LABOUR LEFT BRIEFING

General Election
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Our May Day message

Labour Left Briefing

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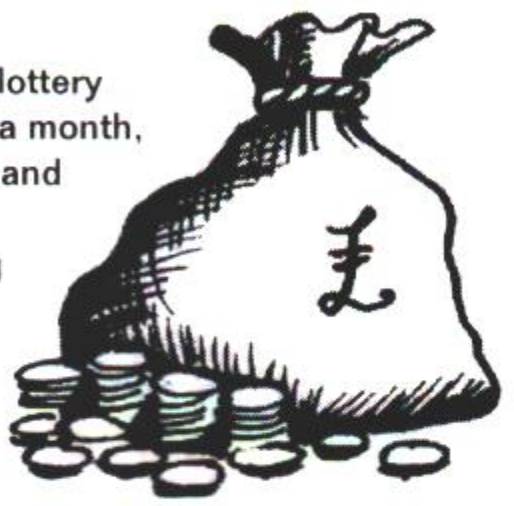
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Make it a May Day to remember

EIGHTEEN YEARS is a long time. *LLB* readers will not need to be reminded what these years have meant for public services, democratic rights, trades unions, the poor, the ill, and for tens of millions of workers, female and male, black and white, across the country. Make no mistake, the best way to commemorate this year's international workers' day is to ensure the Tories are trounced at the polls. Their demise will make this a May Day to celebrate in style.

The tide of popular feeling is now running overwhelmingly against the Tories, principally because the cumulative impact of Tory policies on the lives of the majority has been negative — and for some has been devastating. Labour opened its big lead over the Tories in the wake of the sterling devaluation of September 1992, which was quickly followed by the uproar against the pit closures and the Tory split over Maastricht. Since then, our lead has been sustained by a succession of Tory failures, gaffes and divisions rather than any positive or deep-rooted enthusiasm for New Labour.

Labour will win because experience has led millions of voters to reject Tory policies on privatisation, public services, taxes and benefits, trade union rights, education, health and transport. Yet Labour enters the election campaign committed to the bulk of these policies. It is a strange moment to assume the mantle of an utterly discredited Thatcherism. Nonetheless, people will vote Labour in hopes of improving their shared future, and they will look to Labour for some redress of long-standing grievances.

Coming the day before the campaign launch, the selection of Alan Howarth in Newport East sent out exactly the wrong message (New Labour = Old Tory). The endorsement of the *Sun*, which followed soon after, was another bad omen. The spin doctors rubbed their hands with glee because they had neutralised a powerful potential enemy. But are the *Sun*'s value's compatible with Labour's values? The price that has been paid for this deal with the devil — an agreement that a Blair government will not interfere in the expansion of the Murdoch empire — is simply too high.

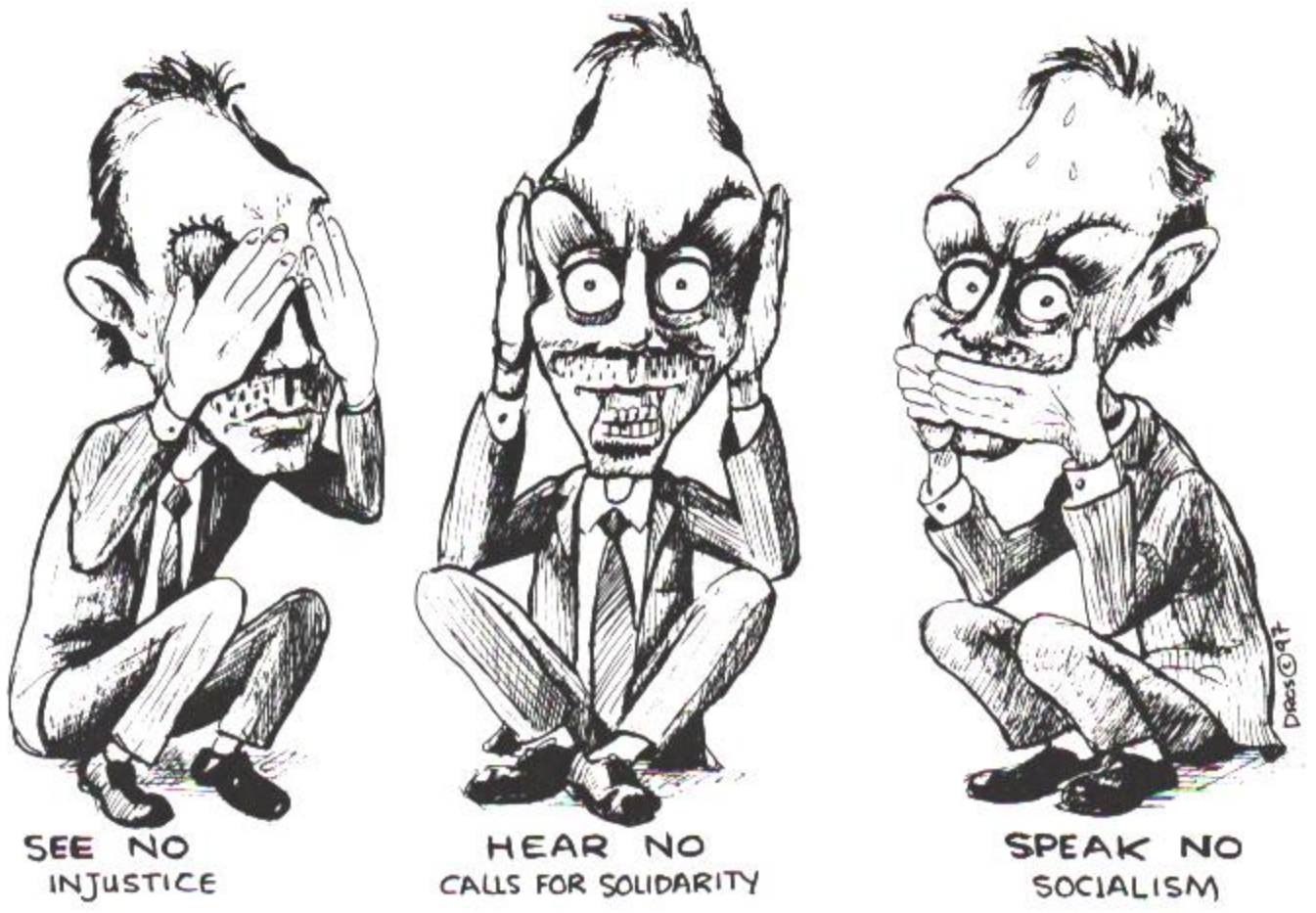
The apparent retreat on the windfall tax in the middle of the first week of the campaign was also disturbing. If we are to water down commitments at this rate, we'll run dry well before polling day.

We urge all our readers to vote Labour and work for the return of a Labour government. Not because of the Party's policies, leaders or campaign methods, all of which have been taken to task many times in *LLB*, but because a Labour election victory opens up possibilities for change unimaginable under any other circumstances. If you doubt that, just imagine the devastation, the collapse of confidence, the loss of hope that would follow an upset Tory triumph.

Our struggle against Tory policies will not, unfortunately, come to an end with a Labour victory, though a Labour victory is a precondition for advancing that struggle. No one can doubt that a Blair government will be strongly tempted to do as it is told by business and the media. The only counter-balance will come from the labour movement itself, and it will have to come quickly if we are to ensure that this Labour government delivers the changes its supporters desperately require.

We say this not out of any desire to see the long-awaited Labour government plunged into internecine warfare, but because the pace of events outside our control dictates it.

If the NEC proposals on the Party constitution are agreed by this year's Conference, Constituency Labour Parties will forfeit basic rights, policy making will be handed over to a self-selecting elite immune to genuine democratic scrutiny, Annual Conference will be nothing more than a leadership rally and the NEC will be reduced to an unrepresentative and unaccountable talking shop. Blair is counting on a post-election honeymoon period to allow him to push the package through the Party. But Party members and trades unionists must realise that the damage done by these proposals could prove irreparable. We have to organise against them from May 2nd.



As Brian Burkitt makes clear in his article in this month's *LLB*, the incoming Labour government will face harsh budgetary choices within a month of taking office. Given Blair's commitment to "no tax rises", it will take immediate and concerted action to stave off public spending cuts. The European Inter Governmental Conference, which will chart the next steps towards Economic and Monetary Union, takes place in June. Decisions made there could bind Labour for the duration of its term in office. We will have to do whatever we can to ensure that the aspirations stimulated by a Labour victory are not dashed at such an early stage.

After eighteen years, new horizons beckon, and with them new responsibilities. ❑

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Pensioner poverty - a Tory legacy

Can we afford to pay the elderly a decent pension? Jeremy Corbyn MP debunks some modern myths.

ACCORDING TO the Department of Social Security, in 1979 21% of pensioner couples and 12% of single pensioner households had incomes that were less than half the UK average. In 1993, the comparable figures were 25% of couples and 33% of single pensioners.

In 1975, the Labour government linked the state pension with earnings or prices, whichever rose the higher during each year. That government also brought in SERPS, which meant that everyone was either in an occupational scheme in work or had access to SERPS. Pensioners could look forward to some security in retirement and a share of any rising national prosperity. By 1980, the state pension stood at about 24% of average earnings.

That year the Tory Chancellor broke the link with earnings and substituted the retail price index. In his autobiography, he recalled the measure as his single greatest achievement. Had the link been preserved, the current state pension would be £82.25 per week — £21 more than at present.

In 1986, legislation reduced the value of SERPS — partly on the basis of dubious actuarial evidence — and promoted private pensions. As a result, there has been the massive scandal of mis-selling of pensions, which cost pensioners millions of pounds. Now the Tories are proposing what they call "basic pensions plus" — an attempt to dragoon us all into the clutches of the private pension industry.

One of the architects of this policy is Jose Pinera, a minister in the Pinochet government in Chile, which privatised the national insurance system. Pinera now goes around the world making a great deal of money for himself addressing seminars on the wonders of private pensions. He is part of a burgeoning global army of lobbyists — promoted by the IMF and World Bank, underwritten by the private pension companies — dedicated to popularising doomsday scenarios about the burden of state pensions and the advantages of private schemes. Their arguments are inaccurate, immoral and self-serving.

The fact is that private pension companies incur heavy management costs, huge commissions and huge advertising budgets to compete with each other. Is that an effective use of resources?

Under the Tory proposals everyone would become a compulsory shareholder in a lottery, rather than a payer of tax and national insurance with a guarantee of a fair share of national wealth. Having created poverty among pensioners by devaluing SERPS and the state pension, the Tories are forcing people to choose a market solution.

In a recent article, Malcolm Crawford, a consultant economist and former business editor of the *Sunday Times*, attacked what he called "the big pensions lie" — the so-called demographic time bomb. Crawford and others have documented in detail the distortions and false assumptions behind this modern myth. John Hills of the LSE has argued that our current pay-as-you-go system is perfectly affordable — once policy makers accept its moral basis. The present

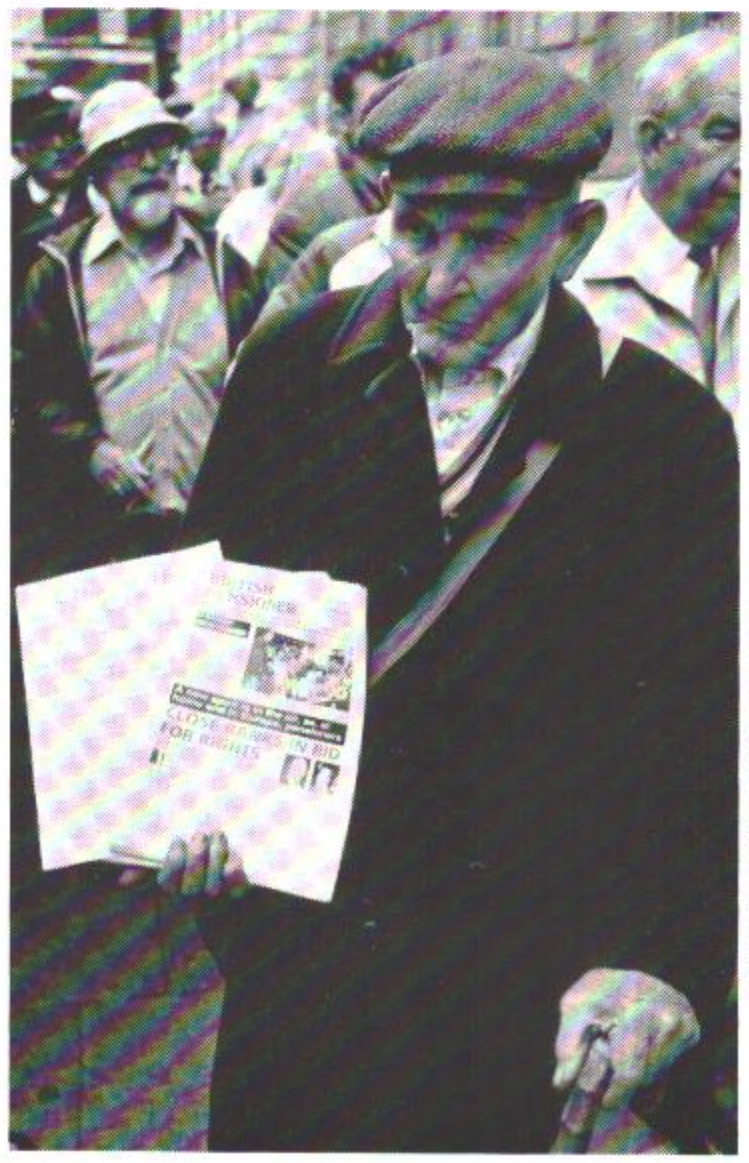


PHOTO:PAUL MATTSSON

system is only unsustainable in so far as low rates of taxation on wealthy individuals and corporations make it so.

Universality is not only the only sustainable moral basis for the provision of welfare benefits; it is also the most efficient. The state pension costs 1.1% of its value to administer. Income support, which is means tested, costs 10.2 % of its value to administer. A funded pensions scheme costs at least 25% of its value to administer. The social fund costs 61% of its value to administer, ie. two thirds of its value is spent in telling people they cannot have anything from it.

An OECD report reveals the real cost of pensions. In 1995 pension expenditure was 4.5% of GDP. By 2030, that will rise to only 5.5%. If wage indexation was introduced it would rise to only 7.8%. This would be the cost to our society of eliminating poverty among elderly people, and it is cheap at the price. Go to a supermarket on a late Saturday afternoon and watch elderly people queuing up to buy cheap, out-of-date food. No one should have to live like that, but in modern Britain they do.

Local Labour Parties: the key to victory

Labour does much better in marginal seats where it has a thriving constituency party. This is the conclusion of a study on the 1987 and 1992 elections carried out by a Sheffield University research team. In areas where Labour was unable to gain marginals through a small swing, a common factor was often a relatively inactive local party. Labour did well in areas with a strong CLP.

The lesson is clear, more time should be spent listening to and building strong CLPs instead of soundbites from Millbank and giving seats to Tory defectors. This advice for the Labour leadership may be too late for this election but let's bear it in mind when considering the future structure of the Party.

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Housing - will Labour make a difference?

Neil Gerrard MP, Walthamstow, looks to a Labour government to provide some solutions to the housing crisis.

THE MOST common problem brought to any urban Labour MP's surgeries is nearly always housing. It can be very dispiriting to see so many people desperate to find somewhere decent to live who almost inevitably cannot be helped at present.

A joint opinion poll run last year by Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing found that 87% of respondents thought that housing was a serious political problem. Two-thirds thought it would be more difficult for their children to find a decent affordable home. A striking finding was that 71% believed political parties do not take housing seriously enough.

In over twenty years' personal involvement with housing I can't ever remember a time when things were so bad. Every part of the housing market has been in crisis. Repossessions are still running at historically high levels. Many owner occupiers are still in negative equity and can't sell their property.

But the biggest crisis is the appalling shortage of affordable rented housing. Not a single council house is being built in the whole of London. In Kenneth Clarke's last budget money for Housing Associations was slashed by nearly 30%, another hammer blow to homeless and badly housed families. Every organisation connected with housing says that at least 60,000 new homes a year are needed, some experts putting the figure much higher. But present figures are at less than half that level, and there's the backlog of nearly 20 years to make up.

So what can a Labour government do? The release of capital receipts from council house sales promised by Gordon Brown is welcome. It will make a difference. But that step alone will not be enough, because the backlog of investment is so huge. So where else can money be found?

The fact is that total spending on housing hasn't changed that much in the last ten years. It's the way the money is spent which has changed. When the last Labour government left office two thirds of all spending on housing was "bricks and mortar" subsidy. Houses were being built. Now only just over a quarter of the money is used like this.



PHOTO:PHIL MAXWELL

Will Labour's policies improve life on housing estates?

The bill for housing benefit is now a massive £11 billion a year. Half of this is paid to council tenants. Public money is going round in a circle, from council to tenants, to pay back in rent. Even if cash doesn't change hands it still all has to be administered and counts as public spending.

You can have the ludicrous situation where a private landlord milks hundreds of pounds a week in housing benefit, at the same time as another council department — environmental health — is trying to get the property shut down because it isn't fit to live in. Hundreds of millions of pounds are lost every year because of fraud by landlords getting housing benefit for non-existent tenants.

Keeping rents down and cracking down on landlord fraud could free up resources for investment, new building and tackling the huge repairs and maintenance backlog in public housing.

There will be moves to try to attract private investment through local housing companies. The big question is on what terms will the money come in. It's absolutely vital that tenants whose estates could be affected have a major say in the running of any such company and can keep control of their own destinies.

In addition, there is no sector of the economy which would help job creation as effectively. Building workers would come off the dole. The building supplies industries would get a boost. Because people are most likely to buy new carpets or curtains or furniture when they move, house building stimulates other sectors of the economy.

Other public services would reap the benefits of better housing. The Health Service would save money, which could be put to other badly needed health care. The costs to the NHS of ill health resulting directly from poor housing run to hundreds of millions of pounds every year. Children's education suffers when they are poorly housed, or forced to move frequently from one rotten private rented flat to another.

Of course money is not all that is needed. Public housing must be well managed. The scope for development of tenant involvement in the management of their estates is huge. But the fundamental problems of supply and housing conditions can only be solved by investment. Nothing else will do, and nothing less will be expected from us by those people who are crying out for the basic need of a decent home.

Newport East

Many of us knew for several weeks that Alan Howarth, who as a Tory MP had voted to shut the South Wales mines, was to get the suddenly-vacant Newport seat. *Tribune* had been tipped off and phoned Roy Hughes MP to ask for a comment on his imminent retirement — his response was an aggressive denial. To those critics who doubted the tip-off and wonder why Roy Hughes should suddenly stand down at the last moment to let a Tory get a seat by the back door, we suggest you watch out for Brother Blair's first appointments to the House of Lords.

Glasgow resists council cuts

Barbara Hall, UNISON shop steward in Glasgow City Council reports on "Red Monday" when the citizens and trade unionists of Glasgow nearly stopped the cuts budget.

GLASGOW City's Labour Council plans £80m cuts in its 1997/98 budget, resulting in 2,000 job losses and massive reductions in services. In the Social Work Department where I work, the most vulnerable people will be hit. The Council's sheltered housing service is being replaced with a totally inadequate alarm system. 76 wardens will lose their jobs and homes, putting vulnerable elderly people at risk. After 17 years of reductions in central government funding it is impossible for the Council to make "acceptable" cuts — services have already been cut to the bone.

Members of Glasgow City UNISON and the EIS (Scotland's main teaching union) have taken official industrial action in an attempt to stop the cuts, culminating in a strike of all 12,500 members of UNISON on March 6th, the day the Council announced it would set its budget. Attempting to outmanoeuvre UNISON, the Council changed the date of the Council meeting to Monday March 10th at short notice, preventing an official strike being called. This backfired when thousands of UNISON members walked out on unofficial action to picket Glasgow's City Chambers where the meeting was to be held.



UNISON members joined community groups and other citizens of Glasgow in blockading the City Chambers in an attempt to stop Labour councillors from entering to set the budget. Meanwhile, members of Scottish Militant Labour (now part of the Scottish Socialist Alliance) occupied the Council chamber itself. Only after several hours of skirmishes, with many councillors being turned away, was the quorum reached and the budget set. What is now being called "Red Monday" was a day of shame for the Labour councillors willing to sneak past their constituents and employees to break manifesto pledges of no compulsory redundancies and maintenance of Council services.

The aim of the direct action of 10th March was to persuade Labour councillors to set a budget above the government's capping limit — an illegal or "needs-led" budget. Until recently only a small minority supported this policy, most notably Militant's only councillor in Glasgow, Tommy Sheridan — but it now has the support of Scottish UNISON and the Scottish TUC. That UNISON and the STUC have adopted this position in an election year shows a major sea change in labour movement opinion. A policy that in the past was unthinkable is now being considered by the mainstream left.

The resistance in Glasgow may well be a sign of things to come, whichever government is elected on May 1st. Gordon Brown has already made it clear that Labour will stick to the Tories' public spending limits for at least two years, and to meet the Maastricht convergence criteria this is essential. The difference will be that a massive mobilisation of the labour movement, particularly the public sector trade unions, has at least the potential to influence a Labour government. The willingness of UNISON and the STUC to take the radical step of proposing illegal budgets is heartening.

In Glasgow, UNISON plans further industrial action to stop implementation of these swingeing cuts. Local anti-cuts committees and community groups will be occupying facilities threatened with closure. If we don't succeed, Glasgow will face more unemployment, reduced services and increased poverty.

LLB's idiot's guide to electioneering

Mike Phipps
Brent South CLP

LABOUR'S ELECTION campaign promises to be the most centralised and unaccountable in living memory. In many "safe seats", canvassing is being labelled simply as a diversion. The strategy of targeting neighbouring marginal constituencies will result in precious little campaigning — except perhaps for a few high-visibility gimmicks — taking place in one's own local area. Criticism of this approach provokes the insinuation that one is "not serious" about winning.

This matters for several reasons. Firstly, important though it may be to get the candidate elected, elections are also about accountability and politicisation. Doorstep canvassing is part of the process whereby political representatives are held accountable both to voters and active members. It's also where the best recruits may be made — not the passive paper membership produced by some glossy advertisement — but active members who become participants in the campaign itself. To reject this local activity is a recipe for few activists and a decline of grassroots involvement — an outcome some in the Party might relish.

Much of Labour's campaigning this time around seems designed to minimise face-to-face contact. It effectively buries the rich experience of ward activists beneath depoliticised set-pieces, such as handing out bland nationally produced leaflets outside railway stations. *LLB* encourages Party activists with at least half a brain to concentrate on activities that allow you to talk some socialism, build up your branches and strengthen local accountability of your candidates — you will need it later!

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Parents of straw

Alex Taylor examines Labour's response to Tory plans to crack down on youth crime.

Imagine you are 87. You live alone since your husband died three years ago. You come back from a week away with your son and his family to find you've been burgled. The video's gone. So has some jewellery - treasured memories of a long life - and your bedroom's been ransacked in a vain search for hidden cash. The burglar, glimpsed by a vigilant neighbour, is 12 years old. Such stories contribute to the rich seam of public outrage that the new breed of punitive politicians are mining with the vigour of navvies on piecework and the honesty of salesmen on commission.

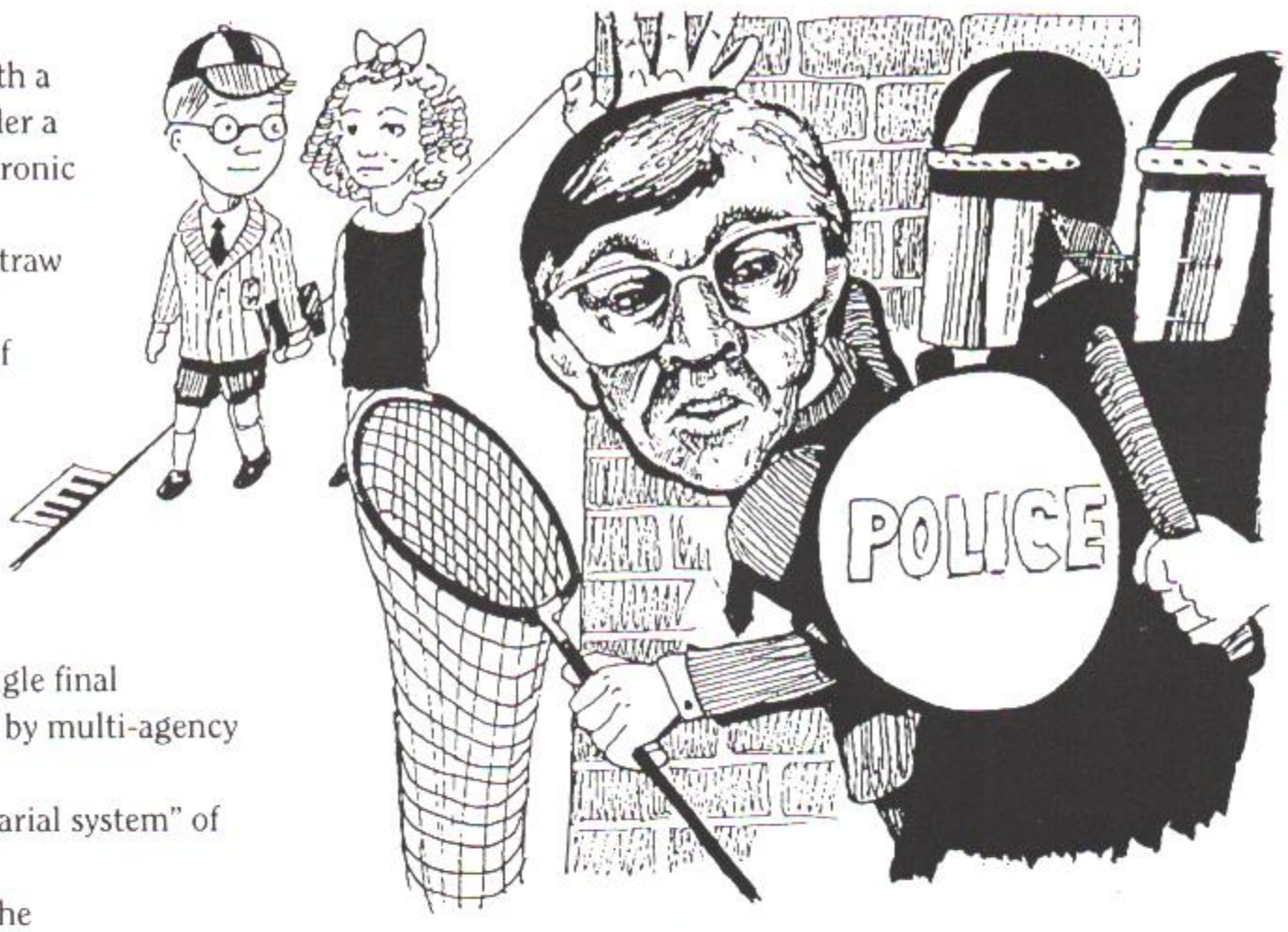
Home Secretary Michael Howard's green paper on *Preventing Children Offending* contained, in the words of Paul Cavadino of the Penal Affairs Consortium "a peculiar mixture of constructive ideas to prevent delinquency and punitive parent-bashing which will do nothing to cut crime." Among Howard's proposals is the bizarre idea of putting carers who fail to comply with a "parental control order" under a curfew monitored with electronic tags.

Not to be outdone, Jack Straw pre-empted Howard's green paper with the publication of his own plans for the nation's delinquent youth. These include:

- replacing the repeated cautioning of young offenders with "single final warnings" triggering action by multi-agency Youth Offender Teams;
- an end to the "adversarial system" of juvenile justice;
- and the abolition of the ancient doctrine of *doli incapax* which holds that a young person between the ages of 10 and 13 cannot be convicted of a criminal offence without proof that s/he knows that what s/he had done was seriously wrong.

With the media salivating over the prospect of seeing more 11 year old "rat boys" hauled before the courts, it was easy to miss Jack's "big idea". But Mandelson and his chums in New Labour's Millbank marketing department seem to have identified something called "parenting" as the key point of difference between Jack and Michael. So a "national strategy for parental education and support", outlined in a discussion paper issued late last year, has become the Party's "unique selling point" in the political market for solutions to youth crime.

The link between Straw's plans for tackling youth crime and his (and Janet Anderson, Shadow Minister for Women's) musings on parenting is clearest in the proposal that the parents of young people who get "out of control" should be compelled to attend special classes to improve their parenting skills. Anyone involved in one of the many voluntary or self-help schemes that already exist around the country will be dismayed by the idea that people can be forced into re-educating themselves as parents. Elsewhere in the criminal justice system it is a truism that "coerced cures" simply do not work.



Nor does the Anderson/Straw paper say anything about the skills required of a modern parent. Banalities about expecting carers to "engage" with their children about "lying", "sex education", "drugs" and "household participation" don't even begin to suggest what the suitably re-educated parents of delinquent youngsters might be expected to do with them, or how.

Straw and Anderson concede that "unemployment, poverty and deprivation" may "impede the development of a good relationship" between parent and child. But, with an eye on their own "Iron Chancellor", the City and the CBI, they say nothing about how such obstacles might be removed under a Labour government. On so-called "family friendly" employment policies for example, they have a few kind words for flexible working and (unpaid) parental leave, before hurrying on to say that such revolutionary measures could only come out of "a positive dialogue between social partners." No doubt their doors have been knocked down by employers eager to start talking.

Then, when it comes to paying for better support for parents, particularly in "parenting problem areas", the paper calls on local authorities to give "a higher priority to supporting families with children in need" within existing expenditure programmes. Some extra funds for early years education are promised from the abolition of the government's discredited voucher scheme, but nothing more.

Stripped of the bold sentiments about opening up a public debate on parenting — "the most important task any of us ever undertakes" — Straw's initiatives do little more than set parents up as the fall guys of a society incapable of meeting the real social needs — education, work and enriching leisure activity for a start — of young people and unwilling to offer their parents anything more than an enforced programme of re-education when they cannot cope with the consequences of this failure.

By fixing both young people and their parents with "responsibility" for juvenile offending, Howard, Straw and Anderson avoid their, and our, responsibilities to them — and to people of 87 who come home to find their lives turned over by a 12 year old with no idea of the effect of his behaviour.❑

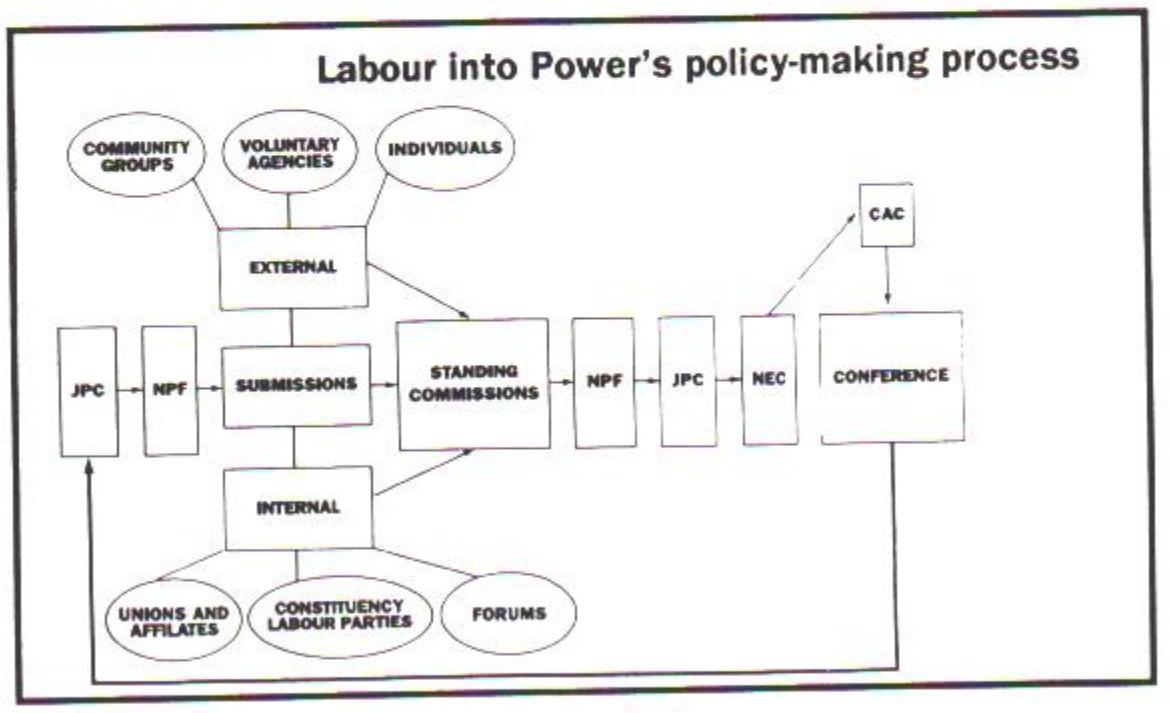
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A fundamental attack

The new proposals on Labour's structure, *Labour into Power*, adopted by the NEC on 29th January, represent a fundamental attack on the internal democracy of the Party. Don Rocinante explains why.

THE CORE of the proposals centre on the role of the Party Conference and the NEC. Historically Conference has been the supreme policy-maker of the Party, where motions from Constituency Labour Parties, trades unions and other affiliated bodies are discussed and, if passed, determine the Party's programme. The NEC report criticises Conference for failing to adequately showcase the Party's policies and leader and for attracting sensational and supposedly damaging press coverage on controversial debates. In practice, its authors are scared stiff that, as long as the Party agenda is determined by the Party grassroots, Labour leaders in government might be called to account for their failure to deliver on election pledges. Denis Healey, the last Labour Chancellor, got a deservedly hostile reception for the monetarist cuts in the welfare budget he imposed in the late 1970s at the behest of the International Monetary Fund.

To prevent such elementary accountability, the NEC proposes that all resolutions from CLPs and affiliated bodies be submitted to a new Joint Policy Committee (JPC) — with an in built Cabinet majority — which would then set the Conference agenda. This would be done by having a two-year "rolling programme", where the main areas of policy would be divided up between each of two years. Clearly, this would prevent any chance of campaigning to get particular issues onto the agenda — like pensions in 1996 — if the JPC chooses to schedule the topic for the following year — or not at all.



Brother Blair's byzantine balderdash

The problem of getting an issue onto the agenda doesn't stop there. Proposals from the JPC would be referred to the National Policy Forum — currently a worthless, handpicked talking-shop of 88 members designed to foster an illusion of consultation — and various policy commissions over a two-year period. The sanitised policy proposals finally reaching conference would be leadership-endorsed and stripped of all controversy. The result would be to transform the Party's democratic decision-making Conference into a Tory-style rally for the leader and his chosen ministers.

The new power-centre, the JPC, would be made up of 50% Cabinet members and 50% NEC. As the leader appoints the Cabinet in office, at least half of the JPC would be in his pocket.

But the NEC itself is also targeted for "reform" in the new proposals. Representatives of the CLPs and affiliated bodies would be swamped by new members from the Cabinet, the Parliamentary Party, Euro-MPs and local government. CLPs could no longer nominate their MP and the NEC Women's Section would be scrapped, inevitably leading to a fall in the number of women elected. Beneath the blather about "stakeholding", there is a clear aim to increase Blair's payroll vote and weed out the dissident minority like Dennis Skinner. Once again the proposals reflect the modernisers' fear of any public expression of accountability under a Labour government.

The NEC would be downgraded too. Under the proposals it would lose its role of overseeing Party policy and become purely organisational, the JPC controlling policy.

These proposals have been circulated to CLPs with a deadline of 20th June. Given the suspension of internal structures until after the election, CLPs have just a few weeks to make clear their emphatic rejection of this attack on Party democracy.

Model resolution for Labour Party Conference

(deadline: 20th June)

Conference believes that the success of the next Labour Government requires the full participation of affiliated trade unions and constituencies in the Party's decision-making process. Conference calls for respect for the following democratic principles and representative structures.

a) The sovereignty of the Annual Conference; no reduction in the amount of time given to policy debates in plenary sessions;

b) The right of trade unions, affiliated organisations and CLPs to submit resolutions directly to conference, without restrictions as to subject;

c) Conference timetable should reflect the numbers of resolutions and amendments submitted on particular subjects;

d) Maintenance of the equal partnership of affiliated organisations and CLPs, reflected in the present 50:50 distribution of Conference votes;

e) Maintenance of the present level and structure of trade union and women's representation and input, including on the NEC;

f) The right of affiliated trade union branches to elect delegates to CLP General Committees, with GCs retaining their present rights in matters of policy and organisation;

g) The right of CLPs to select their parliamentary candidates from Party members who have been validly nominated, and not to be restricted by the introduction of an approved list;

h) The right of CLPs to nominate one of their members or their MP for the NEC constituency section.

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The wrong stuff

We know what Tony Blair has done to the Labour Party. But what will he do to the country? Looking for answers, Mike Marqusee checks out Tony Wright's pamphlet *Who Wins Dares: New Labour, New Politics*, published by the Fabian Society and the *New Statesman*.

ONE OF THE hallmarks of New Labour is the extravagant claims it makes for itself as a "political project" and even a social and moral philosophy. No one advances these claims with more relish than Tony Wright, the MP for Cannock and Burntwood, who moonlights as an expert on and apologist for the thoughts of Tony Blair.

Wright describes New Labour as a "hegemonic project" which has already opened a new era, but warns that in government spin doctoring will not be enough. "The audacious revision of Clause IV" must be "matched by an equally audacious project for the country". Citing the record of the Clinton administration, he warns that "an obsession with keeping the ship afloat can divert attention from where it is supposed to be going — at least until it hits the rocks."

But Wright leaves us none the wiser as to either the ship's course or the rocks that could sabotage it. He concedes "we simply do not know what New Labour in office will turn out to be like" but chastises the "ultras" who express their "disdain for New Labour". Apparently, we have missed the epochal shift in the climate of opinion which New Labour has engineered.

Over the years, the "ultra left" (Wright's term for anyone who has not accepted the Blair "revolution") has produced more than its share of turgid and dogmatic propaganda, but in this department it must now yield to Wright himself. He does not bother to construct an argument; he merely ambles, without plot or point, from one self-satisfied truism to another.

In post-modernist fashion, he claims that New Labour has magically resolved a host of ancient and irritating dualities, thereby clearing the deck not only for a Labour election victory but for a new approach to politics. "A new synthesis — of market and state, public and private, individual and collective, rights and responsibilities — opens up a distinctive political direction." The conflict of classes has gone forever. It is time, therefore, for a "Radical Centre".

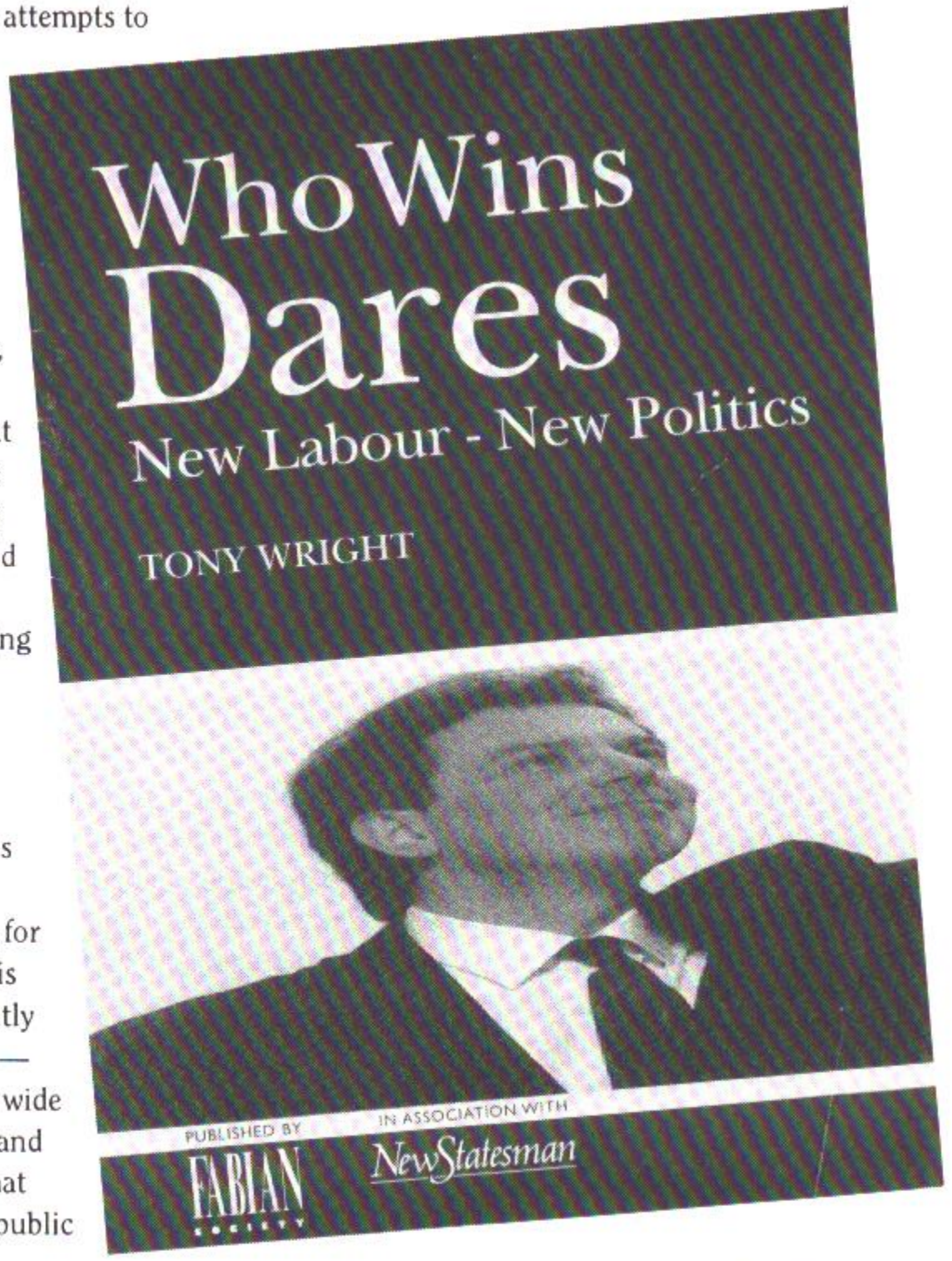
Wright nods in passing to the need for a "fundamentalism about aims" but he never tells us what the fundamental aims of New Labour or his Radical Centre are. Though he claims to be interested in renewing social democracy, he seems to have abandoned both its traditional methods and aims. No mention here of social equality, redistribution of wealth, common provision for common needs, or even the amelioration of capitalism.

Wright strikes a trendy note with his emphasis on the limits of government and politics in general. Voters, he asserts, recognise this reality and therefore distrust politicians who promise too much. Yet he also argues that one of the limits to politics today is set by the refusal of voters to support higher taxes. It is a classical piece of reactionary double think, in which cause and effect are conflated, and the status quo turned into a fact of nature. Wright's style of reasoning is pure Polonius. "Decent public services require decent taxes" but "spending more money on one thing usually means spending less on something else". Since, in the end, its every political decision is hedged in by expediency, the Radical Centre ends up being radical in rhetoric only, while in practice it drifts with the tide.

Wright's endless attempts to reconcile opposites and wish away conflicts of interest reduce him at times to incoherence: "It is a time for boldness, but if timidity is chosen we should at least know what we have done." Noting that the public is fed up with politicians obsessed with scoring petty party points, Wright condemns "yah-boo adversarialism" in Parliament and calls for cross party co-operation, "politics for grown ups". But it is the lack of sufficiently adversarial politics — the consensus on a wide range of economic and social policies — that has reduced much public debate to petty party point scoring.

Wright's chatter about "boldness" and "audacity" and his call for "radical imagination and policy innovation" are not matched by any specific policy proposals. His ideas on constitutional reform pertain entirely to the packaging and marketing of reform. He wants a "new style of politics" and avers "the sound bite is the enemy of the conversation" but his own pamphlet is composed almost exclusively of soundbites.

Any voter seeking an answer to that basic democratic query — what policies will you follow if we elect you? — will turn away in frustration. Wright is worried about the retreat from "the classical ideal of politics through which free citizens engage with their common concerns", but seems blithely unaware that his style of politics is one of the biggest threats to that ideal.



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The long march of European labour

Andrew Coates looks at the clash between New Labour and new labour unrest in Europe.

TONY Wright MP believes "...the assumed link between socialism and its traditional social agent in the working class is dead" (*Socialisms Old and New,* 1996). But the European left and workers refuse to part company. With an average 10.7% unemployment rate the European social model is in serious crisis. Reform and economic restructuring have led to a tide of revolt by unions and the left against the tyranny of markets. The long march of labour appears to have resumed.

In 1995-6 French workers fought neo-liberal health and social security proposals. In March German miners rampaged through Bonn, with Social Democratic support, forcing Helmut Kohl to reverse drastic cuts to mining subsidies. In Belgium,the threatened closure of Renault's Vilvoorde factory has led to employees occupying the plant. On 16th March, thousands of European trade unionists marched through Brussels with local socialists, the French Socialist General Secretary, Lionel Jospin, and his Communist colleague, Robert Hue. In Italy a general strike of public services workers has, with the sympathy of the Marxist Rifondazione, challenged Romano Prodi's centre-left government's plans to cut back state expenditure and denationalise.

While Europe's politics and economics are in turmoil, Blair's supporters are torn between backing for the crisis-ridden European model, and neo-liberal profit maximisation. Will Hutton, Denis MacShane and many in the TUC believe in a European social-market economy, built on partnership, with workers' rights entrenched in law. Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle stand for a "new revisionist consensus" around very different Europe-wide flexible labour markets, welcoming the new global economy and the rigour of competitive markets to which there is "no alternative". But threats to the pattern of co-operation, by dismantling social protection, worsened by the Maastricht convergence criteria, have caused social upheaval.

New Labour has closely paralleled the policies and culture of other social democratic parties. Revisionists' and democratic socialists' unity around the welfare state, full employment and support for a large public sector broke down with Neil Kinnock's Policy Review. In the 1980s socialist parties in power in France, Spain and Italy, as well as Australia, dropped social ownership, seeking regulated partnership between governments and private enterprise, and developed close links with business. Their organisations became personalised around dynamic leaders (Gonzalez, Mitterrand, Hawke, Craxi, Lange). The American Democrats' PR techniques and cross-class base were fashionable. Energetic young professionals dominated the apparatus, many becoming enthusiastic about markets — support for modernising companies was advanced by the influential French Foundation Saint-Simon and Italian socialists were impressed by Hayak's neo-liberalism. Parties adapted to globalism by abandoning Keynsianism and full employment. To win middle class support they dropped egalitarianism and limited welfare. Such were the changes in modernists' ideology that they have been called "post-social democratic".



Standing up for the working class

Europe's left has lost elections not by failing to live up to radical promises (these evaporated in the early 1980s) but through the policies of the post-social democrats Labour has embraced. Years of Conservative rule makes the outlook for a Labour government even bleaker than in other countries.

The privatised monopolies are powerful generators of unemployment and inequality. Labour inherits a state dominated by New Public Management, entrepreneurial professionals and private contractors pursuing their own interests. Labour's hostility to "big centralised government" and support for public-private partnership will lead to a further weakening of equality in public service provision. Coercive welfare-into-work schemes, flexible labour markets and a low minimum wage are to substitute for full employment.

There will be appeasement of the financial markets and more privatisations, leaving Labour ill-prepared to reduce poverty and social exclusion or to face the next economic down-turn.

Behind these developments lies globalisation — the watchword of conservative politicians of the right and left. Ignacio Ramonet has observed that "the dogma of globalisation admits no other economic policy, subordinates social rights to competition, and abandons to financial markets the overall management of a dominated society's activities" (*Le Monde Diplomatique,* January 1997). Many in New Labour claim there is no convincing socialist alternative and are prepared to settle for what they can get from Blair, hoping for a wider distribution of private ownership and employment protection.

Nonetheless, new class conflicts and mass unemployment force the European left to explore more radical alternatives. The markets' destruction of jobs and welfare has forced former post-social democrats to lay down conditions for entering a common currency. A genuinely "social" Europe is called for that can transform existing economic and political structures: limiting the working day, extending employee control, sponsoring third-sector enterprises, and a European network of socialised bodies, from health to transport. States have to be reshaped in line with the needs of the majority of the population.

The May European Convention for Full Employment, in Brussels, and the Euro-March for jobs in June, will be opportunities for the left to explore the class basis of a socialism Blair's admirers declare no longer exists.

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Undoing the Tory damage

Dr Brian Burkitt, Pudsey CLP and Senior Lecturer in Economics at the University of Bradford, offers Gordon Brown a practical socialist strategy.

THE INCOMING Labour government will soon face a budgetary crisis requiring a socialist response.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research recently estimated that the next government needs to bridge a £14 billion gap in budget funding. That is equivalent to the total budget of the Department of Education and Employment or to 8p on the standard rate of income tax.

Consequently, Gordon Brown's acceptance of the status quo (embracing Clarke's public spending targets, which imply substantial real cuts in health, education and local authority expenditure) is not a viable option. Unless the Labour administration wishes to engage in confrontation with pensioners, single parents, students, public sector workers and local government, it must recast the entire framework of economic policy.

New Labour says it will boost investment and long-run economic growth thus generating additional resources. Two issues, however, remain unresolved: how to meet the immediate crisis in public finances and how to fund the greater investment required to boost growth. The first can only be addressed by increased taxation, reductions in public expenditure or both. The labour movement must make clear that the gap must be bridged, not by cutting services or public sector pay, but by taking back the enormous gains — equivalent to some £15 billion during the 1980s — made by the richest 10% under the Tories.

If the next Labour government can repeat the achievement of Lloyd George's People's Budget of 1909 in raising the revenue needed for its economic and social policies through taxing the rich without increasing the fiscal burden on most voters, it could enjoy as long a period of rule as the Edwardian Liberals.

Such a programme would entail:

- Allowing the external value of sterling to fall to the level required to generate jobs in export and import-substitution industries. The aim would be to secure full employment while maintaining a balance of payments equilibrium. It is necessary to stress, however, that devaluation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for regeneration.
- Reducing the level of military expenditure to that of EU competitors over five years. £8 billion would be raised if Britain spent the same proportion of its income on defence as Italy, while £13.3 billion would accrue if Germany's level of military expenditure was achieved. Redundancy payments and project cancellation charges mean that cutting defence spending is not a "quick-fix"" for generating resources, but over the lifespan of a Parliament, it certainly would do so.
- Developing a politically feasible programme to raise tax revenue by:



PHOTO: PHILL MAXWELL

Gordon, there* is *an alternative...

a) Increasing the rate of income tax on those earning over £40,000 per annum to the EU average of 55%, yielding £6 billion;

b) Raising corporation tax to the EU average of 48%, generating £4.5 billion;

c) Imposing VAT at 17.5% on private education and health expenditures, producing over £900 million a year;

d) Levying a 0.5% tax on the 90% of foreign exchange transactions unrelated to trade. As £190 billion is currently traded daily on the London Foreign Exchange Market, such a tax would raise enormous sums if speculators' behaviour remained unchanged. A transaction tax could be avoided by moving to offshore havens, but such a tactic is deterred by exempting all currency transactions not undertaken through a registered exchange from legal status. Consequently, unpaid offshore debts would not be backed by the force of law. The removal of legal support and the low rate of taxation would prevent most speculators from decamping elsewhere.

- The funds thus generated would be used for three purposes:

1) To plug the immediate budgetary gap between expenditure and revenue.

2) To raise the level of industrial investment, particularly in future growth sectors and those industries where Britain remains a leading competitor, eg. aerospace, aircraft, biochemicals, electric motors, machine tools, paper and printing, petrochemicals and pharmaceuticals.

3) To enhance the quality of public services by creating jobs and raising standards of delivery in education, energy conservation, housing, medical care, support of an ageing population and transport.

These measures should, over five years, secure a return to full employment and to a comprehensive welfare state, which will provide the electoral base for a second Labour government. Over a long-term, they are largely self-financing; if unemployment fell to one million by 2002, government expenditure on unemployment-related benefits would be cut by two-thirds while tax receipts will rise to the extent that the present budget deficit is transformed into a surplus.

The probable response of financial markets to any radical strategy will be to trigger a flight of capital, generating a run on the pound. The most effective socialist response is a substantial devaluation to call the speculator's bluff, knowing that the consequent fall in the exchange rate will soon become self-defeating and thus, partially at least, self-correcting. Moreover, full employment requires a lower external value of sterling to create export demand and jobs.

Consequently, decisive government intervention and greater public investment will enable a Labour government during its first term in office to repair the economic and social damage inflicted by eighteen years of Tory Government. ❑

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Suspended for keeping the rules

Mike Davies argues that the New Labour attacks on Leeds North East are a threat to all Constituency Labour Parties.

LEEDS North East Constituency Party, plus four of its officers, has been suspended. The New Labour machine had attempted to orchestrate a right wing coup at the CLP's January AGM. The aim was to replace the existing officers, all long-standing and active members with a history of fighting for honesty in public life and against corruption in the Party. The coup failed. The CLP was promptly suspended.

The completely spurious nature of the grounds given were outlined in last month's *LLB*. In fact the suspension had clearly been deliberately prepared by Blair's machine as a fall-back in case the coup failed. Why is Blair so determined to smash Leeds North East? Because the CLP has a record of being active, democratic, honest and left-wing.

After the defeat of 1992, Leeds North East CLP bounced straight back into campaigning. It realises that winning a seat requires work week in, week out across several years, not just a burst in the weeks before an election. Activists in Leeds North East want to win for Labour, but Blair wants to smash the CLP even if it costs Labour the seat.

The CLP operates as a genuinely democratic party and respects the results of democratic decision making. Blair, on the contrary, overruled members' democratic choice of Liz Davies as PPC and now seeks to overrule the results of the AGM. In both cases these were, from the leadership's point of view, the "wrong" results. Naughty democrats!

In 1992 there was an attempt in a couple of Leeds constituencies to rig the trigger ballot for the Euro-selection. Leeds North East played a leading role in the fight to expose this and a re-run was conceded. The Party machine was so grateful for this assistance in preventing corruption within the Labour Party that the next year they tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Boundary Commission to break up the Constituency.

And of course, Leeds North East has tended to support such unacceptably extreme ideas as progressive taxation, full employment, decent pensions and trade union rights. This brackets Leeds North East with such far-left revolutionaries as Cardinal Hume and Archbishop Carey.

The point for the left is not that Leeds North East is a wonderful, exceptional CLP but that it isn't exceptional at all. If your constituency party is active, honest, democratic or left-wing then you are under threat. There is a growing catalogue across the country of arbitrary and unjustified suppression of local parties and interference in selections. Indeed if the *Labour into Power* proposals being pushed by the NEC for this year's Conference are passed then all CLPs will be, to all intents and purposes, permanently suspended as democratic policy-making bodies.



PHOTO: MIKE DAVIES

Celia Foote , suspended chair of Leeds NE CLP.

Reluctantly, Leeds North East is taking legal action to defend the right of a CLP to operate by the rules. Members don't want to go to court (and can't afford to), but what other way remains to defend the rights of both Party members and CLPs in Leeds and elsewhere? The fight back must be now. It needs to use all avenues, political and legal, and needs to involve all of us.

If you, your branch, CLP, Local Government Committee or district party is or has been suspended, or the leadership has imposed a candidate or otherwise interfered in you selection process, please let us know. If you would like a speaker at a meeting, please let us know.

If you are able, please send a donation. Cheques, etc. should be payable to "Celia Foote (Leeds NE)". Make sure the letter we sent in February to your CLP Secretary about our suspension is discussed at your GC. Use your CLP's one Conference motion to oppose the *Labour into Power* proposals: You won't get a second chance. Make sure you have an able Conference delegate mandated to speak and vote against the *Labour into Power* proposals.

- For more information contact Celia Foote, 24 Martins Drive, Leeds LS7 3LR, tel. 0113-262 4667.

Splitting sides

George Eden reports: The Labour leadership's so-called consultation process has notched up its first victim.

Labour Reform has announced that its vice chair, Tim Pendry, will no longer attend the regular meetings of the PLP What's Left group, following the group's decision on 4th March to accept the NEC's timetable for consultation over the *Labour into Power* proposals. According to Labour Reform, a "fundamental conflict of interests" over tactics has made this necessary.

Labour Reform is fighting the rise of centralism in favour of accountability within the Party, drawing members from the right and left. Unlike What's Left, it opposes the June 20th deadline which makes proper membership consultation impossible. It realises that the Action Plan that will be presented to conference in the Autumn will be inadequately discussed by the membership.

Labour Reform Chair Andy Howell said, "the whole consultation process has been brought into disrepute and could lead to acrimonious debate between the leadership and much of the membership."

Labour Reform, which has no policy programme beyond party accountability, fears a stitch-up between the trades union leadership and the soft-left PLP at the expense of Party members and trades unionists. "It is sad to see the ordinary members being sacrificed once again to the requirements of the professional political machine," Howell commented.

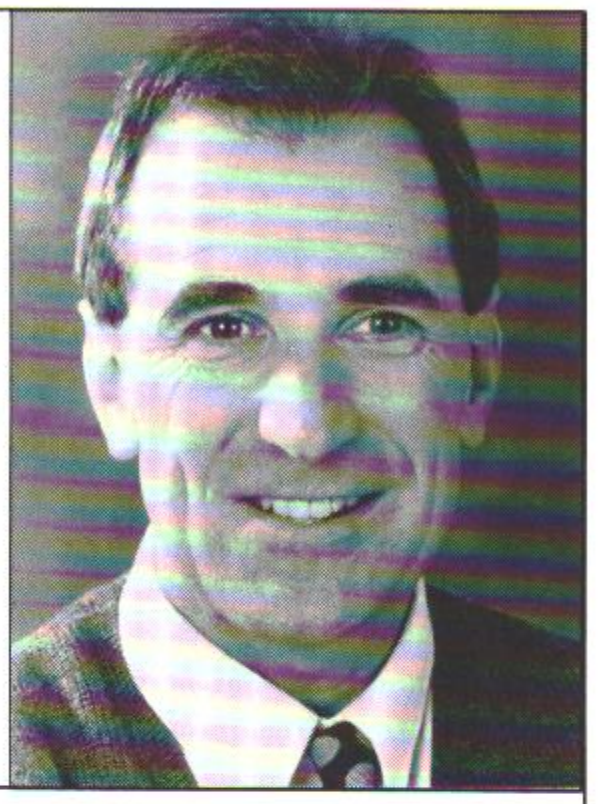
A letter to Tom Sawyer urging proper consultation has yet to receive a reply.

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Britain's winter cull

the Alan Simpson column

The Secretary of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs.



IN THE first two weeks of January 1997, 10,000 more people died in Britain than was normal for the start of a year. The fortnight coincided with a winter freeze, and the deaths were overwhelmingly cold related.

It is debatable whether we should call this a tragedy or a scandal, for although this was extreme it was far from unusual. It is simply part of Britain's annual winter cull of the old.

Each year Britain has in excess of some 50,000 winter deaths — avoidable deaths — of those forced to make a choice between heating and eating. Death, I suppose, at least brings an end to this particular dilemma.

The scandal lies in the fact that Britain today still has poorer standards of home insulation than Scandinavia set for itself in 1945. Five million households are unable to heat their homes properly. At least fifteen million people shivered their way through last winter and they will do so next winter ... and the one after ... and the one after that ... until we tackle the root cause of the problem — cold homes.

It isn't that Britain is entirely indifferent to the problem. There is a plethora of local initiatives and a scattering of government schemes, but these are fragments, half-hearted and piecemeal responses to a much bigger problem. To deal with it we need a commitment to the joined up thinking which the Labour Party was once proud to present as a coherent policy.

The Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, which I presented to Parliament, offered a serious attempt at such a policy. It set out an ambitious 15 year programme requiring 500,000 homes a year to be given a comprehensive package of home insulation and energy saving measures. The strength of the Bill is that it commands both enormous support in the country and broad support in Parliament. Moveover, it doesn't duck the big issues involved in implementation.

Detailed background costings have gone in to its preparation. Over 15 years it would actually save the country more than £3 billion in health care, housing maintenance and unemployment costs. It would create almost 30,000 jobs per year, and end the 50% of wasted energy which currently pours out of Britain's houses, damaging the atmosphere.

To be helpful to a Treasury front bench which has become allergic to public spending commitments, I even offered a selection of ways in which the programme could be initially funded including a new idea for "'ethical gilts", a non-fossil fuel levy, or a national lottery tax for the environment. But all of this begins from one presumption — that to bring an end to the scandal of fuel poverty and cold homes, Britain must learn to save.

Within the framework set by this Bill, we can save in health care costs; we can save on environmental pollution; we can save on unemployment costs; we can save on housing stock and housing management costs. But most important of all, we can save lives.

BRITAIN is almost alone in Europe in the winter deaths we accept from fuel poverty and hypothermia. Elsewhere people may accept they could die if caught outside in a snow blizzard, but not from the cold in their own homes.

The physical dereliction of housing in Britain, which blights the lives of the fuel poor, is really the policy dereliction of Parliament. I know of no pensioner who looks forward to the bracing experience of shivering his or her way through another winter freeze. But I know large numbers who fear that that is the reality which will confront them — until Labour is prepared to do something about it.

The Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill offers a way for Labour to tackle the problem on a serious and imaginative scale, rather than just tinkering about. In the dog-days of this current Parliament it could not become law. But as a blueprint for the next Parliament and the next century, it is simply what the public will expect of its elected politicians — Labour in particular.

Support for the Bill has come from a glittering array of the great and the good, from Age Concern to the Child Poverty Action Group, from churches to chambers of commerce, and from virtually every environmental campaign group in the country. Will the Party have the courage to follow?

If Labour wins this election — and we have to ensure it does — what would prompt people to give us a second term? The answers will almost certainly be found in the bread and butter policies which give people homes and jobs, hope and security — and the warmth to survive to the next election and beyond.

Labour abstains on PTA

The Prevention of Terrorism Act came up for its annual renewal on 5th March. As in the past, the Labour leadership ordered MPs to abstain, rather than vote against the renewal.

In the debate, Jack Straw said that police needed exceptional powers to prevent and detect terrorist offences, and that Labour acknowledged the necessity of specific "tough and sometimes unpalatable" anti-terrorist legislation. However, it remained committed to two amendments to the Act: the abolition of exclusion orders and the introduction of a judicial element in the extension of detentions.

In previous years, the Campaign Group, joined by other Labour MPs committed to the defence of civil liberties, defied the Labour Whip to vote against the PTA renewal. This year, after discussion with Jack Straw, the Campaign Group decided to abstain.

Only thirteen MPs voted against the Act: Tony Benn, Andrew Bennett, Dennis Canavan, Jeremy Corbyn, Tam Dalyell, Bill Etherington, Eddie Loyden, Kevin McNamara, Max Madden, Seamus Mallon (SDLP), Chris Mullin, Terry Rooney, Dennis Skinner, plus the tellers for the 'Noes' John McAllion and Eddie McGrady (SDLP).

Beyond gay

Since Denmark legalised a form of gay civil marriage in 1989, less than 10% of Danish queer couples have chosen to tie the knot. Most reject the option of a formal, state-approved partnership contract. They stay together because they love each other, not because of an official piece of paper.

While Danish homosexuals who register their relationships enjoy nearly all the legal rights accorded to straight married couples, those in unregistered relationships continue to have little legal recognition.

Peter Tatchell makes his proposal for an Unmarried Partners Act.

If same-sex weddings were made lawful in Britain, there would probably be a similar low take-up rate, and the vast majority of homosexual couples would remain without legal protection. This is the big flaw in the growing movement for gay marriage: it helps few and ignores many.

Far more beneficial to most queer partners would be new laws giving automatic legal rights to all non-married couples (which would also benefit unwed straights).

What is needed is an Unmarried Partners Act, granting statutory rights to live-in lovers (and those living apart) who can demonstrate the existence of a committed relationship. These rights could include: acknowledgement as next-of-kin in medical emergencies, life insurance pay-outs and inheritance of property in the event of a partner's death, joint guardianship of children, and entitlement to spousal benefits such as coverage by pension and health-care plans. Such legislation would be much more

First we must win equality

Peter Purton and Ajay Johnson of the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights (LCLGR) respond to Peter Tatchell's piece in last month's *LLB*: *Beyond Equality*.

Last month Peter Tatchell of OutRage! described LCLGR as "myopic" for calling for the age of consent to be equalised at 16 and lumped LCLGR with everyone else as "assimilationist" for abandoning "gay liberation" in favour of "respectability" and the "straights' system". The main difference between LCLGR, Stonewall and others whom Peter derides, and OutRage! is that we campaign against the gross inequalities afflicting lesbians and gay men in homophobic British society. Within LCLGR some believe that changing laws directly discriminating against us is a sufficient objective, others that oppressive laws reflect an oppressive society — but that getting rid of those laws is the most effective way to start challenging social oppression. Both groups collaborate on the task of achieving legal equality.

Anyone who has addressed a largely heterosexual gathering arguing for lesbian and gay equality understands that to win the argument you must challenge the popular conception that homosexuality is inferior — a view held even by those who agree that we ought not to be discriminated against. Polls show many accept we should not suffer inequality in the criminal law (as with the age of consent), but not our right to be treated equally in raising children or being teachers.

LCLGR fights for the interests of all sections of our communities. We have promoted the demands of lesbians, so often buried in an all-embracing (but actually male-dominated) "gay" movement and "culture". Lesbians' right to fertility treatments, custody of children, adoption and fostering are not "easy" questions, but they are questions of equality and fundamentally challenge existing norms.

LCLGR advances a programme of fundamental legal change. Our *Manifesto for Lesbian and Gay Equality*, published with the welcome assistance of UNISON, is a legislative programme based on policies adopted by Labour conferences since 1985. We have been in regular discussion with Labour front-benchers. In February, Jack Straw made a public speech outlining New Labour's initial commitments: an early free vote on the age of consent with government backing: repeal of Section 28; and anti-discrimination measures based on the integration into British law of the European Convention on Human Rights. While not enough it is a solid start on which LCLGR will build. In comparison with ten years ago, it is a big advance and is due to LCLGR and many others (especially in the trades unions) consistently and tirelessly arguing for these mere "reforms".

As well as working in and with individual unions, LCLGR has taken a lead in arguing for the Lesbian and Gay TUC to achieve a much higher priority and status. Over the Sex Offenders bill, as previously with the ban in the military (Tatchell echoes many of our feelings about the strangeness of this issue for socialists — but equality is indivisible), LCLGR lobbied, argued and campaigned.

LCLGR has always regarded itself as part of a broader movement. LCLGR has offered support and solidarity to campaigns for women's rights, we've supported and turned out for many anti-racist events and offered strong support to campaigns of people with disabilities. We have taken on board the issues of black and disabled lesbians and gay men where other parts of the lesbian and gay movement have been silent. While recognising weaknesses and failures, it is a good record, one which we expect to turn into material improvements for our communities with the election of a Labour government. After campaigning for so long, and on such a principled basis, it would truly be short-sighted to direct our priorities anywhere else.

●To join LCLGR send £15 (high-waged), £8 low-waged, or £3 unwaged to LCLGR, PO Box 306, London N5.

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marriage

practical than gay marriage, and help vastly more homosexual couples.

Giving a high priority to the campaign for same-sex weddings is symptomatic of the increasingly conservative, conformist goals of the gay rights movement. While queers should have the right to get married if they wish, there's something quite perverse about homosexuals actually wanting to be part of a fundamentally flawed hetero institution. Even straights now realise the drawbacks. Yet gay people are jumping on the marriage bandwagon at the very moment when heterosexuals are deserting married life in droves.

The number of straights currently getting wed is the lowest for 60 years, and nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. Put bluntly: marriage isn't working. The only people now showing any enthusiasm for this increasingly discredited institution are religious fanatics and faggots.

It is surprising that so many gays desire the formalised ritual of wedlock (the word itself alludes to the frequently confining, suffocating nature of married life). Getting hitched won't make their relationship happier or more fulfilling. Why do they need the stamp of official approval? Isn't love and commitment enough? Don't they realise that with marriage comes the messiness of D-I-V-O-R-C-E and the millstone of A-L-I-M-O-N-Y? Who in their right mind wants to shell out maintenance payments to someone they should have ditched years ago?

Let's face it, marriage is totally irrelevant to gay people's needs. Its origins are thoroughly heterosexual, evolving primarily to ensure male sexual control over women and to provide a stable family life for the rearing of children. This made-to-measure straight system is hardly an appropriate model for queer couples. Instead of mimicking dubious heterosexual institutions like marriage, we queers should be more imaginative and invent our own.

Already, many lesbian and gay lovers (and plenty of straight ones too) don't want to go through a formal, legally-binding ceremony. They stay together because they love each other, and have no desire for a state-sanctioned marriage contract which burdens them with bureaucratic obligations.

These unformalised same-sex partnerships currently have no legal status, and would continue to remain unrecognised if gay marriages were made lawful (even common law heterosexual couples have few legal rights at present). To remedy this injustice, it's time there were legal rights for all unmarried partners, both gay and straight. Such rights may not be as "respectable" as gay marriage, but they would be infinitely more useful.



PHOTO: STEVE MAYERS

Westminster Registry Office, March 1992: Attempts by OutRage! to file the first applications for same-sex civil marriage in the UK were rejected. Undeterred, four couples pledged their commitment to each other on the pavement outside.

●Peter Tatchell's new book, *We Don't Want to March Straight - Masculinity, Queers and the Military*, is published by Cassell.

Britain's torture shame

Centuries of colonialism have left Britain with expertise in internal repression and torture. Repressive regimes come to British companies for equipment. Eric Fergusson, of the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, reports on campaigns to expose this.

Electroshock batons leave no marks when used properly and are excruciatingly painful: a five second blast to the base of the spine turns the central nervous system to jelly. A torture victim told Channel 4's Dispatches team: "They use the electroshock in our eyes...you feel like it is hell. ...they tried to shoot my friend in his testicles...he saw from underneath the blindfold this stick which gives us all pain."

It's illegal to make or sell these batons from Britain but companies have been filmed doing so. Phillip Morris of British Aerospace revealed that electroshock batons were sent to Saudi in the £20 billion Al Yamamah arms deal — a National Audit Office investigation was suppressed. Dispatches journalist Martin Gregory posed as a businessman linked to the Lebanese government. Morris offered him millions of pounds worth of electroshock batons and shields. Neither Morris or smaller traders such as Glasgow based ICL Technical Plastics have been prosecuted despite such evidence. COPEX, a market place for electroshock batons and other torture equipment, has moved from Sandown Racecourse to government owned land near Farnborough.

It is not illegal to arrange the transport of electroshock batons from say, Mexico to Zaire from Britain. Although some of the profits come to Britain the batons may never touch British soil. This obvious loophole has to be closed with the COPEX arms fair itself.

Gregory, using cod company notepaper and a public fax in Switzerland asked British companies for electroshock batons. Some warned Gregory that it was illegal to sell electroshock batons in Britain, but reassured him the weapons would never touch British soil. One company said: "It gives a huge electrical shock. Low current, high voltage". Dispatches: "Right — not lethal though?" "Oh yes, ...this is basically to make him behave himself." Another company claimed their batons were not "cheap pieces of shit. You can actually use them to hit people. Decent quality."

●CAAT invites labour movement activists with their banners to Farnborough on September 30th to protest against COPEX to campaign for independent trade unions and democracy. Stop the COPEX Arms Fair Protest, Mass Demonstration, Tuesday 30th September 1997.

●Details/donations: Andy Abbott, CAAT, 11 Goodwin Street, London, N4 3HQ. 0171-281 0297, 0171-281 4369, caat@gn.org.apc.

deb

Stay, fight, prepare!

In the last issue of *LLB*, Paul Field and Dave Palmer argued that it is time to abandon support for the Labour Party. Bryn Griffiths and Graham Bash, both of Hackney North and Stoke Newington CLP, argue that left activists must stay in the Party and build a political alternative to New Labour within the structures of the labour movement.

FIELD AND Palmer have made a correct critique of New Labour's anti-working class programme. What is at issue is not whether "to begin the hard task of building a labour movement alternative to New Labour", but how.

There can be no doubt that socialists face probably the most difficult political conditions that have ever existed within the Labour Party. The abandonment of Clause IV, the rejection of any programme or philosophy of reforms, and the abject refusal to reverse any of the fundamental tenets of Thatcherism have brought the left face to face with a dreadful possibility. Perhaps the Labour Party has been so completely taken over by New Labour that it has ceased to be in any sense a political vehicle for the working-class, ceased in short to be a party of labour.

Such a drastic conclusion has to be more than merely asserted, it has to be proven. The anti-working class programme of New Labour, however rotten, is not the decisive question. Labour has never had a socialist programme except as a long term goal. And the policies of Labour governments have often been blatantly anti-working class. Look at Ramsay MacDonald, and remember Wilson's *In Place Of Strife* and Callaghan's attacks on public sector workers in the Winter of Discontent. Yes, New Labour represents a new stage along this road. But policies and programmes come and go and are reversible. What is critical, and what must define our attitude to the Party, are the structures of the Party — its democracy and accountability and its link with the trade unions — and its relationship to the working class.

Field and Palmer refer to Tom Sawyer's proposals set out in *Labour Into Power - a Framework For Partnership* which they believe, with some justification, will close the channels of internal democracy through which the working class can challenge the policies of a New Labour government. They therefore advise us to abandon ship and make the break from Labour.

What exquisitely bad timing! Two months before a General Election, with the vast majority of trade union activists struggling to rid us of Tory government for the first time in a generation — and with the Sawyer proposals not to be decided on until the October Conference — it is tantamount to quitting the front lines at the crucial moment of battle.

While the Party structures remain essentially intact there should not be the slightest question of socialists quitting the Party. Our political isolation from the bulk of the working class is wide enough in this period without adding the further ingredient of organisational separation. It may be likely that Sawyer's proposals to gut Conference and the NEC and to prevent the Party challenging a New Labour Government will be adopted. But it is not inevitable and it hasn't happened yet.

Even if Sawyer's proposals do get through and the channels of internal Party democracy are thereby narrowed and possibly closed there may remain reasons for socialists' continued involvement in the Party.

Even in this situation — in which the Labour Party was all but destroyed by New Labour — the role of socialists would be to help assemble a coalition of forces to rebuild a party of labour, not to use the occasion as an excuse to retreat into the marginal political practice of building a socialist sect. An essential element of any such coalition would be existing members and supporters of the Labour Party — and our role in the immediate future would be to face the experience and challenge of a New Labour government side by side with Party members and supporters and build our political challenge to New Labour within whatever structures were still open to us.

The Labour Party, whatever its fundamental weaknesses, is a product of the historical experience of the British working class. If we lose it, it would be the end of 100 years of working class history. A new party of labour couldn't easily be created without a desperately difficult struggle, especially in a period of defeat which the triumph of New Labour over the structures of our movement would represent.

Our role as always will be to base ourselves on class struggle and the strength of the working class — the only force that can, at best, save our Party, or if it comes to it, rebuild our Party, against New Labour and the forces of bourgeois reaction which it represents.



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bate

Make them pay for our support

Blairites may attack the policies and the democratic structure of the Party but as long as it has mass working class support socialists should stay and fight, argues Mike Phipps, Brent South CLP.

LAST MONTH'S *LLB* debate about whether socialists should continue to support and campaign for Labour presents a useful opportunity to clarify some basic principles. Contrary to what some argue, our attitude to the Party should not be determined primarily by the line of its leadership. On this basis, the debate on whether Blair's policies on spending limits, crime and workfare are as appalling as Wilson's support for American troops in Vietnam in the 1960s is interesting, but not crucial.

Nor should our approach be based primarily on the Party's structure. While the adoption of Sawyer's proposals would be a major setback for Party accountability, the fact is the leadership has often been able to ignore Party democracy and sidestep debate. It would be formalistic to suggest that the latest proposals, however undemocratic, fundamentally transform the character of the Party's relationship with its supporters.

This relationship is the critical issue. As long as the overwhelming majority of the working class votes Labour and finances its election campaigns through the trade unions, then socialists should stay. We need to work in the Party to ensure our movement gets something in return for its votes and its financial contributions. We need to remind the leadership that it owes our class something for its support.

It's impossible to say in advance how far an incoming Labour government might be made to listen to the working class. I suspect it will depend much more on how combative the unions are, rather than how formally democratic the Party Conference is.

If Blair does plan to attack working class living standards, for example by chopping over £20 billion off public spending as a precondition for joining a single European currency, there will be uproar. This is not an issue purely for the left — the whole of the Parliamentary Labour Party would feel the pressure from constituencies, voters and sponsoring unions. Wilson in 1969 was advised by the whips to abandon his anti-union proposals precisely because of the threat of outright rebellion across the backbenches.

So the conflict between the voting base of the Labour Party and its capitalistic leadership is still a long way from being resolved. Talk of a "final phase" may yet be premature. As the contradictions deepen, it is important for socialists to be at the heart of the struggle, not on the sidelines.

Vote Labour!

David Pope, Leyton and Wanstead CLP, argues that *LLB* should have no qualms about campaigning for a Labour government.

LLB CALLS FOR a Labour vote in the Election but stresses the need to organise opposition to Blair from day one of a Labour government. I believe this is a contradictory attitude which we cannot afford in the run-up to 1st May.

LLB has called for opposition to Blair since he was elected as Party leader. I see no point in repeating this endlessly and harping on about the leadership's faults when the immediate challenge is to get rid of the Tories. I doubt whether I am more favourably disposed towards Blair than any other *LLB* supporter but what do we gain by voicing our opposition at every opportunity? A few points on the macho scale perhaps but nothing of any substance. *LLB* has recognised that building itself involves links with Party members to its right. How can this be done if *LLB* is so equivocal at this crucial moment ?

There is nothing splendid about permanent isolation. *LLB* supporters have the choice of leaving the Party or continuing to work within it for socialist policies. We cannot do the latter if we are so equivocal in our attitude towards the Election. We are in danger of forgetting who our real enemies are. Over the last 18 years, the Tories have presided over a shift in wealth to the rich. They have trampled on the rights of trade unions, hounded asylum-seekers, wrecked public services and increased unemployment to three million. Five years of a Blair government will not repair all the Tories' damage but they will do some good.

A Labour government will: restore trade unions at GCHQ; revoke Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and propose the equalising of the age of consent at 16; repeal much or all of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996; end the voting rights of hereditary peers in the House of Lords (the first step by a Labour government towards reforming the Lords since 1947); reduce VAT on domestic fuel bills to 5%; end the assisted places scheme; and grant trade unions recognition rights where 51% of the workforce demand them.

Of course this does not go far enough but I would much rather argue for radical policies from a position within the governing party, than in an opposing one. As a trade union branch officer in the public sector, I will be campaigning for a Labour government. So should all *LLB* supporters. ❑



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No asylum from Britain's shame

What's this? A bout of subversive truth-telling appearing under the imprint of the newly privatised Stationery Office Ltd (formerly HMSO)? For the benefit of those who couldn't be there, *LLB* reproduces extracts from Hansard of Jeremy Corbyn's remarks in the House of Commons, 5th March 1997.

Mr. Corbyn: Britain has among the smallest numbers of asylum seekers of any European country. Compared to other continents, Europe has one of the smallest numbers of asylum seekers. The real burden of the world's refugee crisis falls not on western Europe but on Mexico, Jordan, India and on other countries near to places where there has been civil strife or where there are governments deeply oppressive towards their own people. So the idea that there is a huge flood of people trying to get into western Europe and into Britain, and particularly into Westminster City Council accommodation, is slightly over-egging the pudding. It is also missing the point...

In the United Kingdom there has been a systematic erosion of people's ability to seek asylum and to have their cases properly determined. There has also been a vindictiveness against asylum seekers. It has been parroted in this debate by some Conservative members which has been promoted by newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail*. For many years that newspaper has had a long and dishonourable record on this issue.

Mr Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I wonder whether the Hon. Gentleman will tell the house what mandate he has from the British people to share their citizenship with foreigners?

Mr Corbyn: I am unsure how one answers such a totally ludicrous question. If someone has a legitimate fear of persecution, they flee abroad and try to seek asylum. Many people sought asylum from Nazi Germany. Presumably the Hon. Gentleman, on the basis of his comment, believes that they should not have been admitted to the UK, and that people fleeing oppression in any regime should not be admitted. Suppose he had to flee this country because an oppressive regime had taken over. Where would he go? Presumably he would not want help from anyone else, because he does not believe that help should be given to anyone else...

A couple of weeks ago, I spent several hours talking to a group of asylum seekers from Iran. That regime, despite the fatwah against Salman Rushdie and numerous other human rights abuses, is beginning to be cosied up to by the British Government and by the rest of western Europe because they now prefer to support Iran rather than Iraq.

The people whom I met told me, chapter and verse, of how they had been treated by the regime in Iran, how they had been summarily imprisoned, with no access to courts; how their families had been beaten up and abused while in prison; how the regime murdered one man's fiancee in front of him because he would not talk about the secret activities that he was supposed to be involved in.

Those people came to this country and applied for asylum. Their applications were refused and they appealed. They are now living a life of virtual destitution, while the Home Office ponders on what to do with them ...

Since last year, people from the Ivory Coast have sought asylum in the UK. I recall a discussion with the Home Office about the safety of people from the Ivory Coast. The Minister told me he was assured that everything was okay in the Ivory Coast. The students whom I met told me that their government was so keen on carrying out the economic wishes of the IMF that they were crushing anyone who opposed them, they crushed trade unions and they crushed student opposition, sending troops into various universities and closing them down...

Almost uniquely among European countries, this country routinely puts in prison people who seek asylum. There are nearly 900 people in British prisons who have sought asylum. It costs £20 million a year to keep them in prison.

There has been a hunger strike at Her Majesty's prison at Rochester. When I raised the issue on a private notice question, the Home Office Minister was dismissive. She appeared to have no understanding of the moral force of people undertaking a hunger strike to draw attention to their problems. Hon. members should stop and think for a moment about the circumstances of those who come to this country seeking asylum, go to prison with no direct access to the courts and then, thinking that they have been badly treated and fearful of what will happen, undertake a hunger strike and in some cases a refusal to take fluids.

If that happened in another country under a regime of which we disapproved, the British government would say that it was a terrible indictment of the human rights' record of that regime. In this country, people who say that get routine abuse from Home Office ministers and Conservative members... ❑

Heathrow after Tory racist asylum laws.



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Courts versus women

Why are women being forced to undergo unwanted Caesareans by the courts? Leonora Lloyd, Ealing, Acton and Shepherds Bush CLP, reports.

WHILE IN America the number of Caesareans is at last starting to go down, in this country they continue to rise, with one obstetrician predicting that protection of the foetus would necessitate a Caesarian rate of 50%. This contrasts sharply with the official position that women have the right to make their own informed decisions about how and where they should give birth, which the medical profession accepted only about five years ago.

Guidelines issued recently by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists make it clear that even pregnant women do have the right to refuse any medical treatment offered. Doctors have a duty to explain all the options open but if women refuse to accept any proposed treatment, the doctor is covered by the law, requiring him/her to accept the woman's decision. Moreover, the Guidelines indicate that in those circumstances, the doctor is still required to continue to care for the woman and work towards the best outcome.



Leonora Lloyd at a Briefing AGM

So why are we seeing increasing numbers of Caesareans and so many cases where women are being forced to have Caesareans by order of the Court?

MP Audrey Wise, who sat on a Commons committee which looked at all aspects of maternity care, believes that there are two reasons for this trend. First, it is part of the attempts by the anti-abortion lobby to elevate the rights of the foetus over the woman. This argument has not been used in Britain, not surprisingly, because the law specifically states that the foetus has no rights before birth, but it is nevertheless an underlying theme. In the US, this argument has been explicit. This is shown also by the increase in litigation for "prenatal harm" — where a child sues its own parents or the medical attendants for harm inflicted before birth.

It would be interesting to know where some of the British obstetricians who have pursued these cases stand on abortion. In court, they always argue that the case mainly involves the woman's health, and only secondly for that of the foetus.

More significant, however, is the backlash against the right of women to make their own decisions about their pregnancy and labour. It is notable that Wendy Savage, long an advocate of women's right to choose at all stages of pregnancy, has spoken out against the increasing rate of Caesareans and against the use of the courts.

In the US, Caesareans account for between a half and a third of births. The RCOG notes that there are a disproportionate number of court cases concerning ethnic minority women and those not speaking English as a first language. In only 14% of the American cases have the courts ruled for the woman, and it is significant that in most cases the woman has gone on to have a perfectly normal labour and healthy baby. In one of these a mother of nine refused a Caesarian because she would not have been able to care for her existing children after a major operation: she had a healthy baby. American obstetricians have now declared that women have a right to refuse interventions.

In Britain, most cases are brought in haste, sometimes in Chambers at night, with the woman usually unrepresented. In one case, the Judge admitted that he was administering "rough justice" and that he did not think "there is a possibility of giving attention to the legal niceties." Judges had to "act on the advice of doctors of proper standing". In this case, the obstetrician had told the Judge, over the phone, that the woman's uterus had ruptured, which it had not!

The problem is that, even under the RCOG guidelines, women can refuse advice, for whatever reason, only if they are conscious and "competent" and it is notable that in many cases lawyers for the hospital have argued that the woman (in the throes of a difficult labour) is not competent. Like menstruation, pregnancy and labour in particular is seen to affect women's sanity and take away their ability to make decisions about their own bodies.

There is clearly no need for an increasing rate of Caesareans. This is shown by the startling variations — within the Home Counties and London alone it varies from under 10% to over 22% in different authorities and trusts. Yet the health of women and the survival of babies continue to improve.

What can be done to prevent women being declared insane for refusing to accept what their doctors tell them? It should be declared illegal to pursue a case unless the woman is represented by a lawyer of her own choosing or if she is unconscious, then by her family. It is an important issue that a new government must sort out before more women are forced to undergo procedures they have not consented to. ❑

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Keep the unity in the universities!

University unions have settled their pay dispute after last November's eight union national one-day strike forced management to double their offer. Union activists are now calling for united action to ensure the deal is implemented in full, without job losses.

Some universities are prevaricating over whether they will pay the settlement in full and some are announcing redundancies to fund the deal and compensate for other funding cuts.

Middlesex is campaigning against 23 redundancies and the closure of four art and design courses; Birkbeck faces closure of the physics department; Queen Mary unions are challenging management plans to avoid consultation by announcing redundancies in small waves; York faces its first redundancies of permanent clerical staff; and Swansea management have announced a voluntary severance package without consultation aimed at losing 80-100 academic posts and 15% of support staff.

Magnet workers still fighting

Liz Knight writes: 350 workers sacked by Magnet Kitchens Ltd last September for taking legal strike action are still fighting to win their jobs back. Their crime was to ask for an equal pay rise for all.

The company has so far refused to enter into any negotiations, even with ACAS. All workers were sent an ultimatum letter demanding that they sign a statement disowning the union action.

Prior to the official strike, management had used browbeating and abusive methods to try to demoralise the workforce, including putting photos up on the factory notice boards showing workers who were caught standing still. As profits rose, workers' pay was cut or frozen.

Now the company is using a scab workforce with a high turnover of staff and skilled work is being contracted outside Darlington. There are four unions in this dispute: the GMB, the TGWU, UCATT and the AEEU.

At a meeting in London on 18th March, the TUC agreed to give more active support to the workers, to escalate the leafleting campaign, raise levies, and target 40% of Magnet's retail outlets for picketing.

But it is the strike committee, including a very active women's support group, which has been organising the campaign. They urgently need help, morally, financially and practically.

●Mass pickets are held every Monday, 6-7.30am and 4-4.30pm. Strikers will travel anywhere to speak at meetings. Pickets of Magnet showrooms in London are being organised through the London Liverpool Dockers Support Group, tel. 0181-367 0021.

Donations should be sent to the Magnet Families Hardship Fund, c/o Ian Crammond, Secretary Magnet Strikers Committee, 109 Jedburgh Drive, Darlington, Co. Durham, tel. 01325-282 389.

STAN NEWENS MEP SENDS MAY DAY GREETINGS AND CALLS FOR FULL SUPPORT FOR THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION FOR FULL EMPLOYMENT IN BRUSSELS 22/23RD MAY 1997

The President of the European Parliament will open the Convention in Brussels. This initiative arises from the European Appeal for Full Employment, launched in Strasbourg last July. Since then it has gained widespread support. Over 650 parliamentarians of various political persuasions and from every country in the European Union have signed. These include 162 Members of the European Parliament and 490 Members of national parliaments. Now trade unions, their national centres and European federations, trade secretariats and committees have pledged their support for the Convention, together with many local councillors, church people, academics, broadcasters, writers and non-governmental organisations.



Inquiries to:
Stan Newens, Basement Office, 92 Ladbroke Grove, London W11 2HE
tel. 0171-221 0092; fax. 0171-792 3691;
e-mail: office@newens.demon.co.uk

GROUP OF THE PARTY OF EUROPEAN SOCIALISTS

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April 12th: join forces with the future!

Chris Knight, London Support Group for the Liverpool Dockers, writes.

THE LIVERPOOL dockers confidently expect thousands on their "March for Social Justice" on April 12th. The event is backed by the RMT, NUM, Bakers' Union, Scottish TUC and many other trade union bodies, and marks the start in Britain of a series of marches across Europe destined to converge on Amsterdam in midsummer. We assemble at Kennington Park at noon, moving off at 1.00pm. Heading the march with the dockers will be the Hillingdon Hospital and Magnet strikers.

Weeks before the event, news was already coming in of coaches being booked from Scotland, Yorkshire and around the country. Special arrangements have been made for people with disabilities to participate fully, with a second assembly point (at 1.30pm) at Lambeth Bridge. Campaign Group MPs have pledged to walk the route with their new, specially made banner.

Billed as a noisy peoples' carnival, the event will celebrate "Good riddance to the Tories" with music all the way. The Merton Colliery Band will be playing along the route, as will the "Bateria Mandela" — a Samba band acting on this occasion as part of the entourage of a well-known dragon. Other music will be provided by the Big Red Band, the Women's Marching Band and the Raised Voices Choir. North London's Kurdish and Turkish community will be present in strength, providing us with a special contingent of singers, dancers and drummers in traditional Kurdish costume.

Crossing the river at Lambeth Bridge, the march will pass through Parliament Square into Whitehall. Outside No. 10 Downing Street, dockers' wives and children, dressed in 1848-style costume, will present "The Peoples' Charter for Social Justice". In Trafalgar Square there will be a chance to hear the dockers and other speakers, before resuming with the carnival. The environmentalist direct action organisation "Reclaim the Streets" has billed the weekend as a "two-day festival of resistance", mobilising across the country on the basis that "an RTS-style event" is to be expected. The dockers and their supporters are well aware of the good humour, non-violence and audacity of "Reclaim The Streets", particularly in occupying the Port of Liverpool last autumn.

Stewards will be answerable to the Merseyside Port Shop Stewards' Committee; the aim of stewarding will be to facilitate collective self-control in defending the unity and integrity of the event.

The Liverpool dockers have now been on strike for 18 months. During this period of astonishing struggle, they — not Tony Blair — have established themselves as the leadership of our class. They have achieved that status not only in Britain but also internationally. If we continue to build this leadership, and if the dockers continue to go from strength to strength, we may find ourselves ready to do battle with an incoming Blairite government on terms favourable to ourselves.

Two weeks after the march, on Labour Day itself, the people of Britain look set to vote overwhelmingly for a Labour government. Blair will not give them a Labour govern-ment. His régime will not be a Labour government in any sense. The policy of the dockers to date, when faced with such problems, has been to tell their official leaders: do the job we pay you to do! Or make way for those of us who will! Vote Labour, certainly. Most of the dockers will. But if you really think "it's time for a change", then join forces with the future outside Parliament on April 12th.

Robbie Fowler: Class Hero of the Month.



March for Social Justice

Saturday 12th April
12 noon Kennington Park

JOBS! HOMES! A FUTURE!

Trade Union Notebook



PHOTO: CHRIS CROOME

Hillingdon strikers march in support of Sheffield UNISON.

UNISON's NEC has confirmed a deal which concludes the Hillingdon dispute officially. But the majority of the strikers are still picketing. UNISON rank and file support continues. Donations from London and East Midlands regions were blocked by regional secretaries but branch donations are still getting through. Supporters plan to challenge the NEC which has ruled that conference motions which enforce last year's decision that the NEC backs the dispute are out of order.

The *FT* reports Pall Mall's owners want to sell the company for poor profit performance. In spite of a High Court ruling giving repossession of the picket line to the NHS trust, picketing is being maintained on council owned land nearby.

- Visitors are welcome to the picket line each morning 7am - 2pm at Pield Heath Road, Uxbridge (U2 bus from Uxbridge tube).
- Donations to: Hillingdon strikers, 27 Townsend Way, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 1TG. Information/speakers: 01895-250 781 or 0956-135 311.

Thousands of Sheffield UNISON members went on strike for half a day on 7th March 1997 against threatened compulsory redundancies and threatened privatisation at Sheffield City Council.

A massive rally on the town hall steps brought the City centre to a halt for two hours at the same time as the Labour Council was meeting to ratify its budget for 1997/98.

The Labour Group has agreed to privatise services on a voluntary basis and might try to make compulsory redundancies for the first time. Some Labour councillors say they don't want to make cuts under a Labour government so they want to get them out of the way now.

The budget includes the "outsourcing" of finance and IT services and the total closure of the Department of Employment and Economic Development.

The council is threatening 300 compulsory redundancies. UNISON is balloting members in eleven departments for strike action.

Council workers have been offered a 2.5% pay rise. This will include a minimum wage of £4 per hour. The offer is linked to proposals for common terms and conditions for manual and white collar council workers. The deal includes a maximum working week of 37 hours. Some local agreements include a 35 hour week and it is promised these will be protected. Union leaders are recommending acceptance. A UNISON special conference on the offer has been arranged for 20th May. A ballot of members affected will follow the conference.

Council workers will probably accept the 2.5% but the "single status" terms must be subject to the closest scrutiny before acceptance.

On 10th December 1996 Project Aerospace Ltd, Coventry, locked out all 41 skilled MSF trade unionists after ordering them, without consultation, to sign a new contract or else. The company has refused to negotiate with the unions, even via ACAS.

All donations and messages of support to the picket line in Canal Road off Cross Road in Foleshill or to Project Aerospace Dispute Fund, Coventry Trades Council, Unit 15, The Arches, Spon End, Coventry CV1 3JQ.

For speakers phone 01203-474 261 or 0976-971796, Hughie Paine, Senior Steward.

At the Women's TUC this year, for a change, there were a few contentious issues. A Musicians' Union proposal to include tax relief for child care in the TUC's child care campaign was opposed. Delegates agreed that most women affected earn such low pay that tax relief would be meaningless and that more flexible child care was the answer.

There were protests that this Autumn's TUC Gay and Lesbian Conference will be open to all and will not be resolution based, but the Women's Committee agreed to let the conference propose changes for the future.

John Monks was questioned about discussions with Nestlé which will help determine whether the company will again have a stand at this year's TUC. He pointed out that British Aerospace and Nuclear Fuels also have stands and that Nestlé is a "good" employer. A resolution which condemned exploitation of third world workers and aggressive selling of baby foods was passed unanimously.

An MSF emergency motion condemning the treatment of Roisin MacAlisky was overwhelmingly passed.

If you have any trade union news to report — a dispute, a victory — please send it to: Trade Union News, *Labour Left Briefing*, PO Box 2378, London E5 9QU.

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UNISON's Affiliated Political Fund (the section of Unison affiliated to the Labour Party) meets in May. The timing of this conference — in the first days of a Labour government — is an ideal opportunity to formulate specific demands on the Labour government. Tony Blair's office has obviously spotted this too as UNISON has agreed to reduce the conference from three days to one. The venue has also been switched from Manchester to the Millbank centre, home of the Millbank Tendency.

Meanwhile the London APF has voted overwhelmingly against *Labour Into Power*. Comrade Geoff Martin led the charge.

Civil Service unions are taking the Department of Transport to an Industrial Tribunal, alleging sexual discrimination in the granting of annual leave. In most government departments, senior grades receive the maximum annual leave immediately. Junior grades have to serve qualifying periods of up to 15 years before they are granted the maximum. Unions alleged that this amounts to sexual discrimination because higher grades are male-dominated. If the application is successful it will pave the way for similar claims in every other department.

Lol Duffy, a Liverpool UNISON branch officer, has been suspended from his post in the Council pending an investigation about his "apparent involvement or participation in inappropriate activities which may have incited direct action against elected members of the local authority". UNISON members in Lol's section walked out on strike immediately. Tony Ogunsiji on behalf of the UNISON branch said "it is an absolute disgrace that on the same day that the Labour Council declared 300 redundancies in the DSO it is attempting to victimise one of our officers for letting the people of Liverpool know what the Council planned to cut."

The MSF elections for General Secretary and the NEC were bad for the left — all the incumbents were re-elected — but brought little comfort for Roger Lyons. He received two-thirds of a 23% turn out, no better than when he was first elected five years ago. There was a massive smear campaign against Lyons' opponent, Joe Bowers, who was characterised in illegal canvassing material as a Stalinist and an Irishman with no knowledge of the British labour movement. Because of wide spread cheating and illegal use of Union resources on the part of the right, the London left candidates considered going to the Commissioner for Trade Union Affairs, but decided against it. But Joe Bowers has decided to take his case to the High Court with the Commissioner's support. Meanwhile, Roger Lyons tried to discipline Joe for his activities as a candidate during the election on the basis that as an officer he was doing things outside his jurisdiction! Fortunately the NEC wisely rejected this.

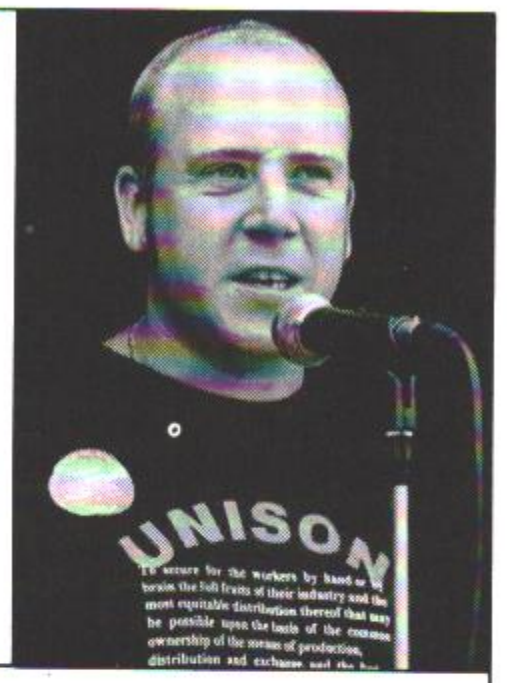
Proposals for the planned merger between the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) and the Public Services, Tax and Commerce Union (PTC) will be examined at each union's national conference this Spring. After Conference merger proposals will be submitted to membership ballots this Autumn. If carried, the new union, with 270,000 members, will come into effect on 1st January 1998.

Draft rules have been written in New Labour-speak and concentrate power in the NEC's hands and include provision for policy and rule changes to be subject to membership ballots. Conference will be held every two years, rather than one.

The draft rules have emerged after an outline (Aims and Values) was carried by a substantial majority in postal ballots in each union. The NEC of each union will use this as justification for resisting any amendments. In both unions the Aims and Values ballot started a fortnight early to avoid opposition.

the Geoff Martin column

UNISON's London Region convenor takes a lefty look at life.



WITH THE election being called , I thought we'd have a change of approach to this month's column. No references to Chelsea, no droning on about the Clash and definitely no mention of the Hampshire Popular Front. Instead what I want to do is pitch in to the debate about how the left should approach this general election and the bottom line is there is no alternative but to throw our weight 100% behind a Labour victory.

I've heard all this business about selective support for other left candidates based on an assessment of the platform they're standing on and a calculation of how far they are to the left of the official Labour candidate. Not only is this a recipe for creating confusion amongst natural Labour voters desperate to see the back of the Tories after 18 years, it would also degenerate into farce. For example, what do you advise Jo Punter to do in a constituency where there's a Lib Dem candidate who supports an expansion of the public services funded through increased taxation and cuts in defence spending standing against a New Labour clone who doesn't know her/his arse from a hole in the ground?

Are the gurus of the ultra left going to advocate a Lib Dem vote or a vote for the Communist Party or maybe even a vote for the Natural Law Party? I doubt it, and the reason why they don't is because anyone taking a serious look at the political landscape knows damn well that working class voters will be flooding to the polls to vote Labour. Not because there's any rampant enthusiasm for Blairism (there isn't) but because dumping the Tories is the priority.

Not only would it be an act of utter madness for the left to isolate themselves from this mood, it would also completely ignore the fight that's to come in the Party after the election. If the serious left has been seen to be pissing about with selective voting advice during something as crucial as a general election, how can we expect new rank and file Party members to take us seriously when we're fighting to keep the link and advocating socialist policies?

We have to keep reminding ourselves that the Labour Party is different from the US Democrats and most European Social Democrats by nature of the link with organised labour through the 50% trade union vote. The fact that trade unionists on the NEC appear to be willing to vote themselves out of existence shouldn't put us off. We know what the battleground will be after the election.

I don't underestimate the pressure that will be applied by the super-mods to dissolve effectively the Labour Party from within after the election but to opt out of that struggle — a struggle which we can win — would hand the political collateral of working class votes to the Millbank Tendency on a plate.

LEADING WITH THE LEFT

Nigeria: new union determination

Sean Coyne from *LLB* recently spoke to a leading trade union activist from Nigeria, the third interview the comrade has given to *LLB*.

Q: Can you tell us what the current situation is like inside the Nigerian trade union movement?

A: It is a grim picture until you scratch under the surface. Firstly, the Nigeria Congress, the equivalent to your TUC, and the oil workers' unions are still under the direct control of the military regime. They have appointed sole administrators to run these organisations. Secondly, the regime has brought in a number of decrees to undermine trade union action. Thirdly, the harassment and arbitrary arrest of activists is still happening. And fourthly, the regime has proscribed a number of unions who were taking militant action.

Q: That sounds like a very difficult situation, but what do you see when you scratch under the surface as you say?

A: Despite everything that the regime has tried to undermine our struggle, workers are prepared to fight back. The unions which have recently been proscribed have simply refused to dissolve! They carry on meeting, and even engage in collective bargaining with the employers. They have refused to be intimidated. Workers still strike if they need to, and ignore the threats from the regime. That's very encouraging.

"If governments increased the pressure it would be supported by workers everywhere."

Q: Last time we talked, you explained that some of the leaders were corrupt and were prepared to sell out.

A: That's true, but there has been a weeding out of many corrupt elements. Ironically, when the regime banned the Nigerian Labour Congress, it got rid of a few for us! Those who remain are mainly the ones with a real base, and therefore they act in a much more accountable way. I think a new determination is emerging within the unions, and that is what is frightening the regime.

Q: Tell us more about the decrees which have recently been passed?

A: They are draconian, and frankly ridiculous. Decrees 4 and 26 make it illegal for a full time union officer to participate in any of the decision making structures of the trade union she or he was elected to serve. A range of measures is designed to decapitate the unions, and leave them open to imprisonment. All the judgements made on this basis are beyond any appeal procedure.

Q: So what are the unions doing about this?

A: After the General Strike of 1994, when we had a partial victory, we were not fully prepared for the repression which the regime unleashed against us after the return to work. Two oil workers' leaders are still in detention with countless others from human and civil rights organisations. This made a lot of people cautious, and many activists said let's wait and see what happens next. Now we have realised that we should have tried to maintain our mobilisation, we should have kept the fires burning at grass roots level, and used the partial victory to ensure that repressive measures could not be used. Many of us have learnt this very hard lesson. Now we are making sure that our members know what is happening. We are rebuilding self confidence in our organisations, and we are working to ensure that we act in a united manner.

Q: What about the other parts of civil society?

A: They remain quite weak organisationally, and they do not have the mass base of the unions, although politically there has been the coming together of more opposition groups and activists around basic demands. We have to make sure that our demands are clear, and that they correspond to the needs of the masses, and are not based on just sloganeering for the intellectual elite. We have to persuade our people in the unions not to underestimate the willingness of workers to fight and make sacrifices for their rights. After all they do it every day in order to survive.

Q: How do you read the international campaign against Nigeria?

A: This is problematical. The Commonwealth has fudged the issue, the UN has skipped around it, and the Organisation of African Unity has pretended that there is really nothing wrong! It has been left to Canada and Jamaica to make any lasting protest. The international do-gooders tell us that we have to be patient, and that there is nothing that can be done on a unilateral basis. This is music to the ears of the junta. Every time the pressure is lifted from the regime internationally, they repress us more at home.

There is a lot of support for our struggle throughout the world. If governments increased the pressure on the regime it would be supported by workers everywhere. Freezing bank accounts, stopping the junta from travelling and isolating them internationally would be a good start. If that did not yield results, then we could move onto more substantial sanctions. Many people inside the country feel that they have been forgotten by the international community, and so lack the confidence to call for firmer action against the regime. If you stand up and call for action against the regime inside the country you could end up in prison for a decade or more. It's only when we stand collectively that we can make an impact.

Q: Is the regime confident?

A: In some ways, yet in others it behaves like a frightened goat. At the moment there is a campaign being waged by our corrupt and sycophantic political elite to popularise the notion of General Abacha casting off his uniform and standing as a civilian for the presidential elections which are supposed to take place next year. This was the path followed by Rawlings in Ghana and Jammeh in The Gambia. Many in the international community think this might be one way of

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ensuring a successful transition to civilian rule, but they fail to recognise that Abacha currently controls all the machinery for the transition, including the electoral system. He has filled them with cronies. They won't ensure that the elections are free and fair, We have to reject this so-called transformation, and call for genuinely democratic structures to be put in place. The overwhelming mass of people want an end to military rule whether they wear a uniform or not.

Q: What can we do to help?

A: I see that the Labour Party have said that the Conservative Government is not doing enough to pressure the regime. That would be a start. Why don't you make sure that Labour, when elected, will make Nigeria a priority campaign like South Africa became. That would be a real confidence boost for all of us. Also within the unions in the UK, we should be making links now so that British workers can understand our struggle. In Scotland in October the Commonwealth will be meeting. Nigeria will be a big item on the agenda. It would be really useful if union activists and others could help to make all these assembled governments realise that the Nigerian people want democracy and are prepared to fight for it, and that the Nigerian regime should be refused arms, credit, international credibility and be treated like the scoundrels they are. That's what you can do to help.

Q: The regime has recently announced that Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka and 11 others are to be charged with treason. What has been the reaction to this in Nigeria?

A: Treason is of course a capital offence, although as the execution of Sara Wiwa and the other Ogonis demonstrated, you can be put to death by the regime without any charge or evidence whatsoever. But the purpose is to fight opposition inside the country. The Soyinka case is an interesting one. When he first received his nobel prize for writing about the brutal injustices of the colonialists, he was lauded up and down the land by the military regime, but as soon as he wrote and spoke about current injustices in Nigeria he was treated like enemy number one and that's why he fled into exile. The regime is desperate to find an oppositional scapegoat to justify its continuation in power. When a number of bombs were planted, the regime said it was Soyinka and his associates, but no one believes this.

Everyone suspects the regime who wants to present itself as a stabilising force to the outside world against so-called terrorism and then to use terror tactics themselves inside the country to undermine the opposition. Now the opposition in Nigeria is fragmented organisationally at this time, but there is a growing demand for unity and this is what is worrying the regime. The regime is brutal but it is not stupid!

We have had to learn a very hard lesson. We must make sure that workers, women's organisations, peasants, environmentalists, and civil and human rights activists begin to find common ground. We can no longer allow the opposition to be divided by ourselves. This is playing into the hands of the regime.

Release Roisin McAliskey!

After months awaiting extradition to Germany, campaigning has improved Roisin's prison conditions. Dorthy Macedo reports.

THE BRITISH government's vindictive treatment of Roisin McAliskey is at last getting media attention. When she was first arrested last November the case received minimal publicity. The change is thanks to tireless campaigning by her supporters. Irish MPs have visited her in prison and the Irish government has expressed its concern.

Despite the fact that Roisin McAliskey has yet to be charged — let alone convicted — and despite her pregnancy and poor health, she was initially treated as a Category A prisoner. She is making a formal complaint about her treatment at the notorious Castlereagh detention centre in Belfast where she was first held, probably in breach of European Court rulings. She was then transferred to Belmarsh, a high-security men's prison, where she was put in a filthy cell previously used during a "dirty" protest, which she had to clean.

Now in Holloway Prison, she was subjected to repeated strip-searches even when she was only allowed "closed" visits where no physical contact is possible. She is kept in isolation from other prisoners. As a result of the media attention her security status has at last been slightly relaxed and she is now able to hold hands with her partner during visits.

Roisin was terrified that she would be shackled before and after the birth of her baby and that the baby would be removed from her. She has now been told she can keep her baby with her; there is no doubt this is due to the adverse publicity and not to any tender-heartedness on the part of the British government.



PHOTO: *IRISH POST*

International Women's Day outside Holloway Jail. Bernadette McAliskey speaks out in defence of her daughter Roisin.

Several Irish prisoners have suffered permanent mental damage as a result of the vindictive treatment they received in British prisons. Knowing this, the treatment of a vulnerable woman, who has not been convicted of any crime, is tantamount to torture.

When Junior Home Office minister David Maclean compared Roisin McAliskey to Myra Hindley, Michael Howard defended this outrageous comment. It is disgraceful that no front bench Labour spokesperson condemned Maclean and it was left to SCG member Harry Barnes MP to call for Maclean to be dismissed. ❑

Euro marches head for Amsterdam

Alan Thornett reports: The working class across Europe has responded to the convergence criteria of the Maastricht Treaty with general strikes and mass actions. There have been general strikes in France, Belgium, Spain, Greece and Italy. There have been the victories of the French lorry drivers and unemployed workers, and strikes by Greek seamen and farmers. The German miners have challenged Kohl, and Belgian and French Renault workers are defending their jobs against closures.

In Britain, meeting the criteria will cut billions from public spending. Whoever wins the election, this will be the biggest single issue facing the new government. This will be the case whether they opt for the first or second round of EMU, and the 3% of GDP limit is not just a qualification for EMU, it is a permanent feature of it. Cuts in public spending will be an ongoing situation once EMU is in place.

In June, the Intergovernmental Conference of the EMU (IGC) meets to put these measures in place and plan the next stage of the process.

A unique initiative has been organised to co-ordinate a response to the IGC. Marches from every country of the EU, and some beyond, will converge in a mass demonstration in Amsterdam on 14th June to protest against the social effects of the convergence criteria.

Marches throughout Britain will reach London on 7th June and go on to Amsterdam. They will demand full employment, the defence of the welfare state, and scrapping of the Job Seekers' Allowance. The victimised Liverpool dockers fully support the European marches for jobs and welfare and will have a delegation on the British marches right through to Amsterdam.

In Britain, the European debate has been dominated by the Tory right. The marches will start to redress this by inserting the working class dimension into the argument and posing opposition to the effects of European integration, not from a nationalist or Little England perspective, but from the defence of jobs and welfare.

There will be marches from 16 countries taking part in the protest, some with multiple marches — three are planned in Britain, six in France, two in Belgium, three in Holland and in Germany. They have broad-based support right across Europe from unemployed and anti-racist organisations and from major trade unions such as IG Metal in Germany, the CGT in France and the CGT in Spain. In Britain, the marches are supported by the Campaign Group of MPs, numerous individual Labour MPs and MEPs, plus over 200 trade union and political organisations and campaigns.

As well as a mass demonstration through Amsterdam on 14th June, there will be a four day counter summit which will include sessions on anti-racism (Schengen), unemployment, homelessness, welfare, the environment, social and cultural marginalisation, and much more.

A wide range of campaigns and NGOs who will be in Amsterdam protesting the various social effects of European integration will be supporting the Amsterdam demonstration and the counter summit. Anti-racism and the effects of Schengen and "fortress Europe" will be a major feature of both the marches and the counter summit.

There will be a major demonstration in Schengen itself when the marches pass through and there will be a conference against Schengen organised by the anti-racist organisations in Holland on 13th June. Anti-racist organisations and those defending asylum seekers from across Europe are invited to take part.

The organisers of the marches, principally the French unemployed organisations, do not see them as a one-off event. As the attacks on the working class become even more co-ordinated internationally, an international response has to be developed. Out of these marches can come a new alliance which can carry forward the fight after this particular IGC is over.

The campaign for the marches in Britain already has the support of three national trade unions, 12 union regional bodies, 100 TU branches, 40 trades councils, 11 trades council county associations, 12 unemployed centres, the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs and nine Labour MEPs.

- Support is needed in the form of sponsorship, marches and money. For more information contact: European Marches '97, C/O Glen Vorris, St. Helens TUC Resource Centre, 21 - 31 Barrow St, St. Helens, WA10 1RX. Tel: 01744-755 889.

News from Nicaragua

Mike Phipps writes: Aleman's new right-wing government in Nicaragua, supported by American diplomacy, is taking the offensive in the ongoing dispute over property rights. 270,000 families who received land and housing under the Sandinista Government in the 1980s could be affected.

In Managua 382 families were evicted from a poor barrio after a violent clash with police. In Granada evictions were carried out by a former member of the ex-dictator Somoza's National Guard. Meanwhile, Somoza's two sons have returned to Nicaragua after an 18 year absence to begin legal proceedings to regain property.

The new American Ambassador, Cuban American Lino Gutierrez, has said that getting confiscated American property returned is the US's "top diplomatic priority". In a statement calculated to inflame the situation he suggested the Clinton administration may suspend aid to Nicaragua if it was not satisfied with progress in this area.

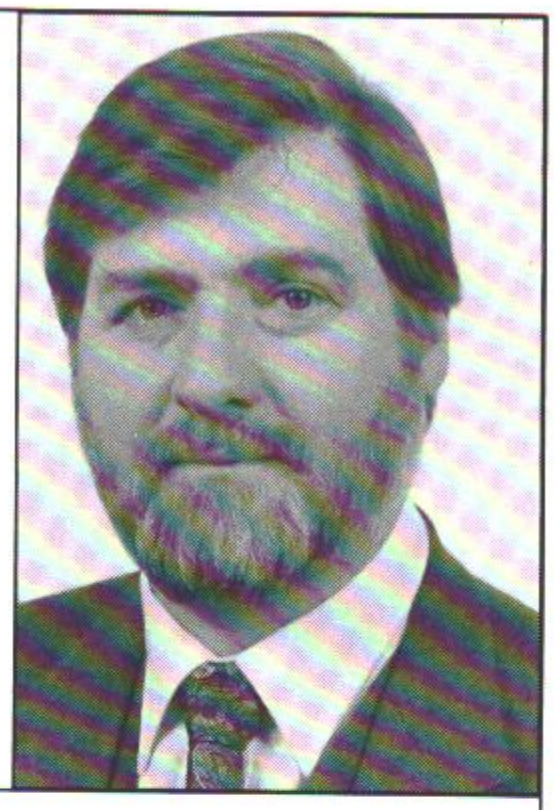
Meanwhile the Aleman Government has announced a new austerity plan that will cost 40,000 public sector jobs. Sackings have already begun with teachers and other public sector professionals being replaced by Aleman supporters, in violation of collective agreements.

On a positive note, a trade union has been recognised for the first time ever in Nicaragua's *maquila* (free trade zone) which employs 10,000 workers.

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the Michael Hindley column

Labour's MEP for Lancashire South gives a global perspective.



German consensus shows signs of cracking

MARCH proved to be a month of unsavoury German records. On the back of the highest levels of unemployment - 4.66 million - since Hitler's coming to power in 1933, comes the highest ever bill for a police operation - a massive £4 million sterling to ensure the delivery of six reinforced containers of nuclear waste to the depot at Gorleben, in Lower Saxony.
In addition, voices of criticism are rising concerning Helmut Kohl's drive to ensure Germany's adhesion to Single European Currency on the present criteria within the present timetable. The bedrock of western European stability is a little bit shaky — everything in the EU depends on the stability and success of the German state which emerged in the west from 1949 to 1989.

The twentieth century has seen five different Germanys — a fact at seeming odds with the German desire for "calm and order". The latest reincarnation, and probably not the last, is the most curious hybrid of them all. It is the unification of two distinct parts, forged when the former highly successful bourgeois democracy West Germany swallowed whole the politically and economically bankrupt East Germany.

Now the Germans are paying a high price for unification, bought by Helmut Kohl's attractive offer of monetary union at the reckless rate of a one-to-one exchange of the old East mark for the Deutschmark. There can be no question that Kohl's gamble, against the advice of the Bundesbank, did unite Germany. But it did not unite Germany economically and the east lags disastrously behind the west still. Readers will detect more than a passing shade of similarity with EMU and Kohl is on the verge of a tragic mistake in attempting to push through European Currency Union. He seems to forget that there is neither the emotional desire, nor the political will to unite Europe that there was to unite Germany.

Kohl has now become the great enforcer in German — and European — politics, ruthlessly pursuing to logical conclusion some of the great issues which others would prefer to fudge. As with the Single Currency, so with nuclear power. Since 1991 all German parties have been supposed to be working towards a "National Energy Consensus", and it just will not work. The Greens are fully committed to ending nuclear power, in fact opposition to nuclear power is one of the few binding threads which keep the nuts-and-raisins coalition together. The Social Democratic main opposition (SPD) is in a difficult position on energy issues, not least because the favourite to challenge Kohl for the Chancellorship, Schroeder, is the SPD boss of Lower Saxony, the site of the Gorleben plant. Furthermore, at the moment the Federal coalition government in Bonn subsidises coal production in the SPD controlled states of North-Rhine Westfalia and the Saarland to the tune of over one million pounds sterling. This cannot survive Germany's drive to cut deficit spending to qualify for Single Currency and with the subsidy coming up for renewal next year the heat is on the SPD.

KOHL IS convinced that domestic coal is too costly and Germany has no natural raw material for energy. Buying in energy from eastern Europe remains a source — West Germany and indeed the old hard-line cold war warrior, Franz Josef Strauss, long since tapped into the former Soviet Union's potential for energy supplies. However, it costs real money and raises the import bills.

The Liberal coalition partners in government, the FDP, have tried to turn up the pressure on the SPD by demanding, not only their commitment to existing nuclear reactors, but also a commitment to new reactors.

The SPD is dithering, and is losing ground accordingly. For despite the alleged slipping of Kohl's position, his Christian Democratic (CDU) ruling party made unexpected gains in SPD heartlands of the state of Hesse and the city of Frankfurt. Some of the SPD leaders will be tempted by the offer of a Grand Coalition, a perennial cry in times of crisis in Germany, whereas many grassroots members will expect the party to increase its alliances with the outright anti-nuclear Greens.

Much does depend on Kohl; with ruthless logic he has decided to go for broke on the nuclear issue, hence the 30,000 riot police in action around Gorleben. Newton's law of dynamics works in politics: any force creates a reaction in the opposite direction of equal force. Not only could Kohl realign German energy policy, but he could also realign German party politics. A grand energy coalition may indeed invoke a grand party political coalition — the last grand coalition government in the 1960s revived the concept of political change by "extra-parliamentary opposition" — the midwife of the Greens.

Gorleben saw some of the most belligerent, imaginative and obstinate anti-establishment demonstrations for decades. This time round, the extra-parliamentary opposition is getting in some early practice.

Solidarity with Renault, Vilvoorde

Renault has announced the closure of the Vilvoorde plant in Belgium with the loss of 4,000 jobs. The shock announcement follows years of sacrifices by the workforce, accepting jobs cuts and flexibility, and major investment by the company which had made the company the most productive in the Renault group. The governor and council president of Vlaams-Brabant province have circulated an appeal through Europe for protests to be Emailed to: renvil@vl-brabant.be, which will be collected and presented to Renault HQ in Paris.

On line with the class struggle

Chris Croome reviews *The Labour Movement and the Internet, The New Internationalism*, by Eric Lee, published by Pluto Press at £14.95.

THE INTERNATIONAL labour movement is beginning to utilize what is potentially the most democratic tool for mass communication yet invented — the Internet. However this is still in its infancy — it's been only two years since the first trade union in the UK opened a web site.

Lee charts the international labour movement's use of computer communications from Chip Levinson's (Secretary General of the ICF) writings in 1972 about the possibilities for union education up to the international solidarity that the Liverpool dockers' web site has helped build.

Lee is a socialist first and a mouse potato second. He gives a detailed history of how strikers in several disputes have used the Net to rally support and get their message across, including the use of on-line newspapers. The use of web newspapers by strikers at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Detroit News* is compared and contrasted with the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters paper, *The Organizer*.

Lee looks to the broad labour movement for the emergence of the next workers' International and believes that the Internet will play a key role in this. It's not hard to imagine. Accounts of great revolutionary periods in history hold tales of left-wing paper distributors running out of copies in minutes and huge crowds gathering around fly posted papers. For the first time in the history of the working class, millions of people across the world could have virtually instant access to text, pictures, sound and video of the latest conquests and defeats. Discussions about the direction of a new international wouldn't need to take place between a small number of comrades from a few countries but could take place among the millions.

If you want to sample the electronic offerings of the far left then the *LLB* links page is a good place to start. Don't be put off this book if you know nothing about computers. Lee gives very clear explanations of all the key features of the Internet, e-mail, newsgroups and the World Wide Web. For a novice or a seasoned surfer, Eric Lee's book and the excellent *Rough Guide to the Internet 2.0* (£5, Penguin), are essential reading.

- Check out these web sites:

http://www.labournet.org.uk
http://www.solinet.org/LEE
http://www.labournet.org.uk/llb

The maverick genius

Dan Carter enthuses about *Chomsky for Beginners*, published by Writers & Readers, £6.99

IT IS CLAIMED that Chomsky is the most-quoted author on earth. The great value of this book is the extensive use of his quotations between witty cartoons and easily-accessible text.

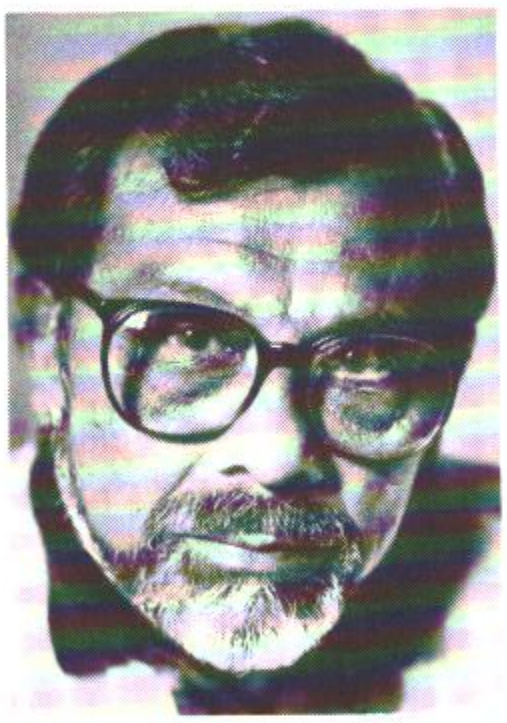
Chomsky challenges the power of governments, big corporations and the media and advocates the right to question everything. His writing is prized by all on the left. This book looks at all aspects of his life and work and includes an exclusive interview with the man it describes as "the maverick genius".

Epic triumph

Mike Marqusee reviews *When Memory Dies*, a novel by A. Sivanandan, published by Arcadia, £9.99.

THIS WISE and moving novel by the veteran author and activist tells the story of three generations of Sri Lankans as they struggle with the impact of colonialism, Singhala racism and violent Tamil reaction.

The first section recounts the formative experiences of Sahadevan, the son of a Tamil peasant from the poverty stricken north who secures government employment in the south, and in particular his ambiguous encounter with the working class struggles of the inter-war years. The second deals with Saha's educated son, Raja, who comes of age as the island gains independence. In the succeeding years, he finds his hopes, his loved ones and his sense of self all deeply scarred by the nascent politics of communal hatred. Raja's earnest and brave stepson, Vijay, takes part in the JVP (People's Liberation Front) youth uprising in 1971, and later persists with his search for socialism and solidarity in a climate of escalating opportunism, finally identifying himself with the Tamil cause, if not with the murderous vindictiveness that disfigures it.



A. Sivandan

Each section focuses on the youth of the protagonists, and each section ends with a killing. Throughout, a balance of hope and despair, bravery and cowardice, generosity and meanness is maintained. The characters are not types but complex individuals. Sivanandan's insight into the ebb and flow of historical tides, as well as the more intimate rhythms of the daily struggle for human decency, enables him to develop plot and characters with conviction. Although the shadow of racism and violence spreads as the story unfolds, the novel remains rooted in memories of "a time when we were one people" and refuses to give way to hopelessness.

The evocation of the sensuous details of Sri Lankan life in all its variety — from the unforgiving soil of the Jaffna peninsula to the tea plantations of the highlands to the working class neighbourhoods of Colombo — is a constant delight, but it is no mere decorative effect. It is part of what the novel is all about — a reconstruction of collective memory, the recovery not of a lost paradise, but of a hidden reality.

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Crash

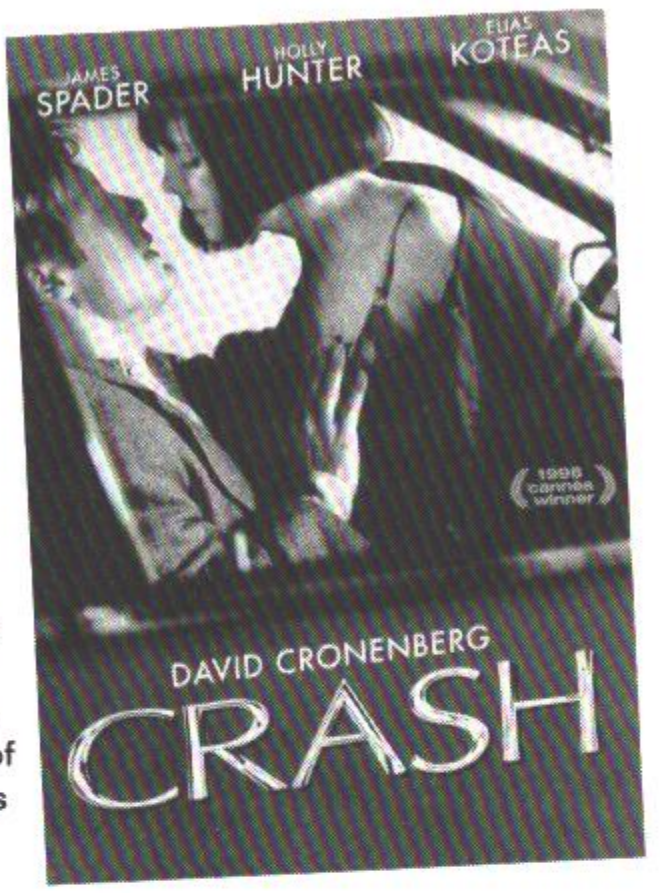
Michael Courtland reviews the latest Cronenberg film.

CRASH, a spellbinding new film has already had a head-on collision with the good-taste police of Westminster Council. At the urging of self-appointed guardians of morals, Virginia Bottomley and Associated Newspapers, the Council has banned *Crash* from its cinemas. But the British Board of Film Classification has now released it uncut. Does the film deserve all this fuss?

Yes and no. *Crash*, based on the novel by J G Ballard barely has any blood in it but that doesn't make it any less startling. Though if you get into the mindset of the director and his auto-erotically obsessed characters, who stage car crashes for sexual kicks, you may well find it shattering and haunting.

James Spader heads a surprisingly mainstream Hollywood cast as James Ballard,the hero who finds his libido aroused in an unusual way by a prang on a Toronto street. Soon he and his girlfriend, played by Holly Hunter, are drawn into a strange coterie of speed freaks who recreate famous car wrecks for their own perverse satisfaction. The faster they go, the more severe their injuries, the greater their pleasure ....

Crash is actually more appealing and enveloping a picture than a cursory synopsis might suggest, largely thanks to Cronenberg's unflinching and intelligent handling of this potentially explosive material. He is aided greatly by wonderful performances from a cast, rounded up by Elias Koteas as the sect's leader, and Rosanna Arquett as a titillating paraplegic, in what must the most unusual portrayal of even her chequered career. She delivers just one of the memorable performances in a film where the characters are almost everything. The story is barely there at all; this is more of a meditation than a narrative. In this film, unusually, sex genuinely reveals character and advances those characters, instead of just providing gratuitous fleshy thrills. These are people who exist in their own icy, obsessed little world, who have taken their worship of the car to deeply exotic lengths - and this film pursues those concerns remorselessly.



It's difficult to take seriously the Government's fears that *Crash* might lead to an epidemic of people totalling their cars on the North Circular in a desperate attempt to turn themselves on - as Cronenberg himself wryly points out, there's been no appreciable increase in road accident rates in the countries where it has been released. It's far more likely, of course, that this is simply a part of a long tradition of trying to appeal to the voters of middle-class Middle England through action on sex and violence in films and television. La Bottomley herself actually admits that she doesn't see much in the way of films and TV anyway, but that doesn't matter with an election coming up! Then the Government may have a crash of its own - or it may turn out to be just a near miss.

As for *Crash* and its influences, I somehow managed to crash my car on the way to the screening. Make of that what you will.

An economic alternative

Brian Burkitt reviews *Tackling Britain's False Economy* by John Mills, published by MacMillan.

A RECENT BOOK by John Mills, a tireless worker for the Labour Party over the last quarter of a century, offers a welcome alternative to the leadership's current economic policies. He argues that Labour's hopes of securing full employment and higher economic growth depend on making the British economy more competitive and that the only practical way to create international competitiveness is to position the exchange rate at an appropriate, lower level.

It is insufficient to establish the parity at a competitive level; it also has to be kept there by relevant policies,notably low interest rates and cheap money. Subsequently the economy will expand in response to greater demand for the goods and services it can produce. The message is that the priority for the next Labour government is using monetary and exchange rate policies that provide the economic foundations from which it can promote wider social objectives.

Few on the left will deny the need for the policy reforms advocated by John Mills: cheap money and a competitive exchange rate will certainly be necessary to any radical Labour programme. Whether they will prove sufficient is debatable. The devastation of industrial capacity wrought by two Tory-induced recessions since 1979 suggests that the measures outlined here are an initial stage to be built upon by an active, socialist industrial strategy and by an extension of public ownership into growing sectors of the economy. The virtue of this book thus lies not only in the policies it proposes but also in the debate it stimulates.

How America destroyed Angola

Mike Phipps reviews *The Destruction of a Nation*, by George Wright, published by Pluto, price £14.99 paperback.

AMERICA'S collaboration with apartheid South Africa in the Cold War years has been well-documented. This book gives a blow-by-blow account of the US's role in the de-struction of Angola in the same period.

During the "civil war" - more accurately a US proxy war carried out by South Africa and UNITA - one million people died in Angola, 10% of the population. Most were civilians and children. 50% of the population has been dislocated and forced into squalor in overcrowded cities.

The country's infrastructure - schools, hospitals, transpor-tation - has been largely wiped out.

Writing from an avowedly Marxist perspective, George Wright details the policy goals and methods - often covert - of the US administra-tion from Truman in the 1940s to Clinton today in fuelling the war in its own interests.

The future of Angola is bleak. Economically under the thumb of the IMF and World Bank, it is forced to adopt the bankrupt policies of neoliberalism, when what is needed is a programme of social reconstruction.

Angola has the highest number of per capita of amputees in the world, and 15 million land mines still remain.

FIGHT RACISM

Labour council axes anti-racist group

HILLINGDON COUNCIL in west London looks set to cut funding for the Hillingdon Monitoring Group, the only body in the borough dedicated to tackling racial harassment and violence.

Doreen Lawrence, mother of Stephen Lawrence, commented: "I am extremely concerned to learn that the council is cutting the Hillingdon Monitoring Group. I know the need it fills is very real and greater now than ever. I urge the council to reconsider this damaging decision."

Mrs Lawrence, along with barrister Mike Mansfield, was present at the launch of the HMG eighteen months ago. HMG is part of The Monitoring Group, which includes the Southall Monitoring Group and draws on 18 years of experience in dealing with racial harassment in west London.

"The Council has no grounds to cut our grant," said Suresh Grover, co-ordinator of the Monitoring Group. "We are delivering a service that is desperately needed and for which there is no substitute. Our caseload is growing all the time." HMG is currently working on seventy cases of racial harassment. Observers fear the cut may be another indication of New Labour's retreat from any practical support for action against racism.

- For more information call the Monitoring Group on 0181-843 2300.

Headingley 'whitewash'

LAST SUMMER, the third day of the England v. Pakistan Test match at Headingley, Leeds, was wrecked by an outbreak of racist abuse on the Western Terrace.

Yorkshire County Cricket Club, responsible for staging the Test, promised an inquiry. After much delay, the Club has issued its report, which the *Observer* aptly dubbed a "whitewash".

The Club denies that racism played any significant part in the disturbances, which it puts down entirely to excessive alcohol consumption. It dismisses press coverage of the incidents (including reports of chants of "Stab the Pakis in the back!") as "hype" and "over-reaction". The only comment from a spectator reproduced in the report comes from an unnamed "distinguished former senior civil servant" who says he saw no racist abuse. He attended the Friday of the Test; the events under investigation took place on the Saturday.

Hit Racism for Six, the campaign against racism in cricket, condemned the report. "No effort was made to solicit observations from black communities or from anti-racist groups," said a campaign spokesperson, "The whole exercise seems to be about denying a painful reality. Unlike the football authorities, the cricket authorities seem unwilling to acknowledge that racism is a problem that needs to be addressed. We urge cricket fans — especially Yorkshire supporters — to write to Yorkshire County Cricket Club to make it clear that this head-in-the-sand attitude is storing up trouble for the future."

- Contact Hit Racism for Six, Centre for Sport Development Research, Department of Sport Studies, Roehampton Institute, London SW15 3SN.

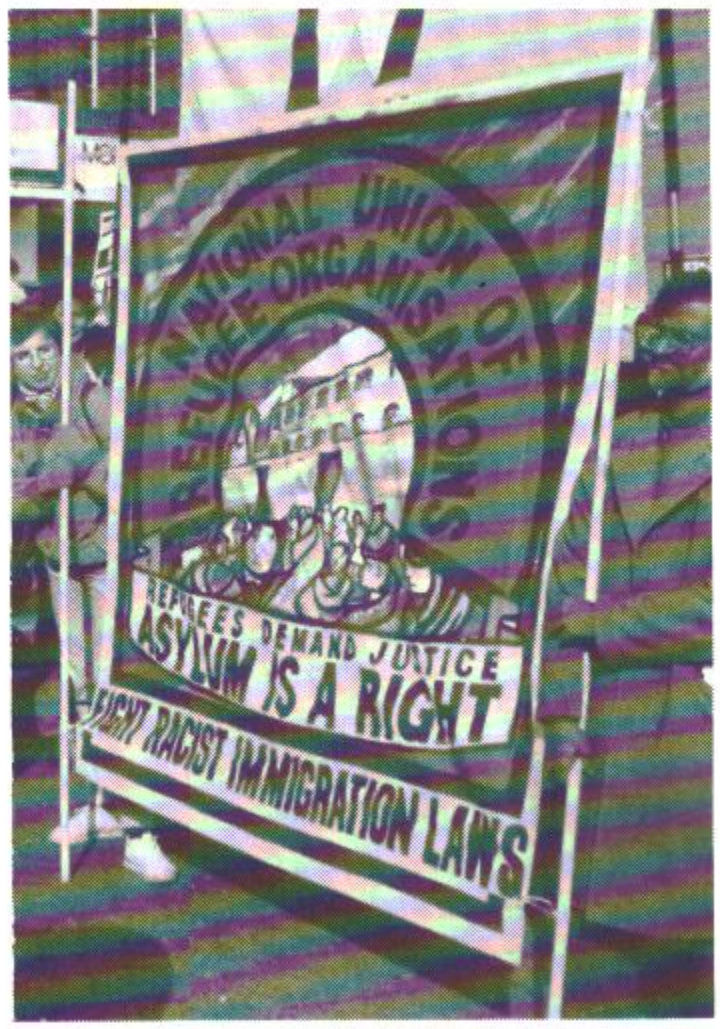
Operation Black Vote - vote Labour

Mike Rahman writes: As the count down begins for the General Election, the three main parties are busy trying to woo those who are registered to vote and those who have never voted. Black and Asian people have historically been staunch supporters of and voters for the British Labour Party, despite its atrocious record on immigration and nationality issues. But will they support Labour at the next election? And should they?

The lobby group Operation Black Vote and other similar groups have launched a campaign to encourage Black and Asian people to register and to use their vote to pressurise parties to take up issues that affect their communities. But the campaign stops short of committing the parties to keep the promises that they may make. While the attempt to encourage people to exercise their right to vote is laudable, the direction is unclear.

Blacks and Asians comprise 6% of the British population and they can tip the balance in at least 50 constituencies. A significant number of Black and Asian people are loyal members of the trade union movement. Many are active members of the Labour Party, through their trade unions, and they know the labour and trade union movement is their only hope of rolling back the tide of reactionary politics and practices. In this respect the best choice for Blacks at the next election should be Labour, despite the antics of Tony Blair and his brand of New Labour.

Blacks and Asians should launch an active campaign inside the Labour Party and the trade unions the moment Labour comes to office. They should help to build an alliance with other oppressed and exploited sections of society to reclaim a decent living standard — full employment, an end to homelessness and over-crowding, and improved education and health services.



Mike Rahman

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CORRESPONDENCE

Your letters are welcome but please keep them under 250 words. Please send a PC floppy if possible.

Write to:

Labour Left Briefing
PO Box 2378
London E5 9QU



Paul Field and Dave Palmer propose to leave the Labour Party because they find the political terrain inside the Party "more hostile" than outside. The virulent hostility of the right wing in the Party has always been there as any effective left wing activist knows. The Labour Party is a main arena of class struggle which explains the hostility of the right wing to the struggle for independent class politics and a workers' government; it is also a considerable obstacle (along with the TUC) to another mass workers' party being organised.

That comrades tire of the unrelenting hostility of the right wing is hardly surprising but not a good reason to turn away from the Labour Party. Those who stay on board need a clear understanding of why they are in, what can be achieved and with whom they can work. The Network of Socialist Campaign Groups, with the many local groups being developed in constituencies, is one way to avoid either drowning as the Labour Party ship slowly founders, or having a hard landing and perishing in the desert of marginal or sectarian politics.

John Calderon,
Hackney

What could be more sensible than Field and Palmer's modest proposal (March *LLB*) to vote for candidates in the General Election who are "clearly to the left of New Labour". Admittedly, their article goes much further in suggesting the creation of a socialist electoral alternative; something I have been suggesting, including in the pages of *LLB*, for a long time.

So, the article has two proposals; one short-term and the other long-term. However, I understand that at a recent *LLB* open editorial board meeting the short-term electoral strategy was rejected and the status quo of "vote Labour" was reaffirmed. This illustrates the stranglehold that labourism has on the Labour left. The boundaries of the Party are as sacred for the left as they are for the right and centre and impose a tremendous constraint on it. Come what may (including getting rid of Clause IV, abandoning the commitment to redistribution of wealth and maybe even breaking the links with the unions) the left will always work within the Party!

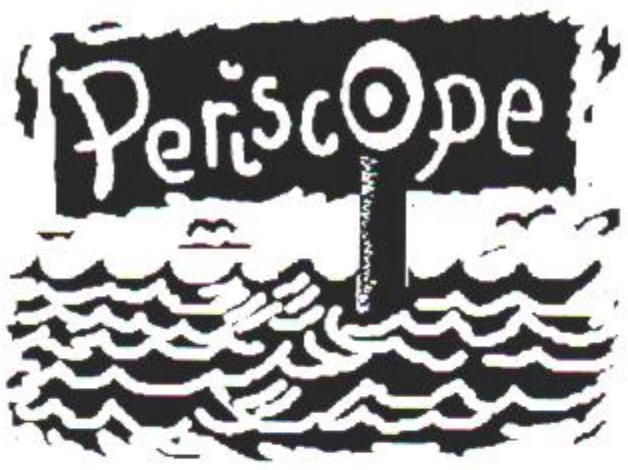
Field and Palmer are absolutely right to argue that the only way to break the Catch 22 situation, of always voting Labour just to get rid of the Tories, is to create a socialist alternative to the Labour Party. At last some positive thinking from the left rather than the negative strategy of always staying within the boundaries of labourism.

Paul Allender,
Canterbury

Geoff Martin asks why should he mention Fulham in his column. It's quite simple really, Geoff. It is a matter of best socialist practice. As socialists we buy our food from the corner shop rather than Sainsburys or Tesco and our beer from small independent brewers such as Youngs or Morlands rather than the mega-brewers like Charrington or Scottish and Newcastle.

So logic dictates that as football consumers we take our football at Craven Cottage rather than from the football conglomerates such as Chelsea, Man United etc.. Besides which I would rather pay £8 to watch Fulham's honest journeymen than £25 for Chelsea's overrated prima donnas in the company of their hooligan fans!

John Evers,
Worcester Park



A *real* victory in West Belfast

The ***Observer***'s handy map of election predictions in February provided a detailed breakdown of every seat in the UK. As the red hordes of Labour swept across the map on 5% and 10% swings, one glaring error typical of the English media stood out. Despite favourable boundary changes, Sinn Fein still failed to win West Belfast. The *Observer* map included a chance to win a £5 bet on the election — we'd advise putting it on a certain G Adams.

The *Sun* Wot Did It

Reports that there is to be a campaign in schools to "protect children from excessive exposure to the **Sun**" lost its impact when it was revealed that the Health Education Authority's target is the large yellow orb in the sky, not Murdoch's poisonous rag.

Spell it out, John!

The *Independent on Sunday* alleged that in order to get into the Labour leader's £500 a head bash recently, Shadow Defence Minister **John Speller** had his ticket paid for by arms' manufacturers. We would like to provide space for Mr Speller to respond to this disgraceful slur.

Low pay capital of Europe

More than 5 million workers in Britain now earn less than £4 per hour, 2 million earn less than £3 per hour, and more than one million earn as little as £2.50 per hour. A recent **TUC report** has dubbed Britain the "low pay capital of Europe". The gap between rich and poor in this country is now wider than any time since 1945. The number of workers in Britain with two jobs has grown from 917,000 in 1993 to 1.26 million in 1997. The main cause is low wages: many workers need two jobs just to cover basic bills.

Privatisation - bad for your health?

Since the privatisation of water in 1989 four companies have been prosecuted for supplying water unfit for human consumption. The latest facing possible prosecution is the **Three Valleys Water** following the outbreak of cryptosporidium (scrabble score?) in the water supply for north London and Hertfordshire in early March. Nearly 700,000 people were left needing to boil their water. Three Valleys Water delivered warning notices to 300,000 homes after the organism was found in the water. The 32 confirmed cases of contamination in this area is three to four times the normal level for this time of year.

AOB

"The National Executive recently approved a transformation in the relationship between the Party and a Labour government. Changes include reform of the National Executive so that it does not become an alternative power centre, and reform of the Party Conference to avoid policy showdowns." — *Peter Mandelson* forgetting the role of Annual Conference.

"Because of unalterable structural changes to the Labour Party, it was now in touch with the opinions of real people, rather than those of a few activists or pressure groups." — *Tony Blair* forgetting the role of Annual Conference.

Unite the left!

LABOUR LEFT BRIEFING

Will McMahon, Convenor of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups, looks forward to the NSCG Conference and the left's first chance to plan for the first year of a Labour government.

LET'S discount for a moment the nightmare that the Tories might win the election. With Blair in Number 10, how will the left in the Party deal with Tony and Gordon when they have their hands on the wheel of the ship of state?

A victory for Labour will see the left emerge from the rubble of Thatcherism with no overall programme for power. It is this to which we need to turn our attention. In this context, the May 31st Conference will allow the left to brush ourselves down and prepare for the first phase of Blairism in government.

There are two practical jobs that the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups Conference on May 31st has to discuss: first, ensuring that the left is able to defeat the attack on democracy proposed by Blair through a united effort and, second, to begin to address the creation of a coherent economic alternative to Gordon Brown's monetarism.

There can be no doubt that the Blair leadership will come crashing down on the hopes of traditional Labour supporters. As has been the case throughout the last 18 years, battles will be fought on several fronts between the working class and those intent on cutting back again and again.

The next decade will see more social explosions and political meltdown as the world economy continues to wreak havoc on the traditional structures of the British political system. Immediate solidarity will be vital — and there will undoubtedly be many strikes to support and single issue battles to be fought — but it will also be important to start on the medium term task of creating a coherent alternative to Blairism.

In the face of this what does the left in the Party offer? Three campaigns on Europe, two campaigns on Party democracy, two campaigns on the welfare state and no coherent economic platform. If it were not so serious it would be funny that as the Labour Party approaches a defining historical moment (the 1997 Conference) the left will enter the fray to defend Party democracy with two campaigns against it, not as a piece of tactical flexibility but almost a point of honour — more splits than fusions.

The simple fact is that the organisational and political co-ordination of the left will still be missing. The left in the Party does not have a left alternative: we have a series of single issue responses to attacks. We do not have an interlocking social and economic programme which can challenge both Blair and the threat of a return of a Conservative government five years hence.

Both MPs in the Campaign Group and the Network itself have failed to make any serious progress in addressing this problem. It is almost a decade since the Berlin Wall fell and the Sandinistas lost power, yet the left in the Labour Party has not regrouped around common positions with which to advance on the free markets system. The shock waves of 1989 have taken a long time to work their way through the system.

If the left is going to construct an alternative to the free market then we need a forum in which to do it. One of the jobs of the May 31st Conference will be to begin a process of developing such an alternative and to move towards structures which integrate different parts of the left into a strong, united force which can develop and popularise the alternative economic and social policy we believe in.

What next for Labour after the Election?

A national conference of the Labour Party and affilated union left called by the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups.

Saturday 31st May

London Welsh Centre
157 Grays Inn Road
London WC1
(10 minutes from Kings Cross BR)

Further details:
Will McMahon, 0171-254 0241

Sponsored by the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs

Organised by the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups

Registration fee: £8 waged London, £4 waged out of London, £4 unwaged London, £1 unwaged out of London.
Send registrations to: the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups, 3 Blades House, London SE11 5TW.
Please make cheques payable to: SCGN.
All donations gratefully received.
Deadline for creche: May 11th

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