asylum seekers

Dear Comrades

More than 100 people crammed into a University of Kent lecture theatre in late February for the day-long "Coming of Age" conference to organise opposition to the detention and deportation of young asylum seekers.

The lively event, initiated by the Kent Campaign to Defend Asylum Seekers, came in the wake of a successful campaign by students and teachers at Canterbury high school late last year to stop the deportation of a then 18-year-old student, Amin Buratee, back to Afghanistan. Amin and two fellow Afghans in Canterbury are among a growing number of unaccompanied young people who face the prospect of detention and forced removal on reaching their 18th birthday.

The Home Office has recently indicated that it will soon be moving to kick out lone asylum seekers as young as 16.

Given Kent's historic reputation as a Tory bastion (with Michael Howard and Anne Widdecombe among the local MPs) and the racist coverage associated with such local rags as the *Dover Express* in the late 1990s, the county seems an unlikely hotbed for activity in support of refugee rights. But the cases of the young Afghani men have created

Il Manifesto journalist kidnapped in Iraq

Dear comrades

A few days ago Giuliana Sgrena, a journalist for the communist daily newspaper *Il Manifesto* which has always opposed war, was kidnapped in Iraq. From *Il Manifesto* website, www.ilmanifesto.it, you'll be able to access part of her work against the occupation of Iraq and, more generally, in support of the liberation struggle of the Arab world. In support of her release, we have written an appeal in many languages, in which we invite you to participate, sending your signatures to the following email address: alfio.nicotra@rifondazione.it (copy to: rifondazione@fsmail.net)

We are certain you will understand the urgency and the necessity of our initiative.

Warm greetings
For the Foreign/Peace Department of the Communist Refoundation Party,
Gennaro Migliore
Alfio Nicotra

a new and larger audience for the previous handful of dedicated campaigners in Canterbury, Dover and Whitstable.

A highlight of an inspiring afternoon was the arrival of three pupils from the Mayfield secondary school in Portsmouth, Hampshire, which has seen significant BNP activity in recent years. Among the students was 15-year-old Lorin Ibrahim Suleiman, who last autumn was on the brink of deportation to Syria along with her mother and 16-year-old sister. The family had suffered under the Assad regime for their involvement in a Kurdish political party.

The audience heard Lorin's calm account of her family's ordeal both in Syria and now in Britain. Her speech was all the more remarkable because she arrived at Mayfield school with barely a word in English in late 2003. Sharon Thomas, a young white pupil and Lorin's close friend, teamed up with members of the school council to set up a campaign that swiftly captured the imagination of fellow pupils. While the family's fate remains uncertain, it was definitely round one of the fight to the Mayfield pupils and their supportive teachers.

The conference concluded with an agreement to both strengthen the network across Kent and build for a demonstration in Canterbury on 3 April to protest at the treatment of young asylum seekers and refugees more generally.

Yours GR Binette, national secretary,
Campaign to Defend Asylum Seekers

workers power 5

March 2005 ★ Price 50p / €1 www.workerspower.com Issue 294

British section of the League for the Fifth International

All out on 23 March to defend pensions

The momentum for united strike action against the government attack on public sector pensions moved forward after the 18th February TUC day of action.

Ballot papers for strike action have now been sent out to hundreds of thousands of local government workers. As well as Unison, other unions in local government are also balloting for strikes. The GMB is now considering balloting its local government members.

In the Civil Service, the PCS is organising national strike action and other civil service unions are likely to follow suit. This could mean a united strike on 23rd March of over a million workers.

And this should be just the beginning.

But ordinary union members need to be vigilant. The union leaders have already demonstrated that they are not so keen on seizing this opportunity to launch a united fightback in defence of our working conditions. Instead of co-ordinating action to include all workers that will be affected by the pensions reform, the union leaderships have preferred to spend more time negotiating piecemeal concessions from the government.

We don't want concessions from this government. We want it to capitulate and withdraw the attacks on our pensions rights.

The Unison local government ballot was postponed while talks went ahead



with Prescott. Only a last minute scuppering of the talks by local government authority representatives meant Unison had no choice but to go ahead with the ballot.

This is not a new tactic. During the firefighters strike, the union, the FBU, was constantly invited to talks just before strikes were due to take place. The union would delay the action only to find that the negotiations led nowhere.

The government will use the same

tactics and all the toing and froing of negotiations could be used to divide the campaign sector by sector and to stop any strike action from building up a momentum.

There have been further examples of how the national union leaders and the head office bureaucrats have worked against building a united and militant response to the government. The Unison Health Service Group Executive voted against balloting NHS workers

who will be affected. The teacher's union (NUT) national executive voted to ballot the members area by area - but the national leaders who refused to start a ballot threw this out. It now looks likely that the FBU will not hold a national ballot so that its members can strike on 23rd March.

This does not mean that the campaign is going to fall apart, simply that rank and file activists need to seize control of the campaign at every level.

Leeds Unison initiated the rally as the local TUC were just going to do leafleting. It was also supported by the GMB, AUT and Amicus. The mood was very angry.

The shop stewards from Unison were the most militant and got the loudest cheers. They called for everyone to come out on the March strike date and for "further action" after that to "disrupt the election campaign". They implied that they were critical of the union leadership when they reported that "there had been no deal last night between Prescott and the big four [unions]". In other words, the union leaders have not been able to sell out the campaign, so far. This prompted further cheers.

The coming election was a theme of the rally. Each speaker said that it should be used to bring extra pressure on the Blair government. But when the GMB local bureaucrat said we needed a united front to keep the Tories out, only a handful of people clapped, while the rest of the crowd looked on in silence!

We must get organised both within our unions and across the unions. Workplace joint union meetings should be organised so that all the workers can come together to decide what action we demand the union leaders organise and what action we will take anyway.

Local strike committees should be elected in workplaces, made up of representatives from the different unions. Local pensions action committees should be set up to co-ordinate action across the different sectors: local government, the NHS, the civil service, the fire brigade, education. Pensioners groups and other local community campaigns should also be invited to join in. This is an issue that affects everybody.

If we get organised we can build for successful strikes on 23rd March and 14th April. We should demand those unions who have not called national action for the 23rd March do so. If they don't, local union branches should organise for strike action anyway.

And 23rd March is not the end of the campaign. We must use it to pursue a course of action that will defeat this government - national, united and indefinite strike action by all the workers affected by this attack - organised by the union leaders if possible but organised by us if necessary.

That way we can call on Labour Party ministers to meet with us - not in order to negotiate a rotten compromise, but rather in order to surrender.

The Workers Power leaflet, calling for an all-out public sector strike, went down well. Demonstrators came up afterwards saying it was good that we were bold enough to call for indefinite strike action.

Birmingham

Up to 3000 trades unionists and pensioners attended a Regional TUC rally at lunchtime in Birmingham City Centre on 18th February. Members of Unison, PCS, FBU, Amicus, NUT and Natfhe were present, with the largest contingent from Unison. Clare Short and various trade union leaders gave short speeches, which most people had to struggle to hear since there was no PA system. Obviously the Regional TUC organisers are a bit rusty at street protests.

Complaints were directed at the organisers for the lack of preparation and publicity advertising the rally, with many feeling the rally could have been even bigger. Clearly, a rank and file co-ordinating committee to run the campaign is sorely needed.

18 February: just the start

Bolton

In Bolton about 300 workers from Unison, GMB, NUT, CWU, FBU and UCATT attended a demonstration and rally. They were mainly council and hospital workers, but also about 30 refuse collectors, 20 teachers, 10 postal workers, a few fire-fighters, and others.

There were speakers from Unison Metro, Unison Health, UCATT, GMB and NUT. They emphasised how the attack on pensions was like an attack on wages and needed a united union response. The speakers condemned the vast expenditure on the Iraq war.

One speaker from the NUT emphasised that we needed to get ready to organise co-ordinated action together, suggesting that the rumoured election date of 5th May sounded like a good date to have a shutdown. This drew one of

the biggest rounds of applause. The same speaker went on to say that, whilst our leaders should organise an officially co-ordinated indefinite strike of all public sector unions, it would also be necessary to consider unofficial action. This got quite a cheer, especially from the GMB refuse collectors, whose union leadership isn't even pretending to organise a ballot.

There is widespread anger with the union leadership, both nationally and locally. Barry Conway, Bolton NUT secretary, took up the call for strike action around the election saying that not only do unions need to break the link with Labour, as they keep attacking the working class, but we should show them how we feel on election day by organising strikes, which might have to be unofficial.

A vote was then taken on the town

hall steps, with a previously circulated motion and red voting cards. A unanimous vote affirmed the motion condemning the government and calling on the unions to cease funding Labour.

After the rally about 50 workers went on an unofficial march around Bolton town centre, chanting, "The workers united will never be defeated". Then we went off to lobby and blockade the offices of Brian Iddon, the local Labour MP.

A meeting of school staff NUT and Unison stewards wound up the day by drawing up plans for a public meeting on the 3rd March, with street stalls and leafleting planned and a series of workplace meetings.

Leeds

100 trade unionists gathered on a rainy day in Leeds to attend a pensions rally.

Get active, stay active, join Workers Power

Even the onset of war did not stop the global revolt against it.

Across the world the working class is coming together. Globalisation has forced workers and activists from different countries and continents to unite, work and fight together. There have been huge Social Forums of resistance in Europe at Florence and Paris, in Asia at Hyderabad and Mumbai, and in South America at Porto Alegre.

Together with the L51, which is represented on the European Social Forum, Workers Power campaigns to bring these movements together into a New

World Party of Socialist Revolution - the Fifth International.

This is a momentous time, one of those times when the true nature of the world we live in suddenly becomes clear to millions. Capitalism is revealing itself to be a system of war, conquest and global inequality. By taking to the streets against war and capitalism, hundreds of thousands of people are showing that they have seen through the lies.

Take the next step and join Workers Power. Phone us on 020 7820 1363 or email us at workerspower@btopenworld.com

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