LABOUR LEFT BRIEFING

NOVEMBER 1997 price £1/50p



IS LABOUR LISTENING?

inside... Ken Livingstone interview, Socialist Labour Party, fox hunting, legal aid

Labour Left Briefing

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An opportunity for the Labour left

THE SPECTACLE of Michael Portillo re-creating himself as a cuddly, consensual politician for the "giving age" is sick-making; the Tory attempts to compete with Blair for the one-nation centre ground are laughable; but these events are of great significance for the left, and the Labour left in particular. This shift to the centre is only possible because the Tories largely endorse Blair's economic and social strategy. It means that the real dividing line in British politics, and the real choice before the British working class, will be between the Labour Government and the left. That is an opportunity for the Labour left but also a grave responsibility. If we do not articulate the real options open to the Government, democratic debate will go by default. Blair's neo-Thatcherite package of "labour market flexibility" and "welfare reform" will be imposed without serious challenge.

Events at Labour Party conference highlighted the paradoxical situation in which the Labour left now finds itself. On the one hand, the results in the one member one vote ballots for the Constituency section of the NEC proved conclusively that reports of the death of the Labour left were premature. The fact that Ken Livingstone decisively defeated both Mandelson and Peter Hain shows the groundswell of feeling in the Party for the clear alternative that Ken has advocated. As a whole, the Socialist Campaign Group slate increased its votes by a third. This was the biggest swing since 1980 to the left in NEC elections. It is an expression within the Party of the political shift in the country at large, confirming that the general election result was not just about a change in management but represented a desire for a radically new political direction. Surely it is extraordinary testimony to the fragility of Blairism that only five months after this spectacular victory, with Blair's personal popularity ratings at record level, some 40% of the votes cast by Party members were cast for candidates whose dissent from the Government line on taxation and public spending was explicit.

On the other hand, the honeymoon period was clearly potent enough to allow the leadership to force through constitutional changes that will make it extremely difficult for a leftward moving rank and file to make its weight felt in the Party. The leadership's clean sweep of conference votes, however, owes little to its persuasive powers and much to senior trade union leaders who time and again protected the leadership from dissent in the constituencies. New Labour was saved by Old Labour — which rather proves how misleading is that stale terminology.

In last month's *LLB*, we argued that John Edmonds' criticism of "labour market flexibility" was right. In casting the GMB's vote for the leadership at the Party conference, Edmonds betrayed not only his own members, but also the logic of the critique of Blair which he has discreetly raised in recent months. Edmonds, like most other major union leaders, believes that if he bows to the leadership in public, he can extract concessions from it in private. It is said that the price of support for *Partnership in Power* was the inclusion of legislation on workplace rights in the next Queen's Speech. It is a rotten deal for trade union members, who are being asked to accept a few stale crumbs as an afterthought when the main courses have already been gobbled up the employers. Far more effective than any backroom deal would be a trade union campaign for workplace rights, one that takes the arguments to the public with some sense of urgency, and seeks to utilise every democratic lever the trade unions possess — inside and outside the Labour Party.



Since Conference, events have confirmed that the Labour Government is vulnerable to pressure from the left, at the same time as it is determined to pursue its neo-Thatcherite strategy. The Chancellor was compelled to magic up £300 million to stave off the NHS winter crisis because support for the NHS is probably the single core concern which unites the Labour Party and Labour voters; the Government cannot afford, at this stage, to jeopardise its standing on this issue. At the same time, £100 million has been found for the purchase of additional nuclear warheads for Trident. Had UNISON adhered to the mandate of its own membership and opposed Trident at Party Conference, it would have been much more difficult for the Government to get away with this obscene and wasteful gesture. Once again, trade union leaders have much to answer for.

If the Labour left is to be effective in opposing the Government's anti-working class policies, it will have to find ways of making its weight felt in the new Labour Party structures. A co-ordinated left campaign for the Constituency places on the new NEC needs to be agreed and launched without delay. In Parliament, we need clear opposition — and radical alternatives — to the introduction of tuition fees, the movement towards monetary union, the attempt to set a low and non-inclusive minimum wage, and, above all, to the continuing squeeze on public spending. ❑

London Labour rejects mayor

Leonora Lloyd, member of the Greater London Labour Party Executive writes: The recent GLLP "conference" to discuss the proposed Greater London Authority (GLA) and mayor was not allowed to take any votes, only "soundings". This was the first conference held by the GLLP for two years. The chair Jim Fitzpatrick MP manipulated the meeting shamelessly to avoid even indicative votes. But it was clear that the London labour movement is still opposed to a directly elected mayor and wants a bigger and more powerful authority than the one proposed.

For the London executive, the discussion has been going on for a couple of years, for others less. But we keep coming up with the wrong answer: No to a directly elected mayor. It appears that Londoners are a little dim. Ask them two separate questions ("Do you want an elected assembly?" and "Do you want a directly elected mayor?") and they come all over faint. According to our leaders if we ask two questions we are likely to end up with a mayor but no assembly.

The workshop which considered a mayor gave an indicative vote of ten to one against direct election. This is not because we don't believe in democracy — quite the opposite. The proposals would give the GLA very few powers while the mayor would have huge powers of patronage in what will be quangos under another name. He (no female contenders so far) would be full time and paid — unlike the Assembly members.

The workshops on functions and on financing also wanted taxation power for the GLA — only they called it everything but: precepts, special business rates, tourist taxes, road pricing. Many in the meeting wanted a third question on the referendum, on tax. There was also a clear wish to deal with the City of London and incorporation of the City's separate police force.

A fourth workshop considered electoral methods. The proposed size of the Assembly — 24 or 32, with multi-member constituencies to ensure gender balance and ethnic minority representation — means that each constituency will cover several boroughs, which in turn cover two or three Parliamentary constituencies. This raises questions of accountability. The leadership is pushing for PR and favours the list system to give it control. Most speakers from the floor wanted a larger GLA, with the committee chairs at least part time and paid, with direct lines of accountability.

Dorothy Macedo, member of the GLLP Executive, reports: The original discussion document, *A Voice for London*, was part of the *Road to the Manifesto* exercise in 1996. The Greater London Labour Party (GLLP) executive debated the matter in detail in June 1996 and voted that the mayor of the new Authority should be the leader of the majority party, not a separately elected person with executive powers.

In July 1997 the Government issued the green paper, *New Leadership for London*. The GLLP convened a consultation conference on 12th October to discuss the options. It was a delegate conference but on arriving we learnt that it was not planned to take any votes. At the opening session, GLLP chair Jim Fitzpatrick MP bowed to pressure from delegates and agreed that workshops could submit resolutions to the closing plenary if they had strong views.

There were four workshops: the mayor and assembly, electoral issues, functions of the authority, and financial arrangements.

I attended the workshop on the mayor and assembly, which was chaired by GLLP vice-chair Val Stansfield. The prepared list of issues for the workshop did not include the question of whether we actually want an executive mayor. Speaker after speaker explained the democratic and practical objections to an executive mayor. Ken Livingstone pressed for the referendum which will ask voters if they want a new Greater London authority to also include the questions whether voters want such a mayor and whether the assembly should have tax-varying powers. Not everyone felt cross about being denied a vote: a member of the GMB delegation protested that they could not vote as they had not been mandated. But the closing date for submissions is 24th October, so if the GMB has not decided its attitude yet, it makes you wonder when they intend to do it. And when the workshop chair allowed an indicative vote on the question of a separately elected mayor, the GMB representatives were among the eight (out of the 80 plus present) to vote in favour!

Some delegates passed resolutions to the chair but she declined to put them to the voteand when we got to the final plenary, Jim Fitzpatrick refused to put the views of the workshops to the vote on the grounds that they were not in the form of resolutions.

Abortion: celebrate or agitate?

Meryl Cumber, National Abortion Campaign (NAC) reports: Society has changed enormously in the last thirty years. But it seems it is still not time for MPs to support abortion on request openly.

On 27th October, 1967 a law was passed that changed the lives of British women. The Abortion Act legalised what had been going on behind closed doors and down back streets for centuries. But the MPs who voted it through stopped short of acknowledging the capability of women to make rational decisions about their bodies and futures by ensuring that every woman seeking an abortion needed — and still needs — the consent of two doctors. This Act degrades women. Its underlying message is that women are unable and not sufficiently responsible to reach this important decision on their own.

Three decades ago, the social and ethical environment may have dictated such a requirement. But times, attitudes and expectations have changed. A long-overdue review and update of the 1967 Act is needed. Labour was elected on the crest of a wave fuelled by the need for change. Women ministers are no substitute for women's rights. Women want the right to abortion on request. What better anniversary present?

- March for a woman's right to choose! Demonstrate to commemorate 30 years since the 1967 Abortion Act. Assemble at 6pm, Wednesday 29th October, ULU, Malet Street, London.

Crisis in the SLP

What's going on in the Socialist Labour Party? Just over a year after it was set up, members are talking of an internal crisis and some are leaving in frustration. Don Rocinante investigates.

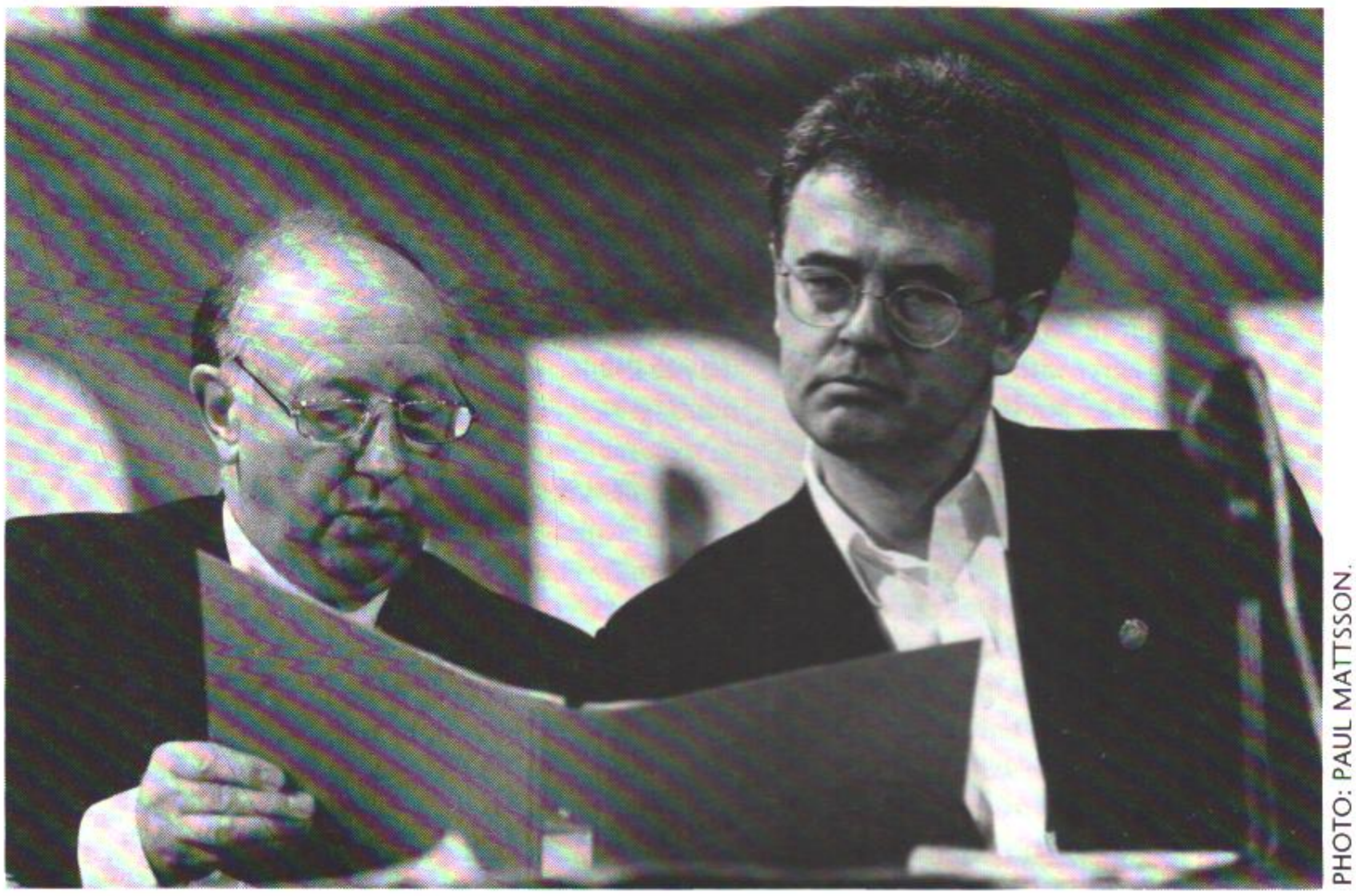


PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON.

Arthur Scargill and Patrick Sikorski at the SLP founding Conference, 1996.

THE SLP has not had a good year. Disappointing election results, a low media profile and a lack of national campaigning have all contributed to a seepage of members. Some of the best trade union militants, including virtually all the Bristol branch, and many of their former Labour councillors have left in recent months. "The SLP is a shambles," one activist told *LLB*. Another claimed the situation worsened dramatically after Pat Sikorski was sidelined and replaced by Arthur Scargill as General Secretary. Internal information dried up and a more centralised regime was imposed.

In June, a number of SLP branches and individuals sent a statement to the party's national executive. It argued that the party needed to draw on the experience and creativity of the working class and provide political leadership on the basis of democratic discussion and joint work alongside others. "Regrettably," the statement argues, "the NEC has acted as if it were an authoritative leadership based on a long-standing political programme. The methods employed by the NEC threaten the future prospects of our new party. Fundamentally their approach is a top-down one, profoundly undemocratic."

The statement identifies five key problems with the SLP. Firstly, there was no discussion among the membership on electoral strategy, despite requests for one. The NEC decided to seek 100 candidates to run in the general election and some of these apparently were imposed against the wishes of local activists. A second concern is that branches have been instructed to set up constituency SLPs in electorally defined areas, "on the basis of a constitution that the members have neither discussed nor voted on". Thirdly, the NEC seems to have decided that the SLP's policy is for withdrawal from the European Union. This occurred without a discussion within the membership as a whole. Fourthly, the leadership decided to rush through without consultation the decision to produce a party newspaper. Many people feel the bland and irregular *Socialist News* competes poorly alongside other red-banner newspapers.

The most worrying accusation is that a number of members have been effectively expelled by the leadership, without being given a hearing or the right to answer specific charges. Such unrestricted power threatens "to strangle our party democracy and create a climate of fear." The authors end by calling for a national discussion bulletin and a membership discussion on policy decisions, the constitution and disciplinary procedures.

The statement was endorsed by several branches of the SLP and a number of prominent individuals, including party officers and parliamentary candidates. The response from SLP General Secretary Arthur Scargill, however, was uncompromising, describing the document as aimed at undermining the party's structures and policies.

It rebutted point by point the issues raised, describing each as "an insult", "a lie" or "completely untrue". It concluded ominously that "factionalism" would not be tolerated, a point echoed in a public declaration from Scargill that appeared in *Socialist News*: "Conferences and meetings have been convened with the clear aim of co-ordinating campaigns to challenge the party's constitution. Such meetings will not be tolerated by the party. Any member who attends such meetings or becomes involved with those co-ordinating these meetings/ campaigns against the SLP must understand they are acting in violation of the party's constitution and will be dealt with accordingly."

Activists confirm that some far left groupings have started factional operations within the SLP. But they are disheartened that any criticism, however constructive and merited, may be branded as simply disloyal. So what now? Since the summer many more branches and individuals have signed the opposition statement. But with Scargill in confrontational mood, the December party "Congress" could well be make or break — not just for the SLP's development but its very survival. ❑

New Labour — New Protection?

Helen Weeks, League Against Cruel Sports' Support Group Co-ordinator for Yeovil, argues that not to support the anti-hunt bill in Parliament will be political suicide.

"YOU WILL ban hunting, but not yet", a hunter told me last week. "Hunting will go on for another twenty years". I would agree with him, if we still had a Tory government. But the Tories, like the hunting fraternity, were and still are out of touch with the public mood — and they are gone. People want a decent, more compassionate society and MPs of all parties need to listen. Nothing symbolises this more than hunting, whereby a powerful, arrogant minority kill wild animals in a cruel and heartless way, simply for entertainment, and against the wishes of the vast majority who are sickened by bloodsports.

On 28th November MPs will have a chance to respond to the people's wish to see hunting abolished, by voting in favour of the second reading of Michael Foster's Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill. This bill, if passed, will end fox, deer, hare and mink hunting. Never before have conditions been so favourable for such a bill. The Labour Government is standing by its manifesto commitment to a free vote on the issue, which means not only the vast majority of Labour MPs, but also MPs from other parties, will be free to back it. Support among MPs is high, as shown by Angela Smith's Early Day Motion calling for the outlawing of hunting wild animals with hounds, signed by over 200 MPs. Tony Blair has declared his intention to vote for the bill. He will not wish to be associated with failure.



Despite misleading and inaccurate propaganda by the pro-hunt lobby — the countryside rally in Hyde Park, for example — the people have not been fooled; although unfortunately a few media commentators were. Opinion polls consistently show 70% to 80% of people, town and country dwellers alike, condemn the cruelty of hunting. Hunting a wild animal with a pack of dogs, bred for stamina and not speed, until, overcome with exhaustion and terror, it is finally overtaken and savaged to death, has no place in a civilized society.

Bloodsports have been allowed to continue only because many of the richest and most powerful take part and the Royal Family has given hunting a bogus respectability. Otherwise, hunting would have been banned long ago, along with bull and bear baiting, dog fighting, cock fighting and badger baiting.

Although the signs are good — I even heard Pat Archer on *The Archers* (a long time vehicle for bloodsport propaganda) defending the fox against hunting — we must not take anything for granted.

When a bloodsports bill is before Parliament, the manoeuvring of the British Field Sports Society lobby is intense. The pressure applied to MPs in the form of letters, cards, visits, and so on, is enormous. Lords from the shires normally not seen take on a new lease of life. As Eric Heffer (long-time campaigner against bloodsports) wrote, "I would not be surprised to see their horses tethered to the entrance to the House of Lords, as they turn out in force and, like their hounds, bay for blood".

This time the battle will be even more fierce. However, thousands of people voted Labour because of this issue and expectations are high. They cannot understand why Labour will not say that it will give the bill government time. What's the use of a free vote, without providing enough time for it to become law? Feeling betrayed, they will say "New Labour does not keep its promises."

The bill should pass through all its stages in the House of Commons, but as a Private Members Bill, it will need a little extra time at the Report Stage and for the expected hold-ups in the Lords, otherwise it will fall. To make sure the potential support for the bill is realised, please write to your MP asking them to vote in favour of it. If MPs vote for the bill in large numbers the Government will have no choice but to support it. To do otherwise will be political suicide. New Labour would no longer be able to describe itself as the modern party of compassion while allowing this archaic practice.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the League Against Cruel Sports and the RSPCA have joined forces for the first time to form the Campaign for the Protection of Hunted Animals, in support of the bill. Those of us who live in the country fear for the safety of our pets and livestock. Every season pet cats and dogs are savaged or killed by hounds. As the owner of four cats, and as someone who has witnessed the death of a fox by hounds, I'm sure you can imagine the anxiety when the hunting horn is heard. Every single person who wants hunting banned must play their part in the campaign.

- For a free campaign pack call 0800-056 5050.

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Privatisation = danger

A rail worker says that the crash at Southall last month raised many issues of safety following in the wake of privatisation.

THE RAILWAY network's break-up has left a big question mark as to who is responsible for safety. Railtrack has prime responsibility for the rule book, the bible for all railworkers. It is that rule book which states that a train shall not run if the Automatic Warning System (AWS) is not working. The AWS says that if the signal ahead is either red or yellow the driver must be prepared to stop. It does not automatically stop the train, but the driver must cancel a signal; if not the brakes go on. Great Western Trains has also been a pilot for the Automatic Train Protection (ATP) which does stop the train. It appears that neither of these systems was in place.

There have been teething troubles with ATP, not least because of too little investment into the system. But AWS has been tried and tested over a number of years. The Pringle Committee first proposed such a system in 1922 after Great Western had introduced a prototype. It was to take the loss of many lives, nationalisation and another 60 years before it extended throughout the network. Private companies were not prepared to pay the cost and they are unlikely to do so with ATP.

The drivers' union ASLEF claims that the rule that allows the train to continue without the AWS until it reaches a maintenance depot is due to privatisation. There is no doubt that privatisation and the needs of the shareholders are a threat to the safety of the railways; but ASLEF has gone along with getting rid of the driver's assistant who was always present in the cab with the driver. This second driver (and s/he was almost always a qualified driver) was a second pair of eyes. Driving at 125 miles an hour can be very monotonous and a second person in the cab was a safety net to ensure the driver obeyed all the signals. This is particularly the case when vital systems are not working.

Railtrack is responsible for all internal enquiries even though it has responsibility for the state of the track, signalling, electrification and overhead lines which may all play a part in accidents. Now that the British Transport Police (BTP), who investigate if any crime has been committed, is funded by Railtrack, it doesn't exactly give one confidence that it will be independent of its own employers!

It is unlikely that the Southall enquiries will lay any blame on the break-up of the railways. Instead individuals will probably be scapegoated. It is unlikely that ASLEF will admit that the restructuring agreements it is signing with train operating companies are putting great strain on drivers with longer working days, less breaks and greater productivity. The Labour Government is refusing to consider renationalisation and the rail unions (TSSA and RMT) gave in to the platform at Labour Party Conference and did not allow a vote on the issue.

Public and staff safety cannot be left in the hands of the private owners who have other priorities. But according to John Prescott safety has a price tag. One only has to look at the history of the old private railways to see that profits came before lives. Our caring society seems to care for directors and shareholders and not for those of us who use and work on the railways.

Defend free education

Simon Hewitt, Hayes and Harlington CLP, and former chair of Brunel Labour Students writes:
Over the summer vacation, both myself and Dan Evans, the former secretary of Brunel Labour Club, resigned from our Labour Students posts.

We did so out of sheer outrage at the failure of the Labour Students organisation to make any attempt to stand up for students' interests, first over grants and then on the fees issue, and out of contempt for the lack of integrity shown in their perpetual repositioning in order to remain flavour of the month with the Government.

While I remain a deeply committed member of the Labour Party, it is my political priority to build an effective campaign against tuition fees, and this is best done from outside the auspices of Labour Students.

I know of two nationwide campaigns against fees; the Campaign for Free Education and the Stop the Fees campaign. The latter is organised by the SWP, and while the two groups have been co-operating well so far, we might well ask why the SWP thought it necessary to start a separate campaign. If we are to oppose fees effectively we must be both united and focused on this single issue, so as to build as broad a base of support as possible. Labour Party members **should bring motions opposing tuition fees to their branch meetings/GCs.**

The argument about tuition fees is the argument about the whole welfare state, that we have collective provision for collective need. The alternative is that we go through life as frightened and isolated individuals, with our personalised learning account, saving for a private pension while seeking work in a "flexible" labour market. This is something all socialists must resist.

Demonstration against student fees, 27/9/97.



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON.

Keep legal aid

Liz Davies, a barrister specialising in civil legal aid cases, argues that threats to legal aid are an attack on human rights.

LEGAL AID was introduced by the 1945 Labour Government as part of the welfare state. Access to justice was to be available to all. The Lord Chancellor proposes to replace legal aid with contingency fees (no win, no fee) for most civil claims which include compensation for road accidents, medical negligence, accidents at work, or tenants suing bad landlords. The civil legal aid budget accounts for a small proportion of the overall legal aid budget. Most civil legal aid cases are brought by individuals against companies, councils, etc. — who are backed by insurance companies — and result in compensation and legal aid costs being paid by the insurance companies.

Like the NHS, legal aid is demand-led, and that is why its cost has risen in recent years. A major reason for the increase in such litigation is claims arising from the loss of collective provision and protection under the Tories. As councils face cuts, and their ability to subsidise council housing is restricted, the condition of council housing deteriorates and more and more tenants resort to taking legal action against councils. Under-funding of hospitals increases the possibility of negligent treatment. And in an increasingly casualised labour market, employers take more and more risks with health and safety.

Despite the expansion of legally-aided litigation, the proportion of the population financially eligible for legal aid has shrunk from 80% in 1979 to 20% now. Contingency fees might open up legal remedies to people on middle incomes, but these remedies have their own costs which will not be affordable to those on low incomes or benefits. Clients will still have to pay for medical and other expert reports, court fees and insurance premiums against the possibility of losing. That is an outlay of several hundred pounds: not possible for anyone on benefit. The Law Society estimates that 20 million adults and ten million children will lose out and thereby lose access to justice.

The Government laid the ground for these proposals with attacks on "fat cat" lawyers. There are certainly many highly paid lawyers: very few of these make their money from legal aid. As a thin cat lawyer, I regard this as a wholly dishonest debate. Surely, the most fair and efficient method of recouping the excessive incomes of fat-cat lawyers (and any other fat cats, for that matter) is simply to tax it at a higher rate!

These proposals do not come from Labour Party members. Year after year, Party Conference, with leadership support, has passed motions calling for an expansion of legal aid. No motion has ever been passed calling for the abolition of legal aid.

The spectre of Treasury-led 'welfare reform' looms over all areas of government spending, with the notable exception of defence. In health, education, social security and now legal rights, the Government's policy is to encourage individuals to take out private insurance rather than to expand collective universal provision. Millions simply cannot afford the supposed safety-net of insurance policies, and millions who can afford it will find it a burden that makes them reluctant to pursue legitimate claims through the courts.

The Lord Chancellor's proposals will profoundly compromise access to justice in this country. They are part and parcel of the Blair circle's attempt to redefine the boundaries of social (as opposed to individual) responsibility as justification for the 'rationing' of essential services — and in the case of the legal service, that means human rights.

UPS now attack Italian workers

Following the historic victory of the Teamsters against UPS (see October's *LLB*) two shop stewards and 6 others have been sacked from UPS's Italian operation following strike action last spring for better wages and conditions, against subcontracting of driving and for trade union recognition. Twenty three others have been threatened with the sack.

- Send solidarity messages to Antonio Forlano (email address acedit@mv.itline.it or fax: + 39 2 5079253.

A new start on immigration and asylum policy

Kumar Murshid, chair of the National Assembly Against Racism, looks to the new Government to make much-needed changes.

IMMIGRATION legislation in Britain over the decades has been justifiably perceived by black people as fundamentally racist. The entire ethos of this quite complex area of legislation appears to be about either keeping black people out of Britain, or generating pressures on those already here without permanent rights of residence. The 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act is a particularly racist piece of legislation that should be done away with in its entirety.

Despite a pledge to restore benefits to asylum seekers, the Government has delayed implementing this measure. It is vital that benefits are restored as a matter of urgency. The Government has yet to face up to the disgraceful and dehumanising process of detaining asylum seekers. Some 800 people currently face this predicament, 160 of whom have been held in detention for 12 months or more. For those staying 'illegally' a general amnesty is justified by the history of racist provisions in immigration legislation. As a minimum, a proposal from a number of bodies, including ourselves and the churches, to give an amnesty for those who have been here over five years and have family or other roots in Britain, should be accepted.

It is imperative that meaningful steps are taken sooner rather than later by this new Government and a radical review of immigration legislation embarked upon so that we can have genuine non-racist immigration and asylum policies. What better way to celebrate the new millennium?

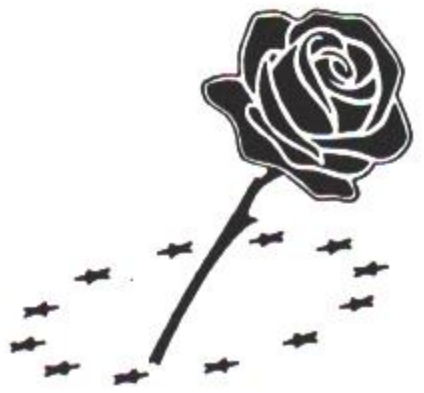
European Full Employment Convention — a briefing conference

Europe's jobs challenge after the Luxembourg jobs summit

10:00am-2:00pm, Saturday 6th December
TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, WC1

Sponsored by Stan Newens MEP,
Ken Coates MEP and Mike Elliott MEP
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A briefing conference on European unemployment issues, following the Full Employment Convention in Brussels in May this year, negotiation of the Amsterdam Treaty and the EU Jobs Summit in Luxembourg. To include the new Employment Chapter in the Treaty, the Commission's new Employment Policy Guidelines, Europe's Agenda 2000 Programme, the future of Europe's Social Programme, the battle to prevent Europe's welfare system from American Workfare ideas, shorter working time policies and new paths to employment security.To register tel. 0171-221 0092, fax 0171-792 3691, email: office@newens.demon.co.uk



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Party of European Socialists

LLB AGM

The left and the Labour Government - what now after Conference?

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Reclaim the Labour Party

In the wake of Labour Party conference *LLB* interviewed Ken Livingstone, MP for Brent East and newly elected to the NEC.

Q: What does it mean now that *Partnership In Power (PiP)* has been passed?

A: You have to look at the context in which it was carried. Although the press drew on the assumption that Blair had another very good conference the NEC votes show that isn't the case. If it hadn't been for incredible arm-twisting and brow-beating of delegates — and a deal with the unions offering them much better legislation on trade union rights at work — they wouldn't have got *PiP* through. Without that deal with the unions they wouldn't have saved themselves on tuition fees or nuclear weapons or rail re-nationalisation. We could have had a spectacular defeat on each day of Conference — avoided only by traditional old Labour values. The leader sits down with the trade union bosses and does a deal. You could say that because of the strength of the left in the NEC elections there's been extra money for the NHS.

We have no option but to make *PiP* work in the way we made the old structures of the Labour Party work. They weren't created by the left. What's very useful now is that Labour Reform and the older campaigns of the left in the Party are working together. It's going to mean a quite different form of working. All the focus in the past has been on what the MPs are doing. Now we've got to elect six people onto the NEC who aren't MPs. The left should aim to take the majority of the seats if not all of them. There's going to be a big block of people that we can get elected to the Policy Forums. MPs may be valuable in mobilising support for these slates. Campaign Group MPs can be useful in providing policy research. We've got to bring together and broaden the range of interests that worked effectively to defeat Mandelson. There are already informal meetings underway. This clearly shows there is a real willingness to work together. Not necessarily because we all agree on a whole range of policies but on the defence of the Party as a working class, trade union based party. That's the main foundation which brings us together.

The second foundation I think we share is the Roy Hattersley prescription: Labour should be a party of redistribution and progressive taxation. I'm sure there'll be huge differences on Europe, foreign policy, and so on. But these are the things that unite us that define us as clearly "Labour" unlike some of our opponents like Roger Liddle. He left to join the SDP to try to destroy Labour. He failed and has now parachuted back to the top of the Labour Party.

I'm optimistic. Because the NEC focus shifts away from parliament it might be very healthy for the left. We have to strengthen our constituency and trade union activist networks. The unions are starting to build activists' networks in a way they didn't before. Some of the unions are asking if it is still worth staying in the Labour Party.

The leadership did over-reach in attempting to try and legitimise all they'd done to elect Mandelson. It helped accelerate the coalition that's coming together. Mandelson's bid for power forced us to get our act together.

Q: What do you think about the NEC results?

A: The focus on me versus Mandelson distracts from the fact that the increase in my vote was exactly the average for the Campaign Group as a whole. These votes reflect real anger at tuition fees, cuts in single parents' benefit, anger at the fact that we've done nothing for pensioners. I addressed the pensioners' rally and asked: "What do you think of the new Labour Government so far?" They booed!

Q: Who would have voted for you for the NEC?

A: There is a base of support for Mandelson and the project. He got 65,000 votes. But the new forces that assemble round Mandelson are committed to breaking the union link and making us into a ghastly Democrat-style party. They have forced all the other genuine Labour Party strands to come together. Labour MPs who have not spoken to me in ten years have seen me and given a little nod, a wink or a thumbs-up.

Although they couldn't stand my assistance to lesbian and gay centres in London or meeting Sinn Fein they believe that the working class needs its political party. Once we've saved the Labour Party we'll get back to having a row about lesbian and gay centres in their constituencies.

Labour's Hamilton affair

LEEDS LABOUR MP Fabian Hamilton has lost his High Court attempt to block a prosecution against him for alleged offences under companies legislation.

Hamilton is charged with offences under the Companies Act 1985 and the Insolvency Act 1986. The alleged offences relate to a number of companies of which Mr Hamilton has been a director or company secretary. While protesting vehemently that he wanted to clear his name as quickly as possible, Mr Hamilton had spared no effort to prevent the cases coming to trial. He sought a judicial review in the High Court, arguing that the cases were "politically motivated" and should therefore be stopped as an abuse of process.

In law anyone can bring a prosecution unless the particular statute reserves this right to the DPP or another authority. It has also long been accepted that motive is irrelevant in bringing a criminal prosecution. Had Mr Hamilton's argument been upheld, it would have amounted to giving virtual immunity from prosecution to MPs. The High Court on 9th October 1997 refused Mr Hamilton's application. He will now face trial in Leeds Magistrates Court for the alleged offences.

Before the General Election, Mr Hamilton's CLP Executive had asked the national leadership to withhold endorsement of Mr Hamilton as candidate because of his allegedly deplorable business and financial record.

Mr Blair, despite his professed anti-sleaze stance, chose to support Mr Hamilton. This was perhaps not unconnected with allegations that the Party machine had already been used to rig the CLP selection in Hamilton's favour. Instead, Leeds North East CLP was suspended.

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Q: So where is the Mandelson project leading?

A: In a sense the values that Mandelson represents are American: aggressive capitalist market, flexible working which means appallingly bad working arrangements. Traditional Tories don't like the idea that kids don't see their parents because they're working 48 hours. They don't like the idea of Sunday working. Sunday is now another day for the production of capital rather than a day of rest. I don't suppose that many *LLB* readers have followed the Pope's pronouncements against the Tory Party. The papers reported major Papal statements denouncing ruthless market capitalism, defending the welfare state. Now there's a strange coalition. I suppose it's the *Economist* versus humankind really.

Europe cuts a big dimension in all this because the European mode of capitalism is dramatically different to the American one. It's much more for regulation, much more consensual. The vast majority of Labour people, even those who are in favour of the European project, feel more at home with this than aggressive American free trade. There is a very important schism within the European Heads of Government meeting. Blair is putting the American agenda and the American model much to the annoyance of Kohl and Chirac.

The US meet regularly with Yeltsin. They're not bothering about Blair now. When Jospin argues for a European strategy for job creation, Blair is the one leading the charge against it, sounding almost Thatcherite. That's a weakness in ideology. These people have bought the whole Thatcher project just as the rest of the world is turning against it. This reinforces the option for the European left of solidifying and expanding on those more moderate European values. Given that socialism isn't on the agenda before next year's Conference, the problem is defending the more acceptable and humane idea of capitalism we've got grumbling on in Europe.

Q: What are the issues in the next year that are going to be the cutting edge for the left?

A: Organising to win these places on the policy forum and the NEC, building up structures that allow us to do that, sustaining people who get elected with the support and the help they need. But then there's wider campaigning issues. Pensions are going to come to the fore. Next year Harman has got to come up with some pensions deal. We are beginning to see bits in the papers about how the leadership is losing its patience with Frank Field — "he can't cut it". Pensions will be a vast debate. This dovetails with the tuition fees question and the minimum wage. My guess before the election was that the first phase of debate was going to be about the economy and the welfare state would come in the second or third year. However the question of the welfare state is now immediate because



Ken Livingstone at this year's* LLB *Labour Party fringe meeting on the evening his election to the NEC was announced.

they've got to make decisions having accepted the Tory budget and spending limits.

It looks like the downturn in the economy — that might lead to recession — is going to come in 1999, not 1997. Blair is massively popular in opinion polls now. But we are still living off the pre-election boom that Ken Clarke generated to try to get re-elected. The average person has had a larger increase in take-home pay than at any time in the last 20 years. Not since Thatcher came to power have people suddenly had so much extra money in their pocket. But this isn't sustainable. Brown's done nothing to lay the foundations for a soft landing. So they have huge rows rumbling on about the welfare state. This will soon be overtaken by the general debate on the economy.

Blair's not necessarily happy with Gordon's project. I met a newspaper editor who'd been granted a lunch with the Prime Minister. All the way through the lunch questions about the economy were answered with "that's up to Gordon". If it's up to Gordon Brown, it's Gordon's neck. They have nuanced differences about how quickly to enter EMU but there's clearly a disagreement. Brown is saying 1999 and the earliest Blair thinks we'll go is 2002. Blair is now moving to fight the next election on the basis of "vote for us and we will go in". Blair wants it because most of British capitalism want it. Every major employer will say "you want to keep your job? vote Labour!" If Britain stayed out, in a year or two there would be major employment implications.

All this inward investment which has foreign money coming into Britain has been the hallmark of the Thatcher years. We're not getting any of our own jobs — we're just providing cheap labour and anti-union laws as a more attractive site. But they only came here because we pay the lowest wages and have the least trade union powers of any European country and this is the place to be to penetrate the European market. Now if you take that away, foreign investors will be prepared to wait a couple of years but if there's a clear decision by the British state to stay out of Monetary Union a lot of these jobs won't stay here.

The benefits of cheap labour and anti-union laws are slowly going to be eroded now you've got Labour in government and if the other countries form a monetary block it will eventually discriminate against those who stay outside. That's inevitable. They're not going to allow us to devalue our pound constantly and it seems, the way things are going, we could be the only major power outside. Things really have accelerated considerably since the Election.

Q: With all the clampdowns on socialist voices within the Labour Party do you see any reasonable prospects for a revival of the left?

A: The clampdown hasn't worked, has it? This is shown by the NEC results and the fact that Blair is making concessions. That socialist voice is there and alive and strong. That's the tragedy of Arthur Scargill leaving. A split in the SLP is inevitable.

If you have a small left-wing party it's going to attract every faction because they will have tremendous influence. It doesn't matter how much Arthur tries to impose a constitution to deal with it. What happens inside the Labour Party and Government for the next five years is where the struggle is going to be.

Labour Party

Where's the man in the brown tie?

Paul Daintry, Chingford and Woodford Green CLP, reveals his first experience of being a Labour Party Conference delegate and exposes the manipulative abuses of the Party machine.

IT WAS my first time. I was a little nervous. Friends had talked about it being wonderful. Some said it was painful. All of them had enjoyed it though, and gone back for more. I was a bit embarrassed to be in my thirties and still a Conference virgin.

I had high hopes. This was the first Labour Conference under a Labour government for 19 years. Like everyone else, I'd worked hard for a Labour victory and now wanted to join in the celebrations and get on with the job of building the right policies for Labour in power. I wanted to make merry and celebrate the victory of socialism: but there was a skeleton at the feast.

Partnership in Power hung over the beginning of Conference like a dark and menacing cloud. The trouble started at compositing on Saturday when it was made clear to us that no matter how many separate and specific composites delegates felt should be compiled, only a few would be called. Already access to debate was being shut down and true enough only three of the seven composites critical of *PiP* were taken. The two composites for *PiP* had no problems being timetabled.

At every reception, briefing and meeting before the debate on Monday it was made clear to us that there was only one way to vote on *PiP*, and that was to vote for it, absolutely, now. Never mind that delegates had strong mandates from their CLPs, that the composites were very specific and that mandates could be clearly applied, we were told in no uncertain terms that delay was not an option.

At pre-Conference regional briefings, senior Party officers went so far as to tell delegates (80% of whom were first-timers) that mandating had no validity and could safely be ignored. So much for the expanded and inclusive democracy that *PiP* is supposed to be about.

In the *PiP* debate, carefully selected pro-platform speakers were called early on. This set a strong tone of compliance and allowed the chair to call for delegates who wanted to speak against the proposals to identify themselves so he could call some "in the interest of balance". Thus all delegates who weren't for the platform line could be spotted and any chance of one of them being called by accident could be avoided.

Manipulation of the conference floor by party staff continued all week. Delegates were sneaked out of Conference to have their speeches written for them. Instructions on who to call were whispered into the chair's ear. One delegate I met was asked the night before a key debate if he wanted to speak the next day and then met up with staff in the morning to have his speech drafted. At least he had enough conscience to blow the whistle on the whole scam in the next morning's Campaign Group bulletin.

The most farcical example of delegate planting was The Strange Case of the Man in the Brown Tie, where the planted delegate had forgotten to don the prearranged neckwear. The most brazen, though, occurred in the Education debate. The composite against tuition fees was moved by a speaker who made no reference to her composite. She admitted freely after the

In remission — policy-making at Conference

Lucy Jaffe, Tottenham CLP delegate, reports on her first Conference.

LEARNING HOW to get beyond the ring of steel around the Conference centre became an essential skill during Conference week. I arrived on Sunday and found myself on the wrong side of the wire. I watched a demonstration of people from all over the country shouting "Tony Blair, hear us say, tax the rich and make them pay!" In Conference we were continually reminded that dissent within our ranks will lose us the next election. The sub-text of which was "shut up or get out". Nowhere was this more evident in the *Partnership in Power (PiP)* debate.

Ken Livingstone argued that *PiP* would make policy-making disappear into bureaucracy. "I think we should debate whether we have tuition fees, whether to set the Bank of England free before we read about it in the papers." I hate to agree with him but I fear that we may have just voted ourselves out of any structural influence and decision-making rights.

My moment of greatest disillusionment was when the RMT and the TSSA remitted their motion on renationalisation. The debate was a good one despite Cabinet members swiftly despatching to the dustbin proposals to issue bonds to shareholders in lieu of straight cash to finance the deal. I wanted to vote but was denied the opportunity in this and many other debates. I asked members of the union delegations what they thought they gained by remitting. Their reply was that a vote might end in defeat but not to vote at all would allow further negotiation. This approach restricts policy making to the few, not the many (an over-used Blairite phrase).

Gordon Brown's ringer of the week was "We stand not on the shifting sands of political expediency but on the solid rock of social justice." I don't quite see how tuition fees and the refusal to introduce more progressive taxes fit into a social justice plan for action.

In the defence debate I was astounded at the reliance on the small island mentality as an argument to change nothing. Not only will there be no reduction in the defence budget, the third highest spending department, but our human rights-based foreign policy will suffer. One speaker said: "Beacons to the world (which Robin Cook called Britain) don't revoke two export licences and then sell £350m arms to the same country. More like a match in the wind." Exactly.

Conference reports

debate that Conference staff had written her speech for her. She conveniently remitted so that no expression of opposition could be shown. This stitch-up went back to the compositing meeting where this delegate's co-delegate drew support by pushing hard for the composite to be tabled.

Call me naive, but I expected better from the Party than this massive manipulation. I had hoped that with an unassailable majority in Parliament, the leadership would be big enough to allow for genuine debate again after last year's self-imposed compliance. Instead I feel that delegates have suffered democratic molestation at the hands of the Party. What should have been a wonderful experience has left me feeling cheapened and dirty. If this is the future under *PiP* then we really are in trouble.



New Labour, New Paranoia.

The future not the past

Ann Black, a member of the Labour Reform Steering Committee, moved the motion at Conference to delay implementation of *Partnership in Power*. Here she provides a personal view of the post-*PiP* period.

WHEN resolutions are only allowed on the agenda if we agree not to discuss them, and when delegates are bullied to within an inch of their sanity, it really is time to draw a line under Conference.

The task now shifts to making the new structures work for members. The National Policy Forum must be free to think without fear. Conference will be limited to options provided from the Forum, and these must reflect the breadth of Party opinion. Meeting twice a year, the Forum will depend heavily on the Policy Commissions, and must insist on access to all submissions, and publication of as much as possible. Sending evidence to Policy Commissions is pointless if it can be dismissed in a footnote or filed in the bin.

Forum representatives on the Commissions must include constituency members as well as full-time politicians and trade unionists. Similarly the National Executive Committee, with fewer full meetings and more projects delegated to "lead officers", must not become a two-tier structure. Constituency representatives should have expenses for postage, travel, loss of earnings and childcare, so that participation does not depend on income.

Both the Forum and the NEC will need people committed to accountability and openness, and to advocating the views of ordinary members. For Labour Reform this is paramount, and compatible with political positions ranging from classic left through the mainstream of the Party.

Many more members now define themselves as on the left but they have not changed their beliefs in absolute terms. They voted, as I did, for the new Clause IV, for Tony Blair as leader and for the draft manifesto. They are not interested in seizing the commanding heights of the economy, and they will not sign up for "fightback" campaigns. They want the Government to succeed. But they are anxious about equality and social justice and when it comes to tough choices, they are clear about who should get the compassion and who should get the hard edges.

Before Brighton, delegates were radicalised by "local policy forums" where questions were not allowed, and by patronising regional briefings. Conference management techniques, particularly preventing a vote on lone-parent benefit cuts, disturbed even the starry-eyed.

Concern about centralisation surfaced in the 43% constituency vote to delay *Partnership in Power*, with a draft composite from the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, a proposer from Labour Reform and a seconder suggested by *LLB*. Many of us in Operation Shoestring would not have shared a room, let alone a platform, two years ago. The trust, among comparative strangers, was fresh air after the suspicion and secrecy of the Party machine.

The National Policy Forum will be topped up within months and by now we should know whether the process involves New Labour transparency or Old Labour fixing. Through further co-operation on shared interests, while respecting those where we have different roles, we could indeed, as new Clause IV says, "by the strength of our common endeavour, achieve more than we achieve alone."

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Making our voice

Can the Labour left learn to live with *Partnership in Power (PiP)*? Mike Marqusee, Islington North CLP, reads the runes.

OVER THE last six months the Labour left has argued that the passage of the constitutional reforms contained in the *PiP* package would be a disaster for Labour Party democracy. Well, now they're passed and disaster is upon us, how do we respond? If socialists are to remain in the Labour Party, there is no point in remaining as passive spectators, waiting for a turn of events in the outside world to boost our fortunes. We have to find ways to make our voices heard. We have to find ways to make ourselves visible in the Party's parched, post-*PiP* landscape.

It is well to bear in mind that in some respects *PiP* has merely consolidated what had become custom and practice in the Labour Party over the past decade: the shaping of the Party agenda by adept manipulation of the media, the rule of policy "experts" beholden only to the inner circle of the leadership, and the effective disenfranchisement of both trades unionists and constituency party members. Blair has accelerated this process, and appears now to be constructing a post-party politics, dispensing not only with ideology but with mass political affiliation of any kind. The formal coalition which Tony Benn has warned against may emerge at some point in the future, but in the meantime we are faced with an insidiously informal coalition, incorporating major players in big business and the media, and claiming to govern in "the national interest".

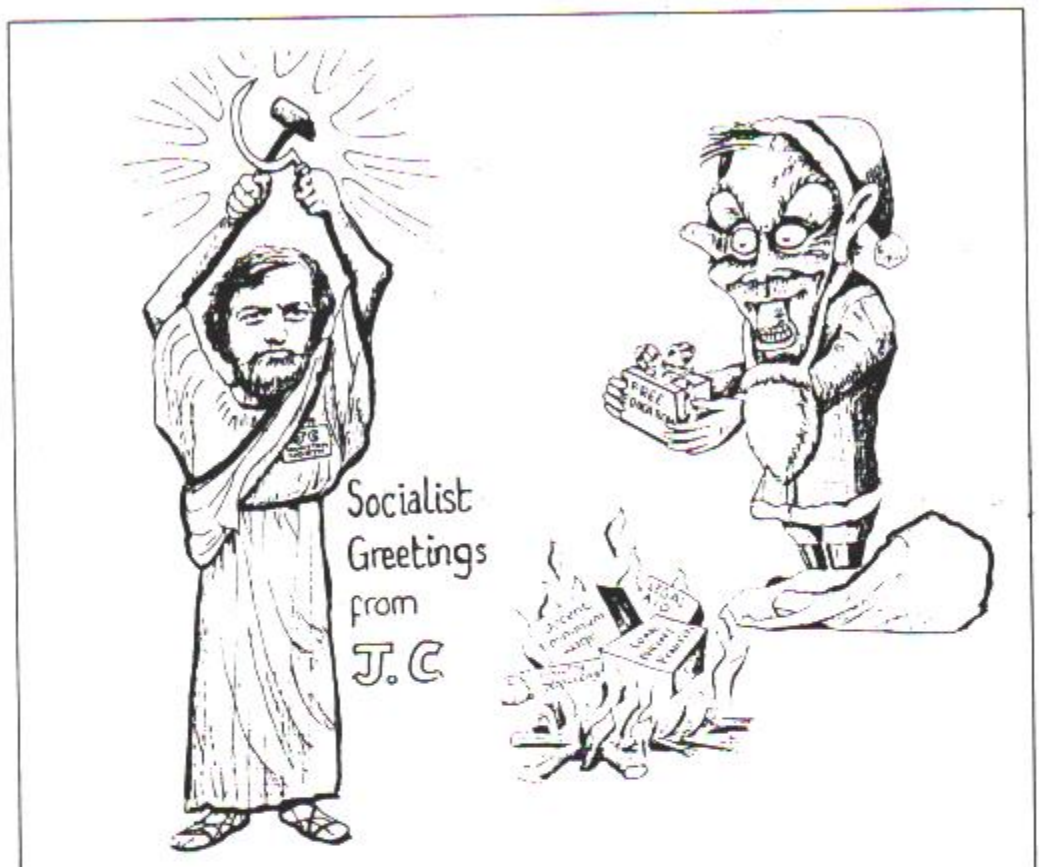
Navigating in such a depoliticised environment is difficult, but the left will find its way not by abandoning party politics, but by reinvigorating them. We have to champion the idea of the Labour Party as a democratic corporate entity, and take action to make this idea a reality.

We need to analyse the new structures and locate the points which are in any way vulnerable to pressure from below. We need to shine a strong, searching light into the dark recesses of our post-*PiP* Party, and ensure that not only Party members but the public in general know who is making Labour (and government) policy, and whose interests they represent. We need to monitor in detail the work (and personnel) of the National Policy Forum and lobby it in conjunction with single issue campaigns. Blair claims to have opened up policy-making to groups and individuals outside the Party structures; let's make sure the NPF hears not only from hand picked experts brought in to bolster the leadership's predetermined line; let's push our own experts and campaigners to the fore wherever we can.

Although the new structures are inherently anti-democratic, that does not mean we cannot improve them incrementally. We need to begin promoting a series of constitutional amendments to check leadership prerogatives and strengthen rank and file input. A few preliminary suggestions: rules to ensure free circulation of accurate information among members, the establishment of a democratic process for setting Annual Conference agendas and speaking rights, a mechanism to allow rank and file members to trigger One Member One Vote (OMOV) ballots on key policy issues (a privilege currently enjoyed only by the leadership). The results in this year's NEC ballot confirm that the left has nothing to fear from OMOV. Indeed, as government policies gradually alienate Labour voters, our strength in inner-party elections will grow — if we get our act together.

As soon as possible, the left needs to agree upon a single, broad-based slate of candidates for the Constituency representatives on the NEC (MPs will no longer be allowed to stand) and launch a high-profile, co-ordinated campaign to win the votes of ordinary Party members.

This requires a vigorous, long-term media strategy. The left has been far too shy about projecting itself on to the national stage. We need to master (some of) the spin-doctors' arts, briefing the press formally and informally on a regular basis. We need to ensure a steady flow of letters and articles in all



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Gagged parties protest

Mike Davies, Leeds North East CLP, reports: Delegates entering the opening session of Labour Party Conference were greeted by gagged figures representing many local parties who have been suspended or had candidates imposed. Leeds NE's suspension meant the loss of their motion restricting the power of the NEC to railroad Conference. Many delegates were clearly new members with no conception of the unpleasant realities.

A Defend the Constitution of the Labour Party fringe meeting revealed more evidence of arbitrary suspensions and interference with selection of candidates. The standard approach is suspension of any CLP or individual apparently both active and honest (let alone left wing) and/or the imposition of "safe" candidates or rigged shortlists.

- Contact: DCLP c/o Celia Foote, 24 St Martins Drive, Leeds LS7 3LR. 0113-262 4667.

heard

sections of the press and on a wide range of issues. We need our NEC candidates to appear on radio and television as often as possible to challenge the assertions made by government spokespersons and explain the left's positive alternative. With the Tories competing with Blair for the so-called centre ground, the principal line of divide in British politics will be between the Labour Government and the left, and the media are therefore likely to give us more space than in the past — if we have the energy and the wit to use it.

We need to establish as a matter of priority a modestly-resourced "think tank" to undertake research and publish details of the left's policy alternatives, particularly on the economy, welfare reform, education, criminal justice, defence, the environment and international relations. This could make submissions directly to the Policy Forum and its commissions, and provide activists with a substantial, credible programme we can argue for at all levels of the labour movement. The Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs are well-placed in terms of resources to initiate this.

Liaison between left-wingers in the constituencies and the trades unions remains an essential but elusive goal. Historically, the virtual quarantine of the two wings of the labour movement was at the heart of Labourism. But the irresponsible behaviour of the trade union leaders at Brighton demonstrated yet again the terrible costs of this separation. With conflict over public sector pay likely in the next year, we need to begin assembling a broad-based alliance for a living wage for public servants which can penetrate both trades unions and Constituency Parties.

While recognising the difficulties facing left MPs, we have to tell them that we simply cannot function without a clear and consistent pole of attraction in Parliament. The left MPs must understand that their supporters in the constituencies are often working in a highly parochial environment, clouded with countless apolitical considerations. The tens of thousands of Party members who voted for left candidates in this year's NEC election will be galvanised into a force to be reckoned with at the national level only if they are given high-profile national leadership.

One of the few meaningful powers left to Party members is the selection of candidates for local government elections. Yet over the last decade local government has become ever more inhospitable terrain for socialists. However, simply walking away and leaving local government to time-serving hacks, middle class do-gooders and neighbourhood busy-bodies is not acceptable. It is absurd to remain in the Labour Party, and to expect to wield any influence, without a programme for, and involvement in, local government.

The tasks I've outlined are demanding ones and will require a much greater degree of co-ordination, ingenuity and initiative than the Labour left has shown in the past. I admit there is little here to entice young people or indeed anyone who rightly wants to see a radical challenge to Blairism here and now.

But the reality is that should a radical popular challenge to Blairism emerge, it will require expression through party politics if it is to leave a lasting mark. The extent to which it finds such expression will depend upon the Labour left's effectiveness in establishing a public presence both inside and outside the Party's new structures.

NEC results

	1997	1996	1995
Leadership candidates			
Gordon Brown		93,679*	79,371*
David Blunkett	106,601* (up 13%)	94,006*	75,984*
Robin Cook	118,726* (up 8%)	109,801*	85,670*
Harriet Harman	80,498* (up 39%)	58,111*	69,092*
Mo Mowlam	105,717* (up 55%)	68,271*	53,578*
Jack Straw		64,547	58,486
Peter Mandelson	68,023		
Average	95,913	81,402	70,363
Socialist Campaign Group			
Diane Abbott	76,772* (up 40%)	54,800*	45,653*
Jeremy Corbyn	39,565 (up 54%)	25,529	22,457
Lynne Jones	40,431 (up 29%)	31,353	
Ken Livingstone	83,669* (up 43%)	58,593	53,423
Alice Mahon	43,395 (up 34%)	32,462	29,212
Alan Simpson	25,940 (up 43%)	18,125	12,409
Dennis Skinner	100,268* (up 37%)	73,390*	64,288*
Average	58,577	42,036	37,907
Others			
Peter Hain	65,816	42,169	32,394
Angela Eagle	22,431	21,857	

(* indicates the candidates elected)

For a broad left slate

Alistair Ward writes: The coalition of forces which united to oppose *PiP* and Mandeleson's NEC candidature should be preserved and broadened to stand candidates for the NEC Constituency places and the Policy Forums. In the past the left has stood to raise the banner of socialism during these elections.

Of course this is still important but the priority is to unite all those who believe in a democratic Party based on its link with the trade unions and policies that will redistribute wealth in society. This will include comrades well to the right of *LLB*. We must start discussions now to plan a slate that wins backing from Labour Reform, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, the Labour Womens' Action Committee and the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups. Each group should reach an agreement on who to back. Endorsement from the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs should be sought.

At least half the slate must be women, but we must also ensure a geographical spread. In order to win places, and this is very much a possibility, candidates should be experienced in the structures of the Party and be willing to stand regularly if not elected first time.

The 21st century family

At the Campaign Group Rally at Labour Party Conference, Audrey Wise MP looked at what underlying philosophy on the family is likely to be around in the 21st century.

MANY WOMEN complain about being housebound. It's great to be a mother, but not for 24 hours a day, every day. Many, whether lone mothers or not, want work outside the home, not because of the work ethic, but for themselves. But they don't want just any job, for any wage. The work ethic doesn't apply if you're worried about your children or have to treat them as a problem. I'm in favour of childcare provision but worried if it is just seen as a solution to a problem.

Children are what it's all about. Children — along with politics — have been the centre of my life and I've never regarded them as a problem to be solved by Harriet Harman or anybody. I get angry when it's put like this and when we're told that if these women are given advice they'll find jobs. They're going to need a lot more than advice!

Tony Blair said, "Every area of this Government's policy will now be scrutinised to see how it affects family life....to see how we strengthen our families". But there was no Conference time for the resolution on lone parents and child benefit.

Regulations have been laid down where all new lone parent claimants who are out of work will lose money. They become new claimants if they take a job and then lose it after even a few days. Any money earned will soon be swallowed up by lower benefits.

The Social Security Bill will mean that lone parents at work will lose benefits as well. I had an interesting run-in with Patricia Hewitt MP on *Woman's Hour*. Pat said we want these lone parents back at work. I said, "Why take away their benefits, whether they're in work or out of work?" And just for good measure you lose more if you're in work than if you're out of work! In work you'll lose about £6 per week from next spring — so if you're having a baby, have it before then!

I've never been a lone parent. I believe it's better for children to have two parents. I'm from (and in) a very conventional family. My experience as a mother tells me you don't become a lone parent just to get the lone parent premium.

If people say, "it's to strengthen our families", how do you do this by making lots of families, containing two million children, poorer? Neighbourhoods are breaking down. People are attacking each other. The wrong people marry and then break up. I'm all for parenthood and for encouraging stable relationships. The most useful way would be better housing, less redundancy and better community care.



Audrey Wise MP at this year's Campaign Group rally.

Cutting benefit is nothing to do with any of that. This is not correct policy for the 20th century, I would not have agreed with it for the 19th century and it's not a good start for the 21st century. Our Government is promoting policies designed by the Tories, in the teeth of opposition from the very high-powered Social Security Advisory Committee. It isn't just a left-right issue.

The Government admits the evidence is inconclusive and notes, "all such research depends heavily on assumptions on how to distinguish needs from tastes". It's clear to me that, despite the importance of parenthood, home-school contracts, etc, lone parents have ideas above their station — perhaps their tastes run to holidays.

They'll be advised how to get jobs — told if they don't get them it's their own inadequacy and they'll be expected to keep themselves and their child, make sure their child is always cared for, doing its homework to a greater and greater extent. They will be in line to be blamed for everything and that will make families less functional, causing more stress, more problems. Yet we're told our policy will be scrutinised to see how it affects family life.

If they've scrutinised this, then I don't understand it. If they haven't scrutinised it, how dare they lecture everybody about the work ethic? I spoke to a journalist, with two kids, a good job and a nanny, who said, "I can't bear it when Harriet talks about this: doesn't she realise how hard it is?" She could see what it's like — why can't the Party leadership?

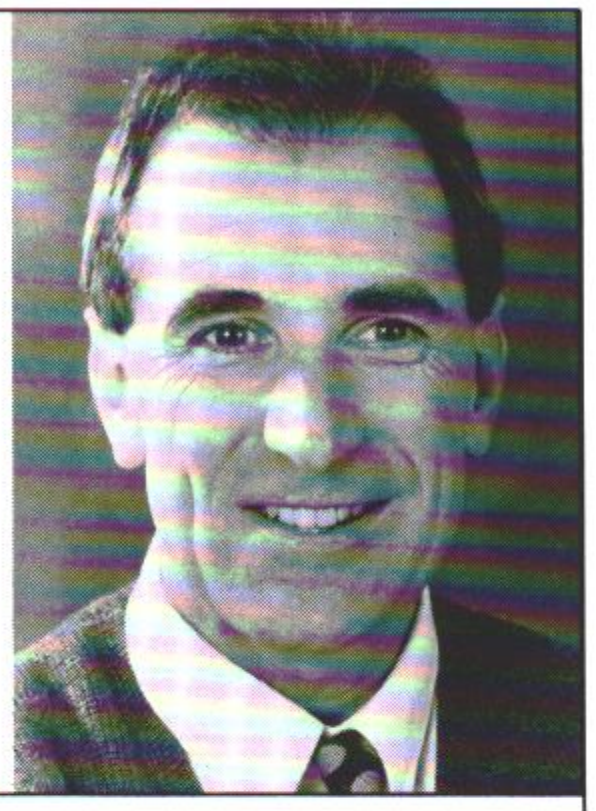
In the 21st Century we need a Labour Party which is doing better than this about family relationships and about children. Children in our society are at the bottom of the heap, treated disgracefully — and by individuals as well. I believe socialists in the 21st century should look to be creating a society with children at the centre. Children are not only our future, if we let them be, they are our glorious, joyful present as well.

Dodgy delegate?

The MSF Labour Party Conference delegation included a young Blairite who works at Labour HQ (in south London) and with a home address in Hammersmith (west London). Nothing wrong with that, except that LP workers are usually members of another trade union, the address she gave does not exist and she was a delegate from Southern Region although both workplace and (supposed) address are in the London region. Still, rules are there to be broken, aren't they?

the Alan Simpson column

The Secretary of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs.



THOSE WHO left the Party Conference thinking it marked New Labour's dream encounter with the end of history need to book their own wake-up call. We are in for one of the most dynamic and unpredictable periods of post-war history, and there are huge stakes to play for.

Anyone believing that the modernising project had finished with constituencies should have gone to the Labour Co-ordinating Committee fringe meeting. They would have been mildly reassured to learn that constituencies are still the problem. We are too obsessed with "accountability" and "the rules". So the plan is to develop "best practice guidelines" which CLPs can be set — T-shirt sales, garden parties, fireside membership in virtual reality politics, etc. Those failing to meet the targets would be twinned with neighbouring CLPs which do. Officers from the "good" constituencies would then be sent in to instruct those who are deficient: good behaviour will be rewarded, trouble-makers will be isolated.

The people's party's keenness to have CLPs listening to the people is matched only by the desire to know who exactly you might be listening to. Pensioners in pursuit of a decent state pension would be decidedly iffy. Portillo may have discovered an unrequited love for single parents but they aren't the ones you should be seen with if the outcome is a demand for universal child care rights and a minimum wage of around £5 an hour. And then there's the question of the unions.

A succession of trade union leaders and delegations had brought their own labour market flexibility to conference: an unbelievable loyalty to Downing Street desires rather than their own union policies. Almost every resolution which might have upset the apple cart of celebrations was remitted after judicious lobbying. Most of this was on the back of threatened defeat by union block votes. It turned Brighton into a conference of "politicus interruptus": everything of any significance was pulled out before it could come to anything. At the end everyone could breathe a sigh of relief. Assignations across the Conference chamber would not be sullied by unplanned political consequences.

All we heard from the unions was the veiled threat that they could not be taken for granted forever. Many, who had tried unsuccessfully to persuade unions that this year's demolition job on constituency rights would next year turn onto the union link, viewed such threats with incredulity, like a condemned man threatening revolt from the scaffold. But revolt is in the air and it will face many union leaders with difficult and long overdue choices.

BEFORE Conference began there was a huge march on Sunday in Brighton against low pay, public sector cuts and unemployment. Large numbers of UNISON branches were represented even though union HQ had tried to discourage it. The argument against was that it was simply an SWP stunt designed to embarrass Labour. Many of the branches represented on the march understood the SWP involvement and had no time for the sectarianism and opportunism of their politics. But they turned up to make their point about absolute opposition to further public sector cuts. How else was absolute opposition to be expressed?

This is the trade unions' dilemma and it goes far beyond UNISON and the public sector. The base of the post-election labour movement will move significantly to the left. Union leaders looking for re-election will not find it by being loyal to Tory spending limits. Leaders looking for credibility will not grasp it in adherence to a minimum wage policy which excludes the under-25's, or which merely swaps poverty in work for poverty on the dole.

The choice facing today's union leaders is simply this: do you support the revival of the Labour left or the anti-Labour left? Freeze out the Labour left and the anti-Labour left will screw you anyway. There has always been an agenda for a post-Labour political configuration. Undermining the trade union link only hurries this along. Siding with the Labour left would help defend the link. It would also entail a political repositioning of the unions themselves: supporting progressive taxation, redistributive spending, common ownership — rather than competitive deregulations; common entitlements (to free health care, education and a restored state pension) — rather than the pursuit of individualised welfare packages.

Labour may have taken the decision to keep politics out of its own future conferences. But there isn't a cat in hell's chance that the unions can do the same. Perhaps this is the key link that CLPs (and a whole host of campaigning organisations) need to reconstruct.

Brighton 97 may yet turn out to be the point which triggered the emergence of a new generation of trade union voices, keener to be fighting on the beaches than strolling on them. That's where we will find "best practice guidelines" with a difference.

March and rally to support the Critchley 31

Saturday 1st November Cardiff

Assemble at 12:30 in Sophia Gardens
Details at http://www.btinternet.com/~donald.macdonald/critch9.htm

The trade union dilemma



Revival of

John McIlroy, author of *Trade Unions in Britain Today, Strike!* and *Industrial Tribunals* looks at the present state of the trade unions and how they have responded to the early days of the Labour Government.

"SLOWLY BUT unmistakably, the trade unions are inching their way back," Seamus Milne tells us in *The Guardian*. There are indeed signs of revival. But the evidence for resurgence, as we reflect on the TUC and Labour Party conferences, is far from unmistakable. Membership of TUC-affiliated unions fell again in 1996, as it has each year since 1979.

The decline (2% compared with 6% in 1995) highlights the continuing failure of recruitment drives and further erosion of the unions' base to 6.75 million members. Just as worrying is the profile of those members. Women make up half the labour force: only a third of them are union members. The average age of the British worker is 31 but the average age of the union member is 46 — a damning statistic which raises big questions about the movement's ability to renew itself. TUC unions increasingly represent the better off workers. Membership is heavily skewed towards the embattled public sector. Only 20% of workers in private industry now hold union cards.

Industrial action is certainly reviving — days lost through strikes topped one million in the year to June. This was five times the figure for the previous twelve months and the highest figure since 1990 — if still well down on previous decades. A number of disputes — most prominently the action of British Airways cabin crews in the summer — showed trade unionists are still able to stand up to aggressive employers threatening the use of legislation, carry public opinion with them and win a victory of sorts. The heroic litany of Liverpool Dockers, Hillingdon, Magnet, and Critchleys demonstrates that the fight has not been knocked out of "ordinary" workers. Increasing at 4.6% over the year, average earnings for full time workers are rising at almost double the rate of inflation — a process helped by the continuing drop in the official unemployment figures to below 2 million.

All this reflects the situation Labour inherited from the Tories. The Blair Government's contribution to a union comeback has been minimal. At Brighton Blair listed as achievements the restoration of union rights at GCHQ, signing the Social Chapter and the establishment of the Low Pay Commission with the minimum wage "on its way". On closer scrutiny they are slim achievements, particularly for those old enough to remember the pace at which the Wilson Government moved to extend workers' rights in 1974-5.

The pledge "to restore normal trade union rights to the staff at GCHQ" has not been redeemed. The new agreement is subject to "no strike, no disruption" clauses. The draconian prerogative powers have been maintained which enable the Government to "take such action as [it] deems necessary for overwhelming reasons of national security or public interest", the very powers that caused the problem in the first place. This is far from normal trade union rights and far from justifying John Monks' approbation: "a highly satisfactory deal".

Signing the Social Chapter is a welcome move, but at present is largely symbolic. The Chapter is a set of aspirational principles, not a code of already existing EU legislation simply to be extended to the UK. It will take effect here in two years' time. It excludes the development of legislation on issues of pay, rights to union membership, strikes and lockouts. Its immediate impact, at the turn of the century, will be in relation to works councils, rights for part-timers and parental leave.

The minimum wage, likewise, remains a matter of deferred gratification for the millions of low paid, casualised workers. George Bain, who chairs the Low Pay Commission, recently observed it could be the year 2000 or later before legislation is implemented. The Commission is scheduled to report in May 1998. The earliest a bill could be introduced would be 1999. In relation to remarks by Mandelson, Bain confirmed the Commission has the power to exclude workers up to the age of 25 from protection. The key question of what level it will be set at remains unclear.

There has been progress elsewhere. The legislation requiring authorisation of deduction of union dues from pay packets every three years will be repealed in 1998 — a measure advertised by Margaret Beckett as "removing burdens from business". But the proposals on union recognition have been put back. A White Paper will now appear in early 1998 based on the election pledge to ensure unions are recognised by employers where a majority of workers want it. As with the minimum wage, Blair has stressed the importance of employer consent and urged the TUC to agree the details of legislation before a bill is drafted. Negotiations on these

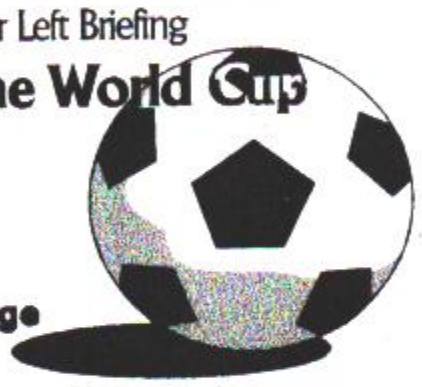
Liverpool Dockers World Cup Raffle

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the unions

have not yet got past first base. There is no consensus on how bargaining units should be defined or what the threshold for triggering recognition should be. Nor is it clear what penalties will be agreed to be imposed on recalcitrant employers. Sequestration of company assets?

It remains uncertain whether the 1998 White Paper will include proposals to extend unfair dismissal protection to part-timers and strikers or abolish the qualification periods so that rights apply from "day one". What is clear is that the core of Thatcherite legislation described by Blair as the most restrictive in Western Europe will be maintained, as will the Conservative economic strategy (centred on enhanced competivity, flexibility, low pay and low taxes) and social policy (centred on greater inequality and a slimmed down welfare state).

For the unions any improvements will be marginal and slow to emerge; they will have to be bargained for. Yet the unions don't seem to be bargaining with Blair. Why not put forward more forcefully a fair framework for recognition which the polls show has strong public support? Is it not more than time to put a figure on a minimum wage and a date for its implementation? This year's TUC carried a commitment to the right to take solidarity action — why not publicise it and argue for it?

And yet union leaders are busy giving away their best bargaining cards. The timid acquiescence of all the big unions to *Partnership in Power*, which qualitatively diminishes the influence they could exercise on the Government, indicates their failure to protect members and appeal to potential members. The AEEU, having kicked up at Blair's reforms, now announce they are in favour of dismantling the remnants of union influence in the Party. The TUC delete from an opinion poll they commissioned the fact that 55% of the public now support a one-day strike over public sector pay. At the very time a figure should be put on the minimum wage, the TUC ensures a UNISON resolution which did just that was not passed. The TGWU executive justifies inaction over the dockers by citing the anti-strike laws. Where is their campaign to repeal them? The unions are back in Downing Street — but where's the product?



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON.

British Airways picket, Summer 1997

Union decision-takers are disabled by the illusion they can subvert the Blair agenda from within. They are locked into social partnership and flexibility in the delusion they can inject an element of regulation and civilisation into market strategies. They refuse to confront Blair's insistence that regulation must not impede flexibility, that flexibility is essentially about deregulation. They refuse to confront the simple fact, part of the everyday experience of workers, that there is a conflict between flexibility on the one hand and job security and decent pay on the other. They brush aside the vivid evidence documented in a recent National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux report that flexibility, positive or otherwise, means cost-cutting, casualisation and speed-up. They ignore the overwhelming research findings showing employers are, on the whole, simply not interested in real partnership with unions. Behind the unions' rhetoric about partnership, union membership, recognition and collective bargaining have all declined. Attempts to marginalise workplace organisation and management hostility to working with unions have increased. History teaches us that the only way you change that is by building up power and exercising pressure, not by giving employers — and a government which increasingly identifies with them — *carte blanche*.

Signs of unrest are surfacing. There were tensions, unease and dissatisfaction with Blair at recent union conferences and at the TUC. A honeymoon period was to be expected. Labour's incomes policy could generate conflict as Blair goes for the soft option of hiding behind Tory policies on pay and resources. An explosive situation is developing in our hospitals and schools. In the Party there may be further moves against collective union involvement. Despite *PiP* the unions still have a strong presence and still donate 45% of Party income, with Blair conscious of the unpopularity of state funding.

We need to build an alliance of all those who believe there is still the necessity and opportunity for a fightback in both unions and Party. We need to develop not only a critique of Blairism but detailed alternatives. Fragmentation is a problem. As Bryn Griffiths argued (*LLB* July 1997) the Campaign Group has a key role to play in developing opposition and co-ordinating it in the Party and unions. Otherwise each small group does its own thing ineffectively. If we can bring the campaigns together and fuse the fight for a minimum wage, union recognition and defence of the welfare state, we will have started well. ❑

Pilger salutes the dockers

On Saturday 27th September 5,000 people marched through Liverpool in support of the sacked dockers, marking the second anniversary of the dispute. John Pilger spoke to the rally:

"IT IS a terrific honour for me to be here today and I thank the dockers. Their struggle has been described, and it is a word that should be banned, as the struggle of dinosaurs. This is the most modern, contemporary, relevant struggle of working people in this country and one of the most contemporary in the world. The dockers should know they are doing everything right. They should not be downhearted. Their followers should not be downhearted.

The *Daily Mirror* has discovered the dispute. Congratulations to the "people's paper" even if it took you two years, even if you described them as "old Labour" which they're not. They are newer, more relevant than this Labour Government in office at the moment.

I think what we should understand about the dockers' struggle is its significance, and I can't emphasise that enough. There is a struggle all over the world against something that goes by the jargon name of "globalisation". It is the new form of oppression. It is in every country. It is in the United States where workers are getting less than £4 per hour, where they are being laid off, where casualisation is like a disease. That disease has spread to this country. It is in South Africa where they are struggling for a Docks Labour Scheme. It is in Australia where the same thing is happening. In the Third World it means virtually slave wages. In this country it means unemployment. All the things the great dockers' strike of the last century was meant to eradicate.

Liverpool is at the forefront of the most important struggle in this country at the moment, that is the struggle of working people to reclaim their birthright, the struggle of working people to have the right to work, the right to look after their families, the right to a decent secure life. The Liverpool dockers are at the vanguard of that fight and I think we should acknowledge that.

We've had a lot lately in the media about royalty. There has been a lot of apparent acts of mourning. Yes, mourning was certainly due. There has been a lot of waffle about a new Britain, a softer gentler Britain, led by Tony Blair. Let me tell you in my experience of 30 odd years as a journalist around the world and reporting from this country, the best of Britain are the Liverpool dockers and their families.

I call on my own colleagues, journalists, to drop this nonsense about dinosaurs, to tell the real story of the dockers, to tell the story of the betrayal of the dockers by their union, by their General Secretary and the collaboration of the Transport and General Workers Union hierarchy with the present Government and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company. Tell the story of why the dockers were locked out, why the Torside workers weren't told about an offer right at the beginning. There is a scandal here. These men should not be here today. They should be working. A trap was set for them just as a trap has been set for workers all over the world. I call on journalists to print the story. Stop writing sentimental stuff about white haired men (and there are a few white haired men and why not) and write the political story, write the factual story. This is such an important dispute. I salute the dockers".

Dockers' march, 12th April 1997.

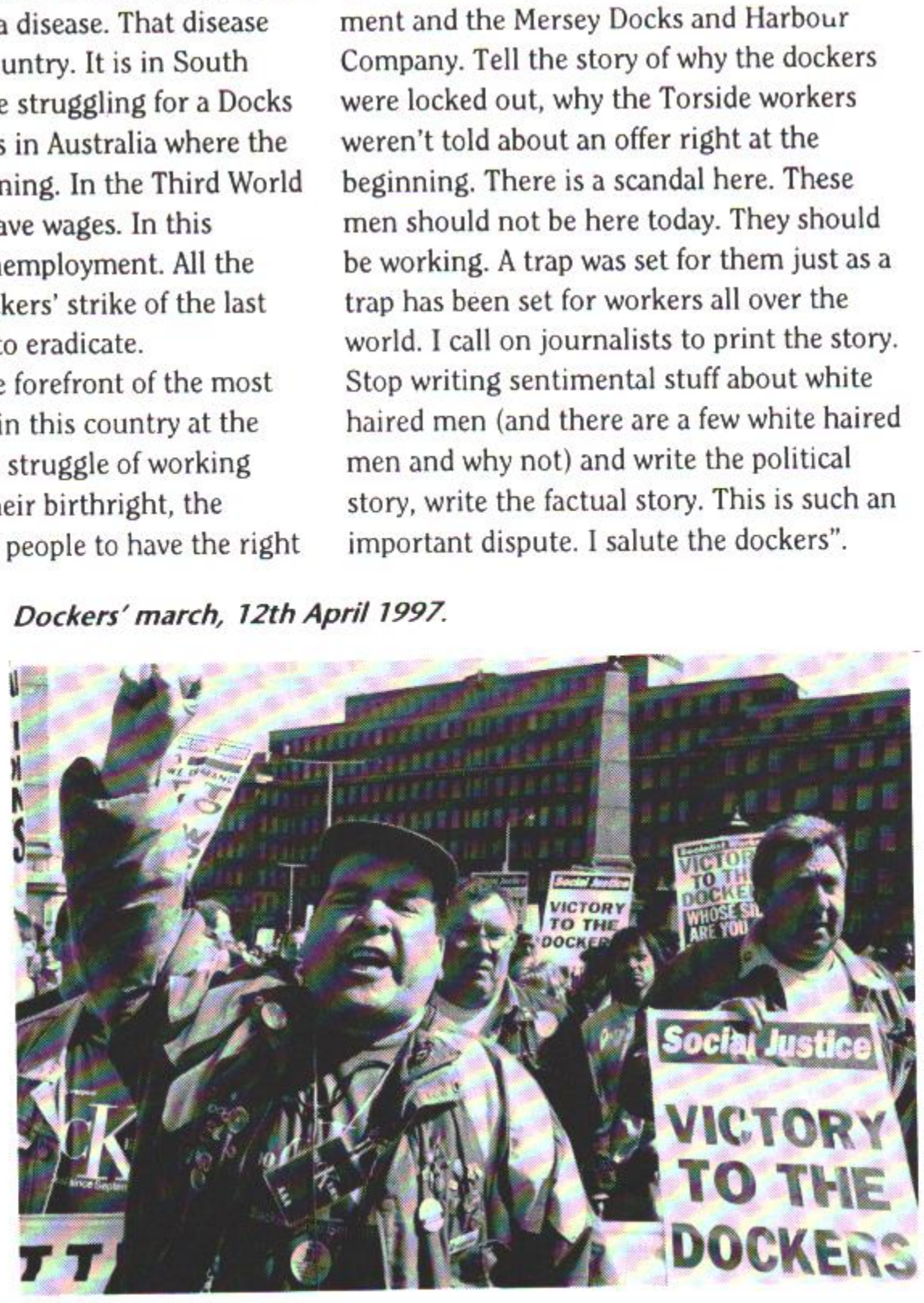


PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON.

Liverpool dockers: US and Canadian support

The good ship Neptune Jade sailed into Oakland on the Pacific on the 30th September. Its load of 160 containers included seven from Thamesport. 32 hours later it sailed away, complete with its undischarged load.

By October 4th the boat was in Vancouver, in Canada. The company hoped that the ship could be unloaded there and the goods sneaked over the border to the States. But again the boat had to leave without unloading.

At both ports, supporters of the Liverpool dockers had picketed despite legal threats and dockworkers had refused to cross the picket lines. The company clearly reads the web sites supporting the dockers and tried to put messages on them, without success, but later claimed that Neptune Jade and Thamesport had nothing to do with the Mersey docks. But information available on the Web distributed by Lloyds shows clearly that Medway Ports, which is 100 percent owned by Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, is the Port Authority for Thamesport. Neptune Jade, which is registered in Singapore, is listed as a Hapag Lloyd service, which is in a container trade alliance with the Jade's owners. Hapag Lloyd has direct links with Liverpool.

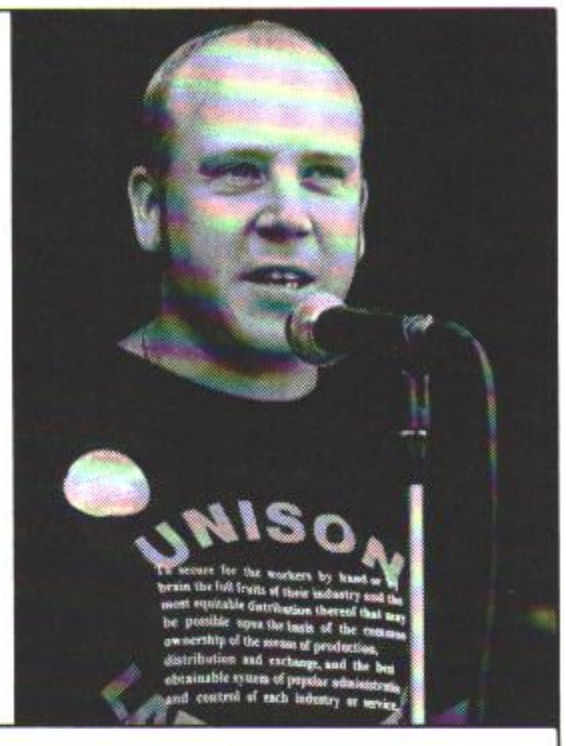
Following the terrific solidarity action by dock workers and others in the States and Canada, the Jade had to set sail for Yokohama, in Japan, with the containers still on board. The pickets were clear that it was a "scab ship filled by scab labour and we're stopping it".

Both in Yokohama on October 15th and two days later in Kobe port, although a number of containers were unloaded these did not include the seven scab containers which were still on board when the Jade sailed on to Kaoshiung.

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the Geoff Martin column

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



WHEN Jack Straw tells you that the bulk of crime is committed by people who've just been chilling out with a spliff or two you know that it's time to start looking for that last remaining NHS psychiatric bed. When the majority of the Conference clap him you know it's time to book yourself into it. The 1997 Party Conference was never going to be an easy one for the left in terms of securing our policy objectives and so it proved.

With a thumping majority stacked up behind the first Labour Government in nearly 20 years an easy ride for the leadership was always on the cards. Even Banksy's Reg Varney impressions failed to derail the machine. The one chance of victory was on the motion calling for the decommissioning of Trident but that was scuppered when the UNISON delegation, despite some resistance, decided to ignore a clear conference mandate and throw its weight behind Blair.

Depressing as the parade of remittals and platform victories may have been it's by no means all doom and gloom. Livingstone's victory over Mandelson and the overall success of the Campaign Group slate proved that the left is still alive and kicking and was a vindication of those of us who've argued long and hard that socialists should stay inside the Party and fight our corner. I do not think that there is any doubt that the majority of Party members, including the recent recruits, believe in wealth redistribution through progressive taxation and the expansion of public services. I also think that the majority of Labour voters thought that was exactly what they were signing up for on 1st May.

In one year the political landscape is likely to look very different. A de facto pay cut in the public sector now looks inevitable, cuts in the NHS and local government are cast in stone and the talk is of a minimum wage between £3 and £3.50 for over 25's only. The reality of Brown's austerity programme will be starting to bite deep into Labour's natural support by October 1998.

DURING the debate on *Partnership in Power* one platform plant suggested that the internal Party reforms were designed to prevent a re-run of the winter of discontent. It's difficult to imagine anyone being further off beam. The hard truth is that the disputes in the public sector in 1978/79 were a clear reflection of what happens when a Labour government allows itself to be blown off course through pressure from international bankers and chooses to make low paid public sector workers pay the price for its economic failure. With Gordon Brown's likely, but now confused, support of the single currency and his adherence to old-fashioned Tory monetarism he appears to be doomed to repeat the failure of the past.

When our members get angry over the relentless grind of low pay, underfunding and low morale they won't be sitting around in the hospitals and the town halls wondering how to feed that anger into Labour's rolling programme. They'll be out on the streets. The 5,000 or so on the SWP-led demonstration on the eve of Conference proved that there are already plenty of willing takers and there will be more to come. The challenge for the Labour left inside the unions is to offer a clear political and industrial alternative to the dead end of *Socialist Worker*. If we fail we will create a political vacuum that they will readily fill. That means pressure to ensure that in the future there are official demonstrations and lobbies for us to build behind and it means a concerted campaign calling for increased public spending, progressive taxation, a decent pay rise and an end to privatisation.

One of the few bright spots at Conference was the renewed success of the fringe. Many delegates were only too willing to break out of the internment camp of the conference compound and to get involved in some real politics. With Conference now reduced to a cross between Stalag 15 and a Mormon convention this trend is set to continue.

Meanwhile, in an effort to improve the co-ordination of left activists inside UNISON the Unison Labour Left has organised a bit of a do. Any UNISON Labour lefties who fancy getting it together should join us on Saturday 25th October at The Ponds Forge International Sports Centre, Sheath Street, Sheffield between 11am and 4pm.

LEADING WITH THE LEFT

Civil Service union merger

Members of the Civil and Public Services Association and the Public Services, Tax and Commerce Union have voted to merge from 1st January. The new union, to be called the Public and Civil Services Union, will be the largest civil service union. The NECs of the two unions sold the merger on the basis of industrial logic and improved services to members. It remains to be seen whether a union in which the role and influence of activists has been drastically reduced will be capable of defending members against privatisation and cuts.

Unions bashed

The Labour-run London Borough of Waltham Forest recently issued an amendment to their Code of Conduct for employees. It requires them to declare to senior officers "any private or personal interests...that they consider could bring about conflict with the authority's interests" including "membership of, or association with...organisations such as the Freemasons and Trade Unions".

Labour Party members were incensed that a Council run by Labour for the last eleven years could regard trade unions as conflicting with the authority's interests, or equate them with freemasons. Upon raising the matter, they discovered that councillors and unions had not been consulted about the amendment to the Code. They are seeking its withdrawal and an assurance that any replacement will be subject to proper consultation. ❑

Historic handshake

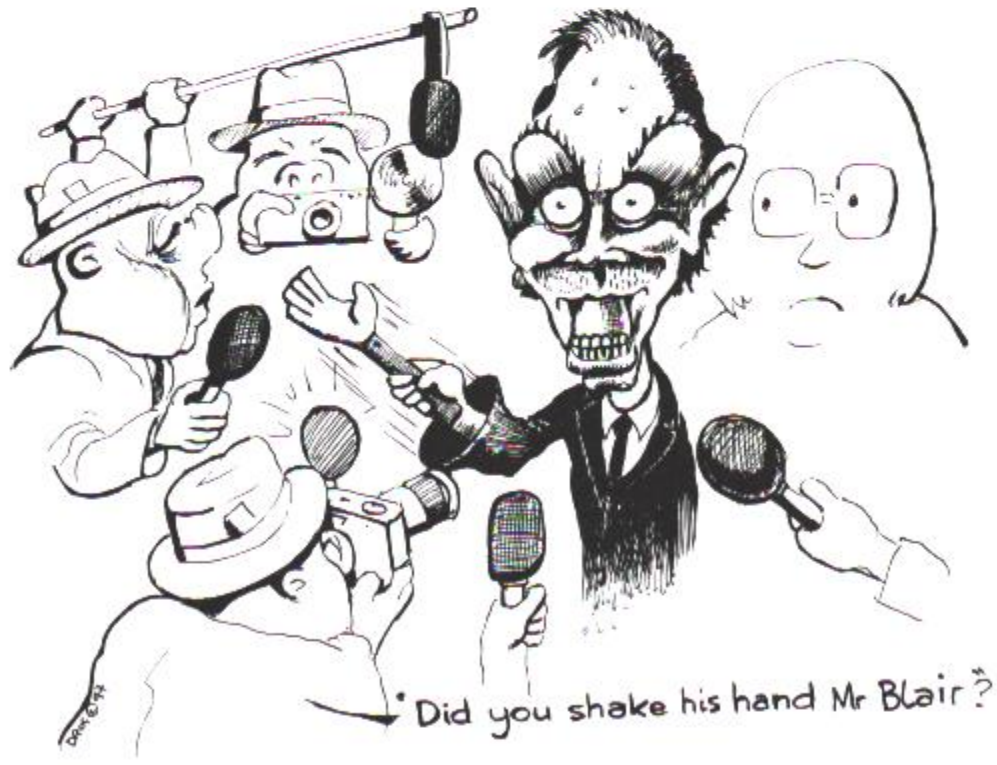
Brian Campbell, editor of Sinn Fein's *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, reports on the Stormont talks.

THERE WAS a peculiar nervousness among the talks' participants at Stormont on Monday 13th October when the famous handshake between Gerry Adams and Tony Blair took place behind closed doors. The media had been simmering in anticipation for days and when Blair emerged from the talks building, the reporters asked, almost in unison, "Well, did you shake his hand?"

Blair hesitated and as the silence grew, Mo Mowlam's smile faded and she shot him a nervous glance. It was as if Blair had been stumped by the most obvious question he had ever had to face. When he did reply, Blair refused to confirm the handshake. Instead, he said that he had treated Gerry Adams as he would treat any human being.

If we ignore for the moment the implication that Adams ever deserved to be treated as less than human, Blair's response showed that he has caught the language of the opening weeks of the talks. Most participants, with the exception of David Trimble's unionists, speak of the need to "build trust" and to "interact" and "create a climate of respect". It is the language of conflict resolution and Blair was quick to tap into the mood.

But the handshake also signalled that the talks have now moved beyond the symbols, posturing and language of conflict resolution and into the nitty gritty of negotiations. The warm-up is over, the shin-pads are secure and the ball is centred.



Blair launched the first attack on Monday by pointedly reiterating that "consent is a guiding principle" in the talks, before defining it as the "consent of the people of Northern Ireland". In that way he pulled on a unionist jersey. That is not unexpected but it perhaps betrays that Blair, like so many others, has not thought too deeply about consent. He and his Government will have plenty of time to rectify that because consent will be central to the talks process. It is the issue around which everything will turn.

Both unionists and loyalists have been at pains, particularly in recent weeks, to wring from the British Government the guarantee that there will be no solution without the agreement of a majority of the unionist/loyalist parties and a majority of the people of the Six Counties. In other words, a unionist veto.

But consent is a two-edged sword. Blair and the unionists believe that the current negotiations process proposes that nationalist consent will not be required for the maintenance of the Union while unionist consent will be required for a United Ireland. Nationalists and republicans have other ideas. These talks represent an historic opportunity.

Northern nationalists were never asked for their consent to the partition of Ireland — it was imposed at the threat of terrible war. They were never asked whether they wanted to remain in the Union. Even now, with talk of democracy, consent, accommodation, consultation and negotiation, nationalist consent is still not being sought. Even worse, according to Tony Blair, unionist consent is presented as an over-arching issue and one that nationalists must accept in order to be perceived as democrats.

If nationalists are not entitled to say "No" to the Union then unionists oughtn't to be entitled to say "No" to a United Ireland. We either have a system of dual consent or one of dual denial. What republicans cannot accept is the idea that there are two democratic rulebooks: one for unionists and the other for nationalists. As the talks progress this issue will rise to the top of the agenda. It will become the centre of debate. It should also be the centre of debate within the Labour Party. Next time Tony Blair visits the talks his language may shift accordingly.

The Women of Srebrenica

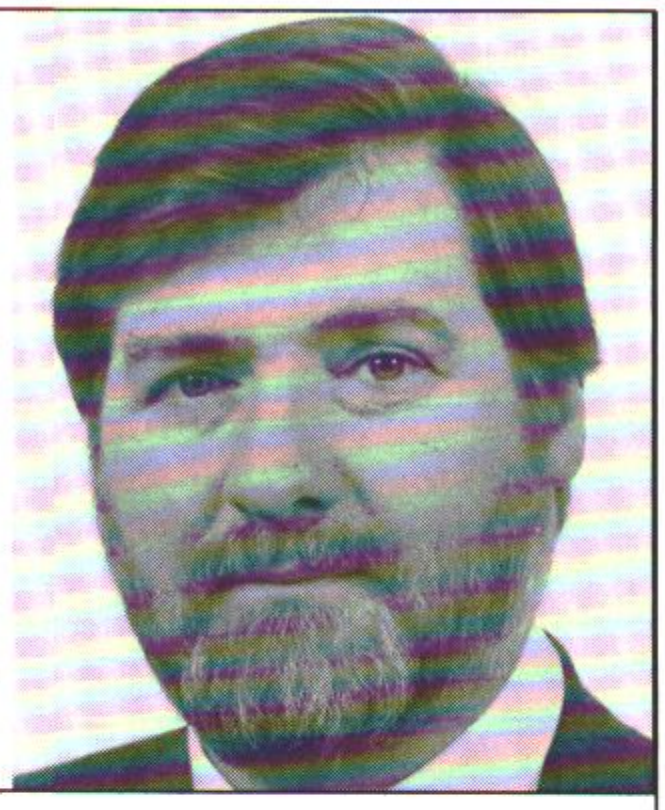
TWO MEMBERS of the Women of Srebrenica will be arriving in Britain on 16th November for a two-week speaking tour. The Women of Srebrenica are calling for the right of return to their home town, and for the right to bury their dead there. Nearly two years after the Dayton Agreement which "guaranteed" the right of return, they, like hundreds of thousands of other refugees, are unable to go back to their homes which lie within Serb nationalist territory.

The Women of Srebrenica need financial help towards their tour expenses. £2,000 is needed for flights, visas, food and travel in Britain and accommodation. You can send donations directly to Unity Trust Bank Branch No. 08-60-01, Account no. 20042967 "Women of Srebrenica Tour Committee". Make cheques payable to "WSTC".

- Draft itinerary: London — November 16th, Brighton — November 19th, Birmingham— November 20th, Leicester — November 21st, Nottingham — November 22nd, Bradford — November 24th, Manchester — November 25th, Liverpool — November 26th, Middlesborough/Newcastle — November 27th, Edinburgh — November 28th. There are regular meetings of the committee organising the tour. Call Alison Snape on 0181-444 6285 for details.

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the Michael Hindley column



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

I HAVE never doubted that Blair would introduce Proportional Representation (PR) for the European elections in 1999 because it will allow an increasingly and dangerously centralised Party leadership even more control. The situation reminds me of a joke by a member of the Spanish Labour contingent (PSOE) in Strasbourg, who, when I teased him about the (non) chances of him voting against the party line said "Michael, the only revolutionary aspect we retain is a Leninist party structure."

The crime sheet of Labour MEPs is long. Famously, half the group signed a front page *Guardian* advertisement to retain Clause IV. Worse still the advert upstaged Blair's visit to Brussels. Then half the group rejected appeals from Robin Cook and voted against the extension to Turkey of a customs union because of human rights abuses there.

MEPs cannot be brought into line by the payola vote of preferment which keeps MPs noses to the grindstone. Try as they might, and some leaders of the EPLP have striven heartily in that respect, there is little room for the disciplining power of patronage within Strasbourg, so it will have to come from without.

Recently we all received a letter informing us that the NEC had voted in a Code of Practice for MEPs which was now "operative". Our AGM had thrown out a line in our Code of Conduct which the MPs had accepted undertaking to do "nothing which would bring the party into disrepute" — a ludicrous catch-all. The Code outlines that we should not dissent from Party policy on PR for Europe. I won't. I welcome PR, but surely MEPs should have the right to dissent. I recall Party policy was for negotiated withdrawal from the Common Market and unilateral nuclear disarmament when Tony Blair stood successfully in Sedgefield in 1983. Party policy can't ever change if members are not allowed to speak against it. This is precisely where PR comes in: you can speak against the policy of the day but you will be dropped from the PR list for the next election.

I have changed my mind on PR. I warned against PR in *Tribune* years ago on the grounds that first past the post kept the Labour Party together. I accepted — with regret — that this broad-based left of centre coalition would be led from the right. I had no problem with that as long as there was an honourable place for the left and a reasonable chance of getting left policies onto the agenda. Under first past the post there was no reasonable alternative electoral strategy for socialists.

THE LAST election showed the absolute disregard by the Blairites for those voters who believe in Labour's core values. Concessions on policy were made to the middle classes. Under PR, every vote would count and those huge majorities in working class areas would actually amount to much more than those small amounts needed to shift marginal seats our way.

Equally important is the argument for democracy. We have three Parliamentary front-benches with little difference. All believe that history has ended, capitalism has won, the people are not interested in politics, profit comes before people and the environment, and the poor, alas, are always with us. One of the reasons why the MEPs occasionally remember their consciences is there are other voices in Strasbourg — offering a different opinion, though coming from the same philosophical view (the Greens and the United Left). The majority of Labour MEPs were able to vote for their resolutions opposing the Gulf War, after our own failed in the Socialist Group.

Certainly, the Greens can anticipate a good vote in 1999 and under PR that could translate into seats in Strasbourg. Blair will by then have had a referendum on the Single Currency (unless as he hopes, it collapses before then and he is spared a difficult decision) in which he has advocated a Euro for us, and probably lost the referendum, or won and split the Labour Party. The Lib-Dems will be compromised horribly by supporting Blair, so there will be a reasonable anti-government vote which does not want to vote Tory. Some are advocating a Red/Green list, but I reckon the Greens are bright enough to realise that for any immediate future they will do better on their own.

Also, we will soon have a PR vote for the Scottish Parliament, and a sanitised Labour list will be opposed by a reasonable left-of-Labour alternative. The Blairites of course have worked all this out. They will be happy to jettison the left and form a new centre party which under PR might be in power for decades because the British establishment would see it as no threat at all.

But what of the left? I think that we are in for a period of creative confusion, much dependent on local circumstances, similar to the situation at the end of the last century when the Labour Party emerged. But I am certain that ultimately a new clarity of differentiation between parties will emerge, and British politics will be healthier, more creative and more honest for these developments.

Gran Baile De Calaveras

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Roll on PR

Between War and Peace

Dan Carter reviews three perspectives on Ireland.

Between War and Peace by Bew, Patterson and Teague (Lawrence and Wishart, £12.99) attempts to advocate a consensus solution to the situation in the North of Ireland. That and the involvement of the ILP-backed New Dialogue may put many people off delving deeper. That would be a mistake. It presents a useful detailed political and economic analysis. In a discussion one of the authors, Henry Patterson, commented, "It is making an intervention into a debate which might make a difference — unusual for a book." Reflecting the views of the majority of the population of the North, the authors support full involvement of all parties in the current talks process, while not expecting them to succeed.

The book examines the importance of sections of the leadership of the republican movement wanting an end to political violence. Unlike the loyalists, the authors believe that republicans have more to lose if the current talks are successful, as they will produce a settlement clearly within the union. The Unionists would have to accept a North-South institutional dimension, but this would probably coincide with the Irish government removing their claim to jurisdiction over the North (though not their ultimate territorial claim).

The book draws a negative balance sheet of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, questioning when Britain last had a strategic interest in the North. Paul Bew told *LLB* that he believed the "objective of the Irish state was one of stability, not unity in the form of any imposition". Waiting for the Catholic population of the North to overtake the Protestant one would take at least 25 years; this may be a long term aspiration of the Irish government and could lead to their accepting the status quo now. The recent General Election had, however, produced an unnaturally low Unionist turnout.

The authors believe that the Irish government's optimistic hope that EMU would produce automatic economic success was overstated; they question what would happen if Ireland opts in and the UK opts out. While European Union would not produce any easy solutions, if both opt in there would be a strong element of economic and social harmonisation, whether the Unionists wanted this or not.

While the prospects for the Ulster Unionist Party are good, the question was whether Sinn Fein would continue to grow at the expense of the SDLP, despite the latter's role as a major player in the peace process. Much depended on whether the republican movement split over the issue of violence, and "it was difficult to envisage the republican movement being kept together".

One conclusion to the current talks — the use of a referendum by the British Government — was seen as a risky move. It could force people into a compromise or could be self-destructive and destroy all that had been gained. The activity in Ireland had to be seen in the context of the vote for a Scottish Parliament and the Government's desire for UK decentralisation. Blair's strategy for the North of Ireland was simply an extension of his strategy for the whole of the UK. Scotland's vote had helped push Trimble into the talks and the Unionists may end up having to accept a devolved assembly as the only way to stay in the UK.

Because the book assumes that both nationalists/republicans and Unionists have the wrong perspective on the current situation, it is in danger at times of "holier-than-thou-ism"; its great strength, however, is its detailed historical, political and economic analysis, and for this it is certainly worth reading.

Orangeism: Myth and Reality (Connolly Association, £1.50) is the text of a speech of prominent Irish historian Peter Beresford-Ellis in 1995 which, strangely, the Connolly Association has taken two years to publish. It is, however, timeless as an analysis of Orangeism. "When we talk of the Orange Order we are not speaking of a movement whose philosophies have been cast in stone from the moment of its creation," says Beresford-Ellis. He shows how over 200 years Orangeism has adapted from being anti-union with Britain to pro-union, the one constant being its virulent anti-Catholicism.

From the beginning, the Orange Order was organised along Masonic lines with the founders coming from such lodges. Back in 1799, over 450 members of the Irish House of Lords were members of the Order. It began as a High Tory conservative, sectarian and anti-revolutionary force opposed to the United Irishmen and determined to divide Catholic and Protestant, while initially excluding Dissenters from its ranks. Membership of the Order has fluctuated according to perceived reforms seen to be of benefit to the Catholics and the strength of nationalist and republican movements; its relationship with the British Crown has rocketed from high-ranking royalty being leading members to its attempt to stop Victoria being crowned Queen. Commenting on the Orange marches through Catholic areas, one of the most important symbols of the activities of the Order today, Beresford-Ellis likens them to "a dog marking its territory."

For £1.50, the pamphlet is worth buying for the history lesson alone, and its analysis of just how dominant a force the Orange Order has been in the political life of the six-county statelet.

The BBC's ***The Provos*** was one of the best-researched political programmes to be shown on British television There has surely never been a TV documentary with such access to those involved from the start in the Provisional IRA and the post-1969 republican movement. It was interspersed with interviews with leading Government and British military figures of the day. It allowed those involved to speak for themselves, but posed the tough questions if they tried to steer clear of controversial issues. Perhaps the most convincing interview was with the man who was a teenager when the "troubles" broke out. He was only concerned about the barricades at the top of his road because they had stopped the postman delivering his O Level results. The significance of his presence in the programme became clear when it developed that the British Army's activities on his street led him to see the need for armed resistance and therefore to join the IRA.

The candour of the British Army officer who, like those in the IRA, showed a perception unusual in the British establishment because he too regarded the situation as war, was a refreshing break from the attitudes we are used to from the British press and many politicians. No way can a programme that showed the carnage that this did be said to be an apology for the republican movement, as some have described it. Its value is that it lets those involved explain their involvement, which, bearing in mind the recent gag on Sinn Fein politicians, was an achievement in itself. This was an all-too-rare offering from the BBC these days.

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The Colour of Money

David Pope reviews the film Face.



FACE (directed by Antonia Bird, scripted by Ronan Bennett) is a violent film portraying a couple of days in the lives of an East End gang of armed robbers. The film attempts to show them as people with the same concerns about relationships and families as the rest of us. It depicts the gang falling out over the proceeds of a ram-raid that nets them a mere £340,000 instead of the hoped-for £2m. One member steals the others' shares and kills the elderly friends of the gang leader Ray (Robert Carlyle) in the process.

Motivated by anger at this betrayal, a desire for revenge and determination to recover "his" money, Ray launches a frantic attempt to uncover the traitor and find the loot. This takes him on a blood-soaked journey culminating in a desperate infiltration of the local police station.

Brief flashbacks show Ray's past as a political activist. The violence as the gang turn on each other prompts Ray's recollections of riot cops clubbing pickets to the ground. His mother and girlfriend, involved in campaigning against deportation orders, urge him to abandon his life of crime but to no avail.

Face does not explain Ray's conversion from causes to crime. Instead it shows the greed and obsession that lead people, living otherwise everyday lives, to pursue the lure of money by desperate means until it brings about their destruction. The gang seem powerless to resist this urge, although as the heavy, Dave (a fine performance by Ray Winstone) admits, he could have made more from a job driving a van.

Face is expertly directed by Antonia Bird on a very low budget. Robert Carlyle is excellent as the sympathetic but flawed Ray and is given good support by a cast with several familiar faces.

The road to parliamentary capitalism

Just how new are Labour's modernisers? Mike Phipps reviews The End of Parliamentary Socialism *by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, published by Verso, price £15 paperback.*

IT IS A truism that history's winners get to establish their version of events as the official record. So it is with the Labour Party. New Labour was born, Blair and Mandelson tell us, from the need to modernise, to move away from "centralised state socialism" and learn the lessons of Labour's disappointing terms in office.

The importance of this book is in setting the record straight. It was not today's "modernisers", but the Labour left which in the 1970s recognised that to survive as a force for change the Party would have to be innovative and radical. This required a new approach to the idea of the paternalistic state and a recognition of the limits of 'parliamentary socialism'. "The Labour left wanted to replace it with democratic socialism," state the authors. "New Labour would replace it with parliamentary capitalism."

The new left that emerged in the Party in the 1970s contained a number of ingredients. There was the municipal left that replaced the corrupt right wing in local politics in the late 1960s, when Labour lost town halls across the country due to the unpopularity of the Wilson Government. There was the disillusionment from within that government, expressed most clearly by Tony Benn, who began to advance a more popular and participatory democracy along with the need for a more political trade unionism and controls on the power of the media. There was also growing concern with greater accountability and grassroots democracy. Nor were these entirely British trends; across Europe similar tendencies were developing in social democratic parties as a response to the crisis of the post-war order. This book charts in detail the development of the left as a force within the Party, through the collapse of the 1974-9 Labour Government into IMF-dictated monetarism.

The fight for accountability to the rank and file led logically on to reform of the Party's constitution. The book recalls the hothouse atmosphere after Labour lost office, when a right-wing parliamentary party felt obliged to choose Michael Foot as leader to head off the revolt. Benn's narrow defeat in the 1981 deputy leadership contest is rightly seen as a turning point: thenceforth the right in the Party opened an offensive that placed respectability in the eyes of capital above the need to defeat the Tories. The Kinnock leadership squandered every opportunity, from the miners' strike to the poll tax, to defeat the movement's enemies. In this it was backed intellectually by the Eurocommunist journal *Marxism Today* and within Labour's ranks by the emergent "soft left" — formed ostensibly to pull the leadership to the left, but more often abandoning its diminishing principles to keep up with Kinnock's charge to the right.

The book correctly links the fate of the left to the big class battles of the 1980s, such as those in local government against rate-capping or trade union struggles against Thatcher, with each defeat making Labour easier to "modernise" and safer for business to trust.

Is the fight for socialist policies inside the Party over? The authors do not say so definitively and they are correct to argue that the fight to democratise Labour's structure must be extended to other institutions of civil society, especially the media. However, activists may feel a good deal more optimistic than Panitch and Leys about the future inside the Party after this year's excellent showing for the left in the NEC elections. ❑

Deportations to Turkey endanger Kurdish lives

John Stewart, treasurer of the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, highlights the cases of three families threatened with deportation to Turkey.

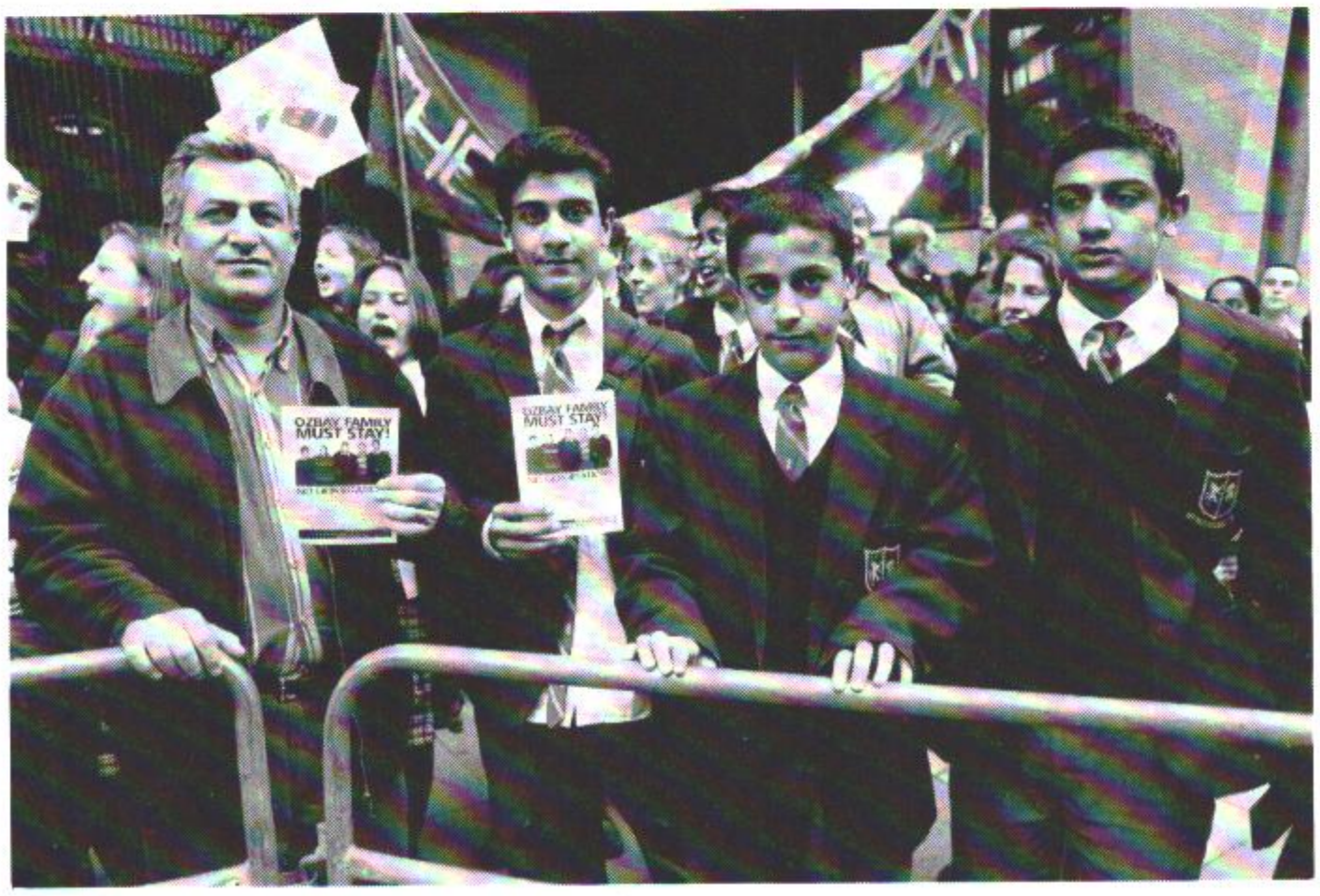
A RECENT meeting of NCADC heard representatives of three different campaigns of Kurdish people threatened with deportation to Turkey. All three involve very different people who have never met before but are all united by the oppression they have suffered, first in Turkey at the hands of the Turkish state, and now here in the UK.

The Ozbay Family, Huseyin, Hanim, 15 year old twins Ali and Veli and 12 year old Semih have lived in North London for over three years having fled from imprisonment, torture and beatings in Turkey and Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus. The Ozbays are a Kurdish Alevi family who have seen several members of their family killed or seriously injured by Turkish soldiers. In 1993 Hanim's brother's son was shot dead by Turkish police and her sister's son was shot in January 1995. Two of Huseyin's nephews were killed in 1992 and his brother, Hassan was so badly beaten by Turkish police he lost the use of his arm. His sister was beaten with truncheons by gendarmes and suffered a broken arm. The arm turned gangrenous and had to be amputated.

In her application for asylum Hanim stated: "The police and gendarmerie in Turkey were persecuting us. They took my husband away. His face and feet would be swollen from beatings. I've been tortured a lot too. The same torture went on in Cyprus. The police would come and take my husband away all the time. I would rather kill myself than go back to those places." Michael Howard turned down their application saying, "your application is simply a device to secure your stay in the UK."

The Capti Family, also living in North London, are a Kurdish family from Maras in South East Turkey. Mehmet Capti came here in 1993 after being detained and tortured in Turkish prisons. Members of his family, including his father, continue to be detained in Turkey. Mehmet's application for asylum was turned down in December 1993. His appeal was subsequently dismissed and leave for judicial review of his case's handling was unsuccessful.

The family are organising a campaign to publicise their case and the situation of the Kurds in Turkey and to try to convince the new government to look sympathetically at their asylum claim. In 1994 the adjudicator considering the case conceded that Mehmet came from a Kurdish village considered by the Turkish authorities to support the PKK and therefore suffered from Turkey's indiscriminate action to reduce the influence of the PKK by detaining any young men found in the area. Unfortunately Mehmet's then solicitors were late in sending an application to take his case to the Tribunal.



The Ozbay family outside the Home Office.

PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON.

The Capti Family, especially their children who were born in the UK, are at great risk if they return to Turkey. Their father is suspected of political activity and would almost certainly be detained.

The story of Ekrem Gokce is rather different. Ekrem, a Turkish national, was serving in the Turkish army in an area heavily populated by Kurds. Like many young conscripts Ekrem was not especially political and simply accepted his call-up. He was then greatly distressed at the way his unit was ordered to treat Kurds and felt unable to attack, beat and shoot Kurdish villagers as ordered. For refusing to obey orders he was imprisoned, beaten and accused of being a PKK spy.

Ekrem fled to Britain in 1994 and applied for asylum. He lived and worked in the UK for three years and married a local woman in Barrow-in-Furness in 1997. Ekrem was detained by immigration officials in June and held at Campsfield. He was deported to Turkey in September. His wife and family are continuing to campaign for his safe return.

These cases are just three of thousands concerning families and individuals who have fled persecution in their country and are now forced to campaign to secure a peaceful future for themselves here in the UK. As part of its new ethical foreign policy the new Labour Government should announce that it recognises that Kurdish people in Turkey face a well-founded fear of persecution and will not be returned there against their will. At the very least Home Office Ministers should agree to review the three cases outlined here.

- These campaigns and many others around the country need mass support. Help can range from writing letters to organising meetings. If you are able to help then contact the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns at 22 Berners Street, Birmingham B19 or ring 0121-554 6947 for contacts for campaigns in your area.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Your letters are welcome but please keep them under 250 words. Send a PC floppy if possible or email llb@gn.apc.org.

Labour Left Briefing
PO Box 2378
London E5 9QU



I found your article "one race — the human race" annoying (September's *LLB*). Keith Veness seems to be jumping on the Out of Africa II bandwagon. This theory holds that the human species has a very recent common ancestor dubbed "Eve", going back only about a hundred thousand years. So of course it appears a more politically correct theory (all one big happy family) than the Out of Africa I theory that the human race goes back about a million years and which posits a multi-regional evolution of the human species.

It is true that the DNA evidence points towards Out of Africa II, and personally I support Out of Africa II. However it needs to be stated that the main proponents of Out of Africa I vigorously deny racist labels attrib uted to them. Furthermore recent archaeological evidence from Australia and Java, and DNA research carried out in Oxford has swung the pendulum in their favour.

So what if they are correct? Does this mean that *LLB* will no longer define us as "one human race"? Will racism be acceptable after all?

I do not exactly know what the term "race" means. I am aware that terms like Caucasian, Mongoloid, Negro etc are now questioned. I have recently heard some socialists declare that no such thing as race exists. There seems to be a tendency on the left not to mention differences amongst humans.

Surely the main point is that we are all by definition one species or else we could not interbreed and produce fertile offspring. But even if two or more hominid species did exist then that does not sanction genocide. Note here in passing that the Out of Africa II theory assumes that our species must have completely exterminated all other hominid species across the entire planet (unless the spurious claims as to the existence of Yetis being remnants of Homo erectus are true!). Socialists should not need a "scientific proof" of the theory of race and human origins when combatting racism.

Geoff Goss
Kentish Town

LLB has been far too uncritical about New Labour's devolution policy. Blair has held blind pre-legislative referenda in Scotland and Wales as a facade of democracy and will now huddle down inside the British state in London to decide exactly what the Scots and Welsh can do in their assemblies. Nothing could better illustrate Enoch Powell's remark, "power devolved is power retained".

LLB should campaign for the Scots and Welsh to elect constituent assemblies as soon as possible which would then negotiate with London on their future powers. In Scotland this would probably lead to far greater powers for the Scottish assembly; in Wales such procedures could help heal the regional differences in Wales which Ceri Evans wrote about.

Surely, too, if *LLB* wants to tackle the leadership's crypto-Toryism, it should campaign for the complete independence of the Scottish and Welsh Labour Parties. Not only would that give a far greater potential degree of local accountability to the Labour Parties in Scotland and Wales, but in all matters it would force Blair's London New Labour Government to negotiate rather than dictate. In such circumstances the potential of the left to influence New Labour would be greater.

Peter Bowing
Hungary



Not green or peaceful

There has been considerable outrage that Labour Ministers have been issued with a circular, telling them to be "neutral", rather than supportive, to **Greenpeace** because of the environmental group's threats to certain "great" British companies. Never one to be neutral when he can attack, **John Prescott** launched an all-out attack on its attempts to block North Atlantic oil exploration. **John Battle**'s Department (Trade and Industry) have even been advising companies to sue Greenpeace.

The Piers Merchant Story with No Sex Shock

Piers Merchant's name once epitomised the Tories much as the name of his opponent last May, **Dominic Welfare**, epitomised Labour. Now he has resigned as an MP will now not have a chance to move his Private Members Bill on waste prevention in December. Perhaps he realised the best way he could promote waste prevention was to resign and so avoid the destruction of trees felled to produce the paper for *Hansard*, the Parliamentary report in which his speeches are published.

Young Fogeys

The Young Fabians couldn't be accused of any pinko pacifist bias at their Conference on defence policy for the 21st century. The event is sponsored by the **Society of British Aerospace Companies**, whose main financial interest is...the defence industry (well, the attack industry really).

Nuke 'Em

British Nuclear Fuels Ltd continues its attempts to ingratiate itself with Labour ministers. Having recruited Peter Metcalfe, *Progress* writer and former researcher to Energy Minister **John Battle**, they now have Northern Ireland Minister **Lord Dubs** as a "BNFL Fellow-elect" on the Industry and Parliament Trust's list of speakers.

Imposter In Chancellor's Office?

Surely the **Gordon Brown** currently fully committed to spending on Trident must have replaced the real **Gordon Brown** as Chancellor? He can't possibly be the same man as the one who in 1984 described the **Trident** programme as, "unacceptably expensive, economically wasteful and militarily unsound." At least in those days he was speaking his own words. Nowadays it's all Balls.

Dear John...

A few years ago, the NUJ's **John Foster** (now its General Secretary) had an unsuccessful battle with **John Prescott** over getting Labour to take up the issue of trade union rights at the **Mirror Group**. Shocked to learn that JP appears to hold a grudge? Prescott recently replied to Foster on another matter. He began: "Dear Mr Foster, I am surprised you are writing to me..."

Blair cheers strike victory

Who says the Labour leadership wouldn't support trade unionists winning a dispute? We can reveal there were cheers all round at the Teamsters landmark victory over **UPS** in the USA. That's because **UPS** were sponsoring the Labour Party Conference fringe guide and having their name splashed all over it would not have gone down well if the dispute were still on.

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Solidarity is the watchword

With even the Tory leader coming out for it, multi-culturalism seems to be an idea whose time has come. Mike Marqusee thinks the celebrations should be muted.

WHEN Norman Tebbit first posed his "cricket test" in 1990 — excoriating Asians and Afro-Caribbeans who failed to support England against India, Pakistan or the West Indies — there was hardly a whisper of dissent from within the Tory Party or the Tory press. Even the *Guardian* confined its criticism to an appeal for patience while immigrant communities were gradually assimilated into the native culture.

William Hague's prompt repudiation of Tebbit's attack on multi-culturalism at a Tory conference fringe meeting shows how far our society has come in recent years. It seems that the "race card" is now more a vote-loser than a vote-winner. Here politicians have followed where others have led the way. Thanks to innumerable hard-fought grass-roots campaigns, the sheer pressure of a changing social reality, and the perseverance of the black communities themselves, more and more people now accept that Britain is and will continue to be made up of people of various colours and religious affiliations.

A couple of years ago I had the strange experience of debating the "cricket test" with its author on Sky TV. Tebbit called me a "racist" (for being "anti-English") and insisted that he was completely colour-blind. He wanted black people living here to commit themselves to their new country and to demonstrate that commitment by supporting the home side in cricket matches. He condemned the English cricket authorities (rightly) for failing to make greater efforts to bring talented black and Asian cricketers into the professional game.

I pointed out to Tebbit that one of the obstacles to black and Asian cricketers entering the mainstream was his cricket test and the attitudes it encapsulated, above all the illusion that there is or ever has been a single, homogeneous English nation with a shared culture. He answered that without a clear national identity our society would descend into anarchy.

Tebbit is an English cultural nationalist. Subjectively, he doesn't give a damn whether you're black or white, so long as you conform to what he considers to be English norms. Objectively, his ideology is a menacing challenge to the right of black people to reside on equal terms with others in this society. His integrationism is one-sided in the extreme.

However, in his own perversely logical way, Tebbit is right to rail against the incoherence of multi-culturalism, in which British society is seen as a neutral host for a plurality of unrelated cultures. Here the multi-culturalists share surprising ground with Tebbit. Both ideologies divide humanity into discreet, inescapable cultural communities. Both deny or ignore the fluid, often contradictory reality of social identities in the modern world and the way those identities are shaped by the changing economic environment.

Recent academic studies have emphasised the diversity among Britain's black communities, and have sought to categorise social values and perceptions according to "ethnic background". It's a short step from cultural essentialism to cultural determinism, and sure enough, we are increasingly told that what counts in the formation of the individual is whether he or she is Indian, Afro-Caribbean, African, East African Asian, East Asian, and in some versions Muslim, Hindu, Christian, etc. Class and gender divisions within these categories are obliterated. The cross-cultural imperatives of collective action are replaced by an appeal to tolerance and an accommodation with the hierarchy of power.

This is why it is so easy for the ideologists of New Britain to combine multi-culturalism with "one nation" rhetoric. In both, a cuddly, inclusive consciousness co-exists with a harsh and unforgiving reality of bitter division and entrenched exclusion. Both define the problem of social exclusion as primarily a cultural one — the result of the way individuals lead their lives, not the way the economy determines the options open to them.

On the ground, the increasing acceptance of multi-cultural Britain has proved only too compatible with a steadily rising number of racial assaults, obscenely disproportionate numbers of black deaths in police custody, a racist immigration regime and the over-representation of black people among the unemployed and the low-waged. Far from engaging in the complex battle with the many-faceted phenomenon of racism, multi-culturalism side-steps the issue. Equal respect for cultures is not the same as social and economic equality for individuals.

The inadequacies of the new, consensual multi-culturalism as an instrument of positive social change have been vividly illustrated in west London recently. Braving insult and death threats from communal Sikh and Muslim gangs — demanding equal respect for their respective cultures — the anti-racist activists of the Southall Monitoring Group have campaigned against religious and other divisions in their community. Secularists in south Asia know only too well the precious ground multi-culturalism has ceded to fundamentalists and others who seek to exploit cultural identities for political ends. In Southall, it is solidarity — not multi-culturalism — which is the watchword in the struggle against racism and for social justice.



700 people marched through Southall on 12th October, calling for unity and solidarity. The march was organised by the Southall Monitoring Group in response to violent clashes between groups of Sikh and Muslim youth under the influence of right-wing communal and fundamentalist political organisations. Speakers included representatives from the Hillingdon Hospital strikers and MPs John McDonnell and Piara Khabra.

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