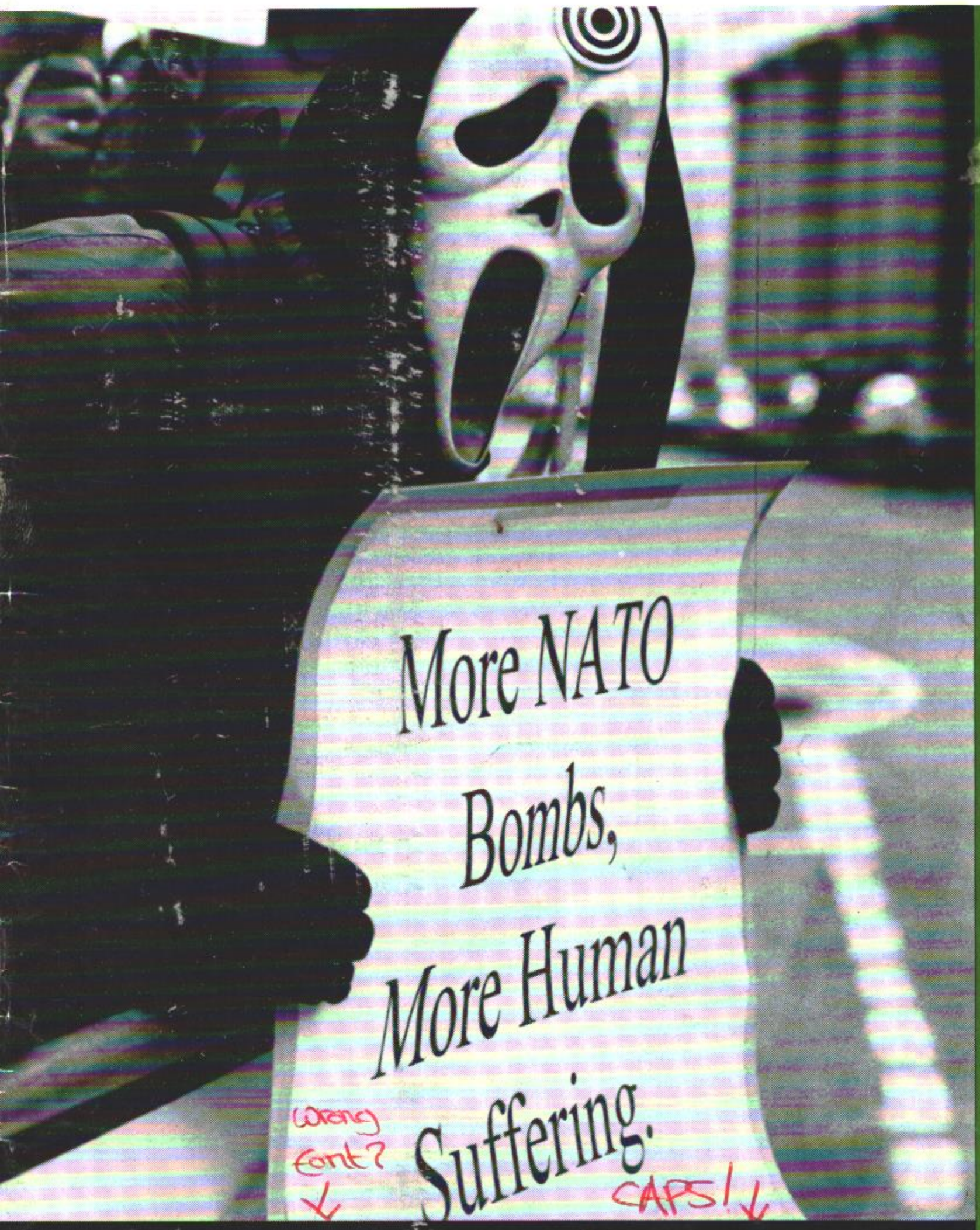
LABOUR LEFT

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NATO's out of control: stop this bloody war!

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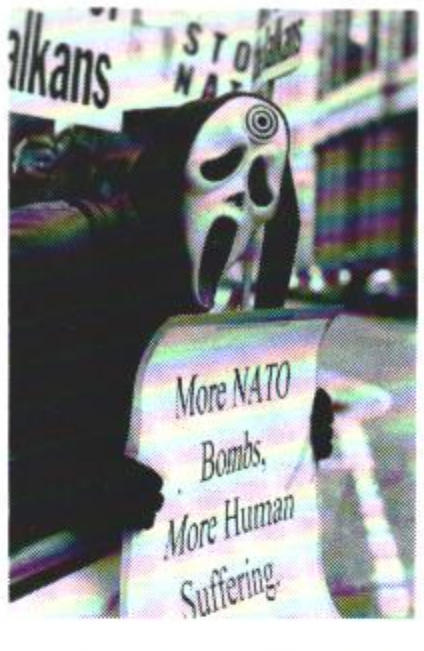
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■ The copy deadline for the July issue is Monday 14th June.



June 1999

Cover photo by Paul Mattsson

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EDITORIAL

Stop this cynical war

From the outset, the hallmark of this war has been cynicism. The USA gave the green light to Milosevic's counter-insurgency drive against the KLA, and the atrocities that accompanied it, last October. As late as December, Robin Cook and other EU ministers were denouncing the KLA as "terrorists" and arguing that Milosevic's actions were in response to KLA violations of Security Council resolution 1199.

Then, a volte-face: at Rambouillet, the US and the British abandoned the Kosovar "moderates" embraced the KLA as the only voice of the Kosovar Albanians, and coupled the proposals for Kosovar autonomy with provisions for the unfettered military occupation of the whole of Yugoslavia by NATO personnel as an "indissoluble package". Not surprisingly, Milosevic rejected the deal, the OSCE monitors were withdrawn, and the bombing started, despite clear warnings from intelligence that it would precipitate a massive outflow of refugees. The evidence is indisputable: the welfare of the Kosovars, and of the democratic forces in the region as a whole, scarcely feature in NATO's priorities.

NATO's war aims have changed from week to week, from "averting a humanitarian catastrophe", to "degrading the Serb war machine" to Tony Blair's recent call for "victory without compromise". Now, the sticking point appears to be NATO's insistence that any international peace-keeping force be under its domination. Meanwhile, factories, offices, residential areas, electricity and water supplies, bridges, roads, television stations, hospitals, schools, prisons, vegetable markets, museums, churches, refugee convoys and even the Chinese embassy are bombed. Depleted uranium shells and cluster bombs are dropped on civilian areas. And the lies are churned out by the official propaganda machines on both sides, with the vast mass of humanity caught in between.

A ground war is being promoted by many commentators – including some on the left – as a more honourable or efficacious means of achieving NATO's humanitarian ends. The reality is that a ground invasion would amount to a qualitative escalation and expansion of the violence. NATO troops would be fighting an enemy defending what it considers to be its home territory. All the precedents for such a campaign are horrific. In these circumstances, atrocities would abound on all sides.

The best outcome of such an invasion would be the return of a portion of Kosovar refugees under armed guard to a NATO protectorate and the continuing isolation of Serbia, which, like Iraq after the war of 1991, would be subject to punitive sanctions and sporadic bombardment. The worst outcome is a prolonged bloodbath. The Kosovars' homeland would be turned into a wasteland.

Those on the left who have provided a fig-leaf for this wholly cynical, wholly counter-productive military adventure have behaved irresponsibly. The humanitarian war they preach is not the war that is actually on offer from NATO. That war was conceived in the self-interest of the NATO elite and is being conducted according to that self-interest.

The essential precondition for any resolution of the conflict in the Balkans is the cessation of the bombing and the resumption of negotiations. And these negotiations are by far the best hope of a return in safety of the refugees to their homeland, and the achievement of any genuine national self-determination for the Kosovars.

Supporters of the war insist that "something must be done". Yes, many things must be done. The burden of debt must be lifted from all the Balkan economies. The richer countries must be forced to fund in full a massive and imaginative plan for the resettlement of refugees and the reconstruction of all the war-affected areas. Human rights and non-governmental organisations must be assisted in establishing respect for basic civil liberties and dialogue over national and ethnic disputes. Democracy must be built, from the bottom up, and socialists all over the world have a contribution to make to that process.

But none of these constructive interventions can start until the military one stops. The longer the war goes on, the greater the damage to be repaired. For the British anti-war movement, the challenge is to mobilise sufficient visible and vocal support to add to the pressure on Blair to retreat from military action. All those who support the call to stop the bombing, all those who oppose a ground war should be welcomed in its ranks. On that basis, local anti-war groups need to bring the arguments against the war into their own communities, as well as into the labour movement, to students, refugee groups and human rights campaigners.

While it is vital that the anti-war movement must embrace a broad spectrum of anti-war opinion, there can be no doubt that the credibility of the movement is enhanced if it clearly dissociates itself from the Milosevic regime and the atrocities it has committed. The most powerful witnesses against this war are the Serb democrats who have risked their personal safety opposing Milosevic, and now find themselves under NATO attack. In counter-posing a genuine humanism to NATO's humanitarianism-of-convenience, we must demonstrate that our commitment to human and minority rights knows no borders.

Shamefully, Tony Blair, Robin Cook and George Robertson have persistently pushed the most hawkish line among the NATO combatants. In doing so, they have been backed up by a compliant British media. Nonetheless, discontent with the war is growing, as the death toll mounts, blunder follows blunder, and it becomes apparent that the bombing has failed to meet any of its proclaimed objectives.

Voices from

no s/e.

Severian, age 26, a computer engineer in Belgrade, asks: is NATO better than Milosevic?

As someone who has been engaged in struggle against the regime of the dictator Milosevic since his teens, I don't consider myself subject to the propaganda of Serbian state television (among other reasons, because I've not watched it for over nine years). Yet I must ask the question. Is there really any difference between what Milosevic is doing in Kosovo and what NATO is doing in the whole of Yugoslavia?

Day by day, despite the laconic claim of "civilians not having been a target", most of the dead turn out to be innocent civilians – men, women and children who did no harm to anyone. In Grdelica a train was hit while crossing a bridge. The bridge still stands, but more than 20 people were killed. The centre of Aleksinac was hit, although there are no military installations for kilometres around. Then the centre of Surdulica was bombed.

Jamie Shea says that "the first two bombs hit the target but the others went somewhat astray due to dust and debris". That "somewhat" was more than kilometres, and 16 dead civilians.

NATO hit a bus which crossed a bridge on Nis-Pristina road at 1pm, peak traffic time. This bridge remained intact but more than 40 people lost their lives. Is there really any difference between the massacre in Racak, when Milosevic's special police units killed 26 people, and this one on the bridge, when NATO killed more than 40 people? Both of them claimed that the civilians were the regrettable en passant victims of attacks on military units.

My western friends will answer that "Milosevic kills civilians intentionally, while NATO, when it does, does it accidentally." Even if it may be so, does it mean anything to those who were killed, and to those who remained behind? And can it be called an accidental murder when a pilot clearly aims at the train and not the bridge (confirmed by footage taken from plane's cockpit), or when the bridge remains undamaged, and the bus gets completely destroyed? Is it really accidental that the attacks are repeated within 20 minutes, when the ambulance arrives at the spot to help the injured, and the firemen stop the fire (in Belgrade three members of special rescue units died in a second attack on the army administrative centre while aiding the victims of the first attack.)

It's clear that NATO has opted for a strategy of frightening civilians and breaking down morale. Is there any difference in strategy between that and Milosevic's terror procedures conducted against Albanian civilians? Is there a difference between burning the houses of Albanian families in Kosovo, performed in order to frighten the Albanian population, and the systematic tearing down of civilian houses, factories, bridges, TV studios and schools, conducted by NATO with the same aim upon the entire population of Yugoslavia?

Is there any difference between systematic laying off of the Albanian workers, as done by Milosevic, and destroying the factories and therefore the jobs of hundreds of thousands of citizens of Yugoslavia, as done by NATO? Is there any difference between shutting down of all independent media in Serbia which fail to comply with Milosevic's taste in reporting, and destroying the TV studios and killing the reporters and technicians whose reporting doesn't comply with the taste of the NATO strategists who pick the targets? Is there any difference in devastating Sarajevo from a safe distance, as was done under the control of Milosevic, and devastating the whole of Yugoslavia, from an even safer distance, as is done now by NATO?

For common people in these areas – there's no difference. And I repeat – this is from a man who has spent all his political life struggling against Milosevic, who bases all his political activity on the principles of western democracy, and who has tried many times, with his Albanian friends, to find some provision for a political and peaceful solution of the crisis. Jamie Shea stated that the electrical grid is a legitimate military target, because the army uses electricity as well. What's next? Poisoning of water, because the army drinks it, too? Or maybe air poisoning, because the army breathes it too?

Vlada, a student in Serbia, age 21, appeals to his fellow Europeans to stop the lunacy.

It is important to stress that Milosevic does not equal Serbs. A lot of people approve the bombing by arguing, "The Serbs are doing the 'ethnic cleansing'. So the Serbs are savages". We are not. Milosevic is!

Milosevic is the one (together with Tudjman, Izetbegovic and the rest of their company) who caused the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. Milosevic is the one who gave NATO the chance to show its power, to violate its own rules, to violate the UN

Greek judges launch attack on NATO

Twenty members of the Council of State (Greece's supreme administrative court) have issued a statement deploring the international crimes against Yugoslavia, which inaugurate a "period of lawlessness" and bring us back to the "eras of the Holy Alliance and the Axis".

"NATO's aggression against a sovereign state, unprecedented in post-war Europe, is an affront not only to the ethical principles of Greek and European civilisation, but also to the fundamental precepts of international law...

"Behind the scenes, the NATO military alliance appeared in a self-appointed role, and without having - nor could it have had - any competence to become involved in this matter, having first dictated an insolent ultimatum disputing the very sovereignty of Yugoslavia, then launched an aggressive war against this state, demanding that it conform to NATO demands. This attack is accompanied by the revival of dark propaganda that attempts to exploit the misery of the refugees to draw public attention away from the violation of international law."

the other Serbia

charter, to test its newest weapons in the heart of Europe, to celebrate it's 50th anniversary with fireworks and bloodshed! Milosevic is the one that gave NATO the chance to destroy half of my country, to kill a lot of my friends. What are they guilty of?

We have been fighting against him and his totalitarian regime. It is a damn hard job.

Milosevic's most important power is the power of public opinion. The only way we can get rid of this regime is to weaken that power. Just when we were up to making another big movement – NATO decided to kill us all to solve the humanitarian catastrophe! All of our ten years efforts were erased in one day. Now the people are united against NATO, which was absolutely predictable.

And while everyone is justifiably furious because of the non-selective brutality of NATO, Milosevic is as irresponsible as usual, and no devastation concerns him while sitting in his comfortable pill-box 40 metres under the ground.



Photo: Ed Hall

Hit the streets to stop the war.

The usual NATO justification for the bombardment is "We couldn't just sit and watch Milosevic doing the cleansing. We had to react." Then, it all goes according to the old logic: "if all you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail." NATO's aim does not exist. It is simply that nobody seems to be able to think of another response to perceived problems in the Balkan.

Let's face the concrete consequences of the NATO attacks. Hundreds of thousands more refugees, many dead civilians, including those killed in the NATO massacres, many Serbian families homeless, the entire Kosovo region devastated (there is almost no more Pristina to speak of), no home for the refugees to return, horrible memories that will never go away (mistreatment from all sides: Milosevic's forces, NATO, KLA, while nobody admits any wrongdoing), half of Serbia destroyed, complete economic chaos, more than 200,000 men and women left with no jobs, devastation of ancient monasteries and churches, likely ecological catastrophe (spreading out of Serbia as well, since poisons do not know borders), the last seeds of democracy abolished in Serbia (pictures of Milosevic appeared on Belgrade's main square for the first time in ten years).

Are there any positive consequence of the bomb attacks? No. So, why does NATO still keep bombing Serbia? As long as air strikes continue nobody has to think about what is to follow. Finally, NATO seems to be thinking about sending the ground troops without permission of Yugoslav authorities. That would be interpreted as the occupation of the territory of sovereign county, which means complete military mobilisation inside Serbia.

Other Balkan countries, even some non-Balkan ones, could become involved. Europe would be burning, saturated with blood.

What is the way out? NATO has to declare a cease-fire and give a chance to negotiations. Ten years of negotiations are better than ten days of war! After the bombardment stops, the opposition in Serbia will be able to think and to act. Several billion dollars is the cost of the NATO campaign so far. If only one per cent of that had been invested in the democratic forces in Serbia, there would have been no crisis in Kosovo.

This is the tragedy of two nations – Albanian and Serb. The Albanians and the Serbs are on the same side, both are innocent, both are suffering, both are being killed. The murderers are on the other side. The lunatics who do not care about human suffering, but only about their own position. The lunatics who are leading the world straight to the abyss. The beginning of the 21st century! Miserable!

We've been fighting for Yugoslavia to become a part of Europe, but not the Europe we see these days. Not the savage Europe controlled by the media and conducted by lunatics, but the real Europe, consisting of all of you and all of us, the people of good sense.

- The full versions of the articles by Severian and Vlada are available, with much other useful information, at the *Free Serbia – other voices from Serbia* website: http://freehosting.at.webjump.com/am/aman-bre-webjump/

Time to stop a dirty war

LLB interviewed Alice Mahon MP, chair of the Committee for Peace in the Balkans, and the only British politician to witness the NATO attack at first hand.

First, tell us about your trip to Belgrade.

It got quite a bit of coverage in the tabloids. And not too hostile. Some people ignored it, like the *Guardian*. There was a rotten piece in the *Mirror*, but the reporter who came with me was very pro-war. She heard what she wanted to hear. It was very difficult getting into Serbia because the airports are closed, so I had to go from Budapest. It was a five and a half hour drive to Novi Sad. They'd blown up two of the major bridges that carried the water and the power supplies to the hospital. I saw extensive damage.

On the one remaining bridge, which has also now been blown up, people were acting as a human shield every night. There are about seventeen different ethnic groups in Novi Sad. They were all represented. Lots of them in national dress, singing, generally having a good time. There was not much traffic on the roads. Only essential vehicles. Very few lorries. It was really eerie. But we were travelling during air raid time.

I'm not surprised now that they've hit targets by mistake. Because I remember looking at the Ministry of the Interior that had been destroyed by Cruise missiles. The maternity hospital was so near. All the windows were shattered and I just thought what a reckless thing to do.

They took us to Tupria, which is a small town that NATO were not acknowledging that they'd hit. And I've not seen it on any list. It clearly had been hit. I wonder how many more? I met a dentist and his wife who had managed to crawl out of the wreckage of their house after it was destroyed. There was a great big bomb crater in the middle of the orchard. The blossom was still on the trees. It was funny looking at it: the magnolia was all out at the time. It had survived but the house had not.

They were not Milosevic supporters. I did ask the question all the time: did they know what was happening to the Albanians? They weren't all in denial. Some were. This man felt for them, but didn't see what he could do. His wife was sorry because she was homeless too now.

There are terrible things going on inside Kosova. There are atrocities being committed. We will see an increase in that. Civilians are on the receiving end of one side or another. It's a dirty war.

What about when you came back? What was the response of people in the Labour Party?

I'm beginning to think I must be a bit of a dragon. There are some people who don't dare take me on. There were others who were embarrassed to be seen speaking to me.

More people are speaking to me now though. There's more uncertainty, more unease. The vast majority of the PLP who supported the war thought it was going to last three days, and nobody was going to get hurt. They'd not read the Rambouillet accord. They allowed the foreign office to fool them.

Did Blair's hawkishness surprise you?

Yes. I'm still bewildered. Robin Cook and George Robertson: they shocked me. We are getting all this belligerence here. Yet in America there's far more caution. There's a macho arrogance; a disregard for any human being who happens to live in Serbia. They must have got themselves into a mindset that has every single one of the ten and a half million Serbs as a Milosevic.

Why is NATO doing this?

It's a major superpower thing. In the Rambouillet accord it talks about running Yugoslavia on market lines. They will brook no different system. There is now a NATO plan to get nearer the Russian border. They want to smash Russia as any kind of a force. All those former bits of the Soviet Union can be bought. They all have something that has been underdeveloped. Behind NATO, behind the Tomahawk missiles come the men with the big carpet bags. The generals are the ones who mark out the territory for them.

It is about NATO's survival. They are already looking weakened to the rest of the world. This is a tiny little country. We have had eight weeks of bombing and where are they? What have they done? They have created 750,000 refugees, another 500,000 milling up and down in Kosova. They have wrecked a modern European country. For what? The greatest military machine in the world has not saved a single life. The Danube was a clean river. They were proud of their river. It was a working river but they kept it relatively clean. They promenade on the banks. Now they can't believe what's happened to it. They reckon there's two hundred billion pounds worth of damage been done to it. The place to watch is Macedonia. There's a hatred building up towards the Kosovars.

There are violent demonstrations in Montenegro. You could get civil war spreading all over the Balkans if they send the ground troops in. If there isn't a ground war they will get more ferocious with the bombing. We can expect to see a lot more people die. Where do they go from here? How on earth are they going to get out of it? They are in a deep pit. I don't know what the end is unless there's a diplomatic solution.

And if they win? What does it say to the rest of the world? The Chinese are going to close ranks, along with Russia, many former Soviet Republics, and India. That means a new cold war.

War is good for business

US legislators may not have much confidence in President Clinton but they rarely rebuff the demands of the military-industrial complex. Having refused to approve of the war on Yugoslavia at the end of April, the House of Representatives voted just a week later to give the US government twice as much money as it had originally asked for – a total of $13 billion on top of the existing US military budget. At least the corporate sector is having a good war, then.

Farringdon road follies

Mike Marqusee takes a sideways glance at British media war coverage.

The Sun bellowed ...

"Blair has seized control of NATO and made himself a giant of the free world," bellowed the *Sun*, whose daily fulminations against "Evil Slobba" and "Mrs Slob" are among the most bizarrely comic masterpieces of self-parody ever to appear in the mainstream press. True to form, the *Sun* praised Straw's "hard line on refugees" days before splashing Cherie's tears for these same refugees over four pages.

All rather predictable. But what about the *Guardian*? What has distressed the paper's captive legion of left-wing readers is not so much the editorials – as sloppily argued and ill-informed as they've always been – but the way the editorial line has skewed the news coverage.

If you've relied entirely on the *Guardian*, you'll be in the dark about the causes and course of the war. The contents of the Rambouillet Agreement and the particularities of the Yugoslav negotiating position have been veiled in silence. There was no mention of Mary Robinson's comment on possible war crimes charges against NATO – though Robinson was previously very much a *Guardian* favourite. Coverage of the East Timor massacres has been minimised and buried deep inside the international pages – distracting from the obvious comparison to Balkans. There was no report of Vuk Draskovic's peace offer (which preceded by two days his sacking/resignation). Maggie O'Kane actually appeared to interview Draskovic on the same day his proposal was being telecast by Sky News and CNN, yet failed to refer to it. The *Independent* put the story on its front page that day.

The only vote taken in Parliament on the war was not deemed worthy of a report. Apart from the letters page, it would be hard to find any evidence in the paper of the existence of an anti-war movement in this country.

That the by-lines for the major political stories about the war are usually Brussels or Washington speaks volumes about the paper's bias.

Then there are the columnists. Now that Mark Steel has got the boot, the balance tilts heavily towards supporters of the war. In a revealing comment, Jonathan Freedland welcomed the start of the "war of a generation" as a chance for the USA to jettison "the Vietnam syndrome" – apparently unaware that this "syndrome" may have saved millions of lives in Central America and Africa over the last quarter of a century.

What we've seen at the *Guardian* in recent weeks is the old liberal imperialism reborn as soundbite humanitarianism – but still reeking of the smug arrogance of its predecessors.

Yes, the *Guardian* published Pilger, after some delay, then rubbished him – though Diplomatic Editor Ian Black's attempt to discredit Pilger rebounded when he inadvertently revealed that he didn't know what was in either the Rambouillet or Dayton Accords.

Despite the poor performance of nearly all sections of the media (honourable exceptions, Robert Fisk of the *Independent* and John Humphrys of BBC's *Today* programme), the NUJ itself has been the only union to take any kind of action on the war. General Secretary John Foster chaired the media workers against the war meeting held in a packed Westminster Central Hall. The union has condemned the bombing of the Serb TV studio and urged members to resist official propaganda from either side.

● If you want to complain about TV coverage contact: BBC 0181-734 8000; ITV 0171-833 3000; Channel 4, 0171-396 4444; Channel 5, 0345-050 505.

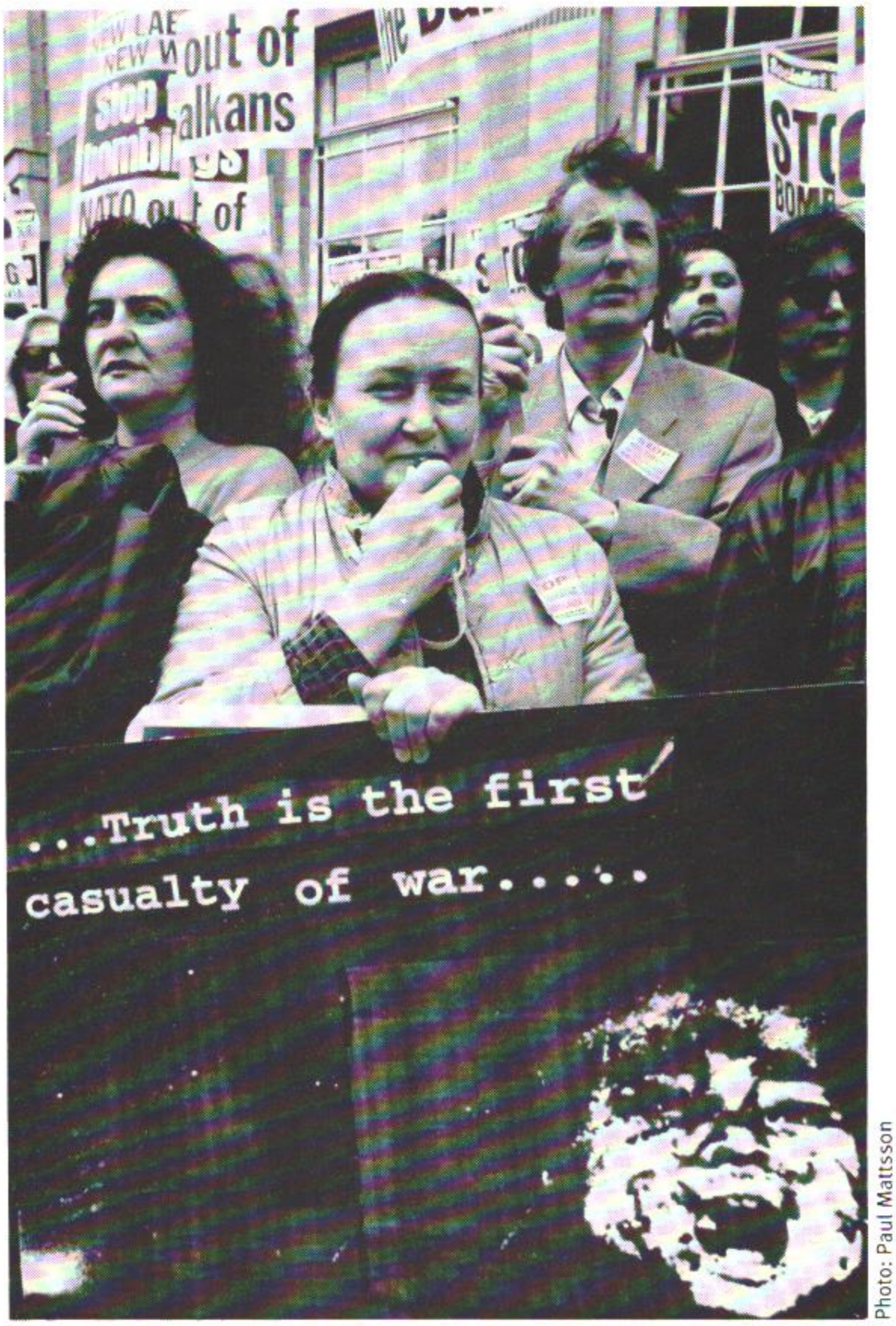


Photo: Paul Mattsson

Picket of the BBC.

Why NATO went to war

Erkan Gok writing from London on behalf of the Turkish Party of Labour (Emegin Partisi), looks at NATO's real intentions.

In Turkey our party works against the horrors of national chauvinism and its modern corollary, "ethnic cleansing". In Britain we are part of the Turkish and Kurdish refugee community, and while we continue to support the socialist and human rights struggle in Turkey, we also recognise that to live in Britain is to join the movement here.

NATO's war in the Balkans has thrown into stark relief the dangerous state of world play as we approach the millennium. In the 1990s, world imperialism made propaganda on the "collapse of communism". However, a problem remained – how to justify the continued existence of NATO? A new role emerged, policing the world to keep it safe for western capital. This role had to be tested in order to gain acceptance by powers other than the United States. The war against Iraq was one crucial test; the war in the Balkans is another. In each instance the USA has presented itself as leading a moral crusade – the enemy is no longer communism, but "evil". The rallying call is for "human rights." Who can possibly align themselves against such a cause?

Can it really be true that NATO is concerned about "ethnic cleansing" in Kosova? If NATO is really so concerned, why has it closed its eyes to equally or more horrific ethnic cleansing taking place elsewhere? What, for example, has NATO ever done to stop the genocidal attacks on the 20 million-strong Kurdish population of Turkey? We are not expecting NATO to feel sympathy for them or to start bombing Turkey. But when the reality is that NATO, through its programme of military and economic aid to the Turkish regime, has actually supported these attacks, then the real intentions of the western military alliance become clear.

All the evidence shows that NATO will support any regime, however abusive of human rights, as long as it remains compliant with the west's political, economic and military interests, and its corresponding need for regional stability.

For the western powers and their big business backers, this war serves various functions – as a testing-ground and showcase for the latest military technology and increasing demand for weapons. Never mind that the vast majority of victims are innocent civilians, and that "mistakes" are an almost daily occurrence, the bombing of the village of Korisa being only one of the most horrific. As with all wars, this war also serves the function of diverting public attention from domestic crises. For Clinton, attacking first Iraq and now Kosova have enormously helped his standing when he looked on the verge of being sunk by sex scandals.

Blair, too, has domestic issues from which he wishes to divert attention. At the same time as he poses as the champion of those fleeing from persecution in Kosova, he is planning to bring in legislation attacking the rights and benefits of asylum seekers in Britain. Unemployment, especially in the north and in inner cities, remains at high levels, and goes hand-in-hand with the processes of privatisation, deregulation, casualisation of labour and cuts in social spending which match the priorities of the finance and service sectors now dominating the economy. As social tensions rise, and many of the most oppressed feel without a voice, so racism and racist attacks increase. Tony Blair far from addressing these problems is either exacerbating or ignoring them. He sees his leadership role as on the world stage, directing armies – when in fact he is a small player in Clinton's pocket. Behind Blair is the British ruling class, which sees this war as an opportunity to increase their say in the world arena, so diminished since the days of the Empire.

For almost ten years, the Serbian regime's reign of terror has been shedding blood. This is not a new problem, although it is apparently newly discovered by NATO. In fact the NATO bombing has clearly facilitated what the Serbian reactionary forces wanted to do in Kosova, and has helped cause the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Kosovars. The aid given by international bodies or individual governments to the refugees is pitifully insufficient, and a drop in the ocean compared to the amount being spent on prosecuting the war. Thousands of innocent people cannot see an end to their suffering. The war, far from solving anything, has increased problems across the entire region. Now they are faced with the threat of possible new regional wars, as well as increased poverty and oppression.

The situation is grim, and there are no easy solutions. However, as socialists of whatever nationality or origin, we have a duty to make our voices heard in defence of real human rights and against the cynical hypocrisy of NATO.

We must demand the immediate withdrawal of NATO forces from the region. At the same time we must defend the right of the people of Kosova to self-determination on the basis of equality and freedom for all the peoples of the region. We must support all genuine initiatives which are guided by those principles.

Our immediate priority must be to help build an active, united and non-sectarian anti-war movement. The stopping of this and future wars depends on the opposition shown by the peoples of the entire world.

A case for reparations

After 50 days of bombing, economists believe that more than $100 billion of damage has already been inflicted on all parts of Yugoslavia, a figure six times greater than its annual gross domestic product. Vojvodina President Bosko Perosevic estimates that destruction in his province amounts to $3.3 billion. Included in this calculation are seven bridges across the Danube, one airport, oil refineries, petro-chemical works, a nitrogen fertiliser factory, an aircraft factory and a dozen public buildings.

Give Kosova *real* support

Bob Myers, Workers' Aid for Kosova, reports on how socialists can help convoys planning to send food to Kosova.

Before mass "ethnic cleansing" started we worked with Kosova unions, getting supplies into Kosova. When the situation changed, we still wanted to get aid through but now it looked impossible.

We prepared a convoy, but the rapidly changing situation made planning difficult. We heard the mining community of Mitrovica still survived so we thought of trying to reach them. Then Mitrovica was "ethnically cleansed". It was hard to know how to help the Kosovars oppose Milosevic and act against the cynical exploitation of their suffering by NATO for its own ends.

Some people went to Albania with several trucks of aid. They found one leader of the Kosova miners' union but most of the leaders are missing. Our team met with members of the education unions from Albania and Kosova who have issued a detailed appeal for educational equipment (available from us).

While the lorries were in Albania, members of Workers' Aid and Trade Unions for Kosova met with Agim Hyseni, President of the Kosova Education Union, visiting Britain to address the Scottish TUC. Agim said the priority was to get food to communities inside Kosova, some of whom were resisting, but hunger is a great problem. The complete "ethnic cleansing" of the Kosova would be a blow to refugees' hopes of returning. Agim explained that if we took food to northern Albania then Kosovars would get it across the border, so we are planning two food convoys for Kosova. The first will leave Britain in June and the second in July. The second convoy will also take aid for refugees, particularly educational equipment.

We want to give these convoys maximum publicity, with meetings along the route. In Britain a convoy team will visit different towns. In the peace plan sent to the Russians by NATO it is made clear, despite mass murder and the expulsion of a million people, that NATO seeks a deal leaving Milosevic in power and in overall control of Kosova! NATO even promises that it will disarm the Kosovars. Of course NATO promises that it will defend them – just like the UN in Srebrenica.

The destruction and killing in Serbia by NATO is not to secure a "just" peace but in pursuit of another rotten deal in the Balkans that satisfies the great powers but ignores the democratic rights of both Serbs and Albanians. To show our solidarity with all the victims of Milosevic and NATO we plan to take aid to the Serbian miners of Aleksinac, whose town was hit by "stray" cruise missiles.

There can be no lasting peace in the Balkans without defeating the Serbian regime, its politics of "ethnic cleansing" and the paramilitary gangs of fascists it has nurtured. This is not NATO's aim any more than it was the UN's in Bosnia. However difficult, this task falls to the working class, to trade unions, to socialists, to everyone who hates racism and ethnic division.

The Kosovar people are fighting back but the task is impossible by themselves. Many of them still look to NATO. Let us show them another ally, one without ulterior motives. Please help our convoys of solidarity.

- Market Forces presents *Taking Sides* – a play about resisting ethnic division from Bosnia to Kosova. Oval House Theatre (Oval Tube), 7.45pm each night until 12th June, tickets: £7.50/£4.50, 0171-582 7680. Half proceeds to Workers Aid convoy to Kosova.

Committee for Peace in the Balkans

National Demonstration
5th June
1:30pm
Victoria Embankment
London

LOCAL GROUPS

Birmingham Committee for Peace in the Balkans: c/o West Midlands CND 54 Allison St, B5 5TH, 0121-643 4617 wmcndall.gn.apc.org
Bolton Coalition Against War in the Balkans: Malcolm Pittock, 3 James Ave Bolton, BL2 6HX, 01204-522 839
Cambridge Against NATO's War in the Balkans: c/o Arjuna, 12 Mill Road Cambridge, CB1 2AD, 01954-719644 gr10009@cam.ac.uk
Colchester Stop the War Campaign: 01206-540 447
Coventry Stop The War Committee: Cllr Dave Nellist 01203-229 311 dave@dnell.demon.co.uk
Ealing Against the War: 0181-567 1170 or 0181-571 5019
Haringey Comittee to Stop the War in the Balkans: 0181-801 7841 or 0181-808 3909
Islington Committee for Peace in the Balkans: c/o 126B St Paul's Road, London N1 2LR, 0956-896110
Leicester Workers Aid: 0116-283 2062 117 Ottowa Road, Leicester, LE1 2EN
Oxford Stop the War Coalition: 01865-557 373
Medway Committee For Peace In The Balkans: Chas Berry, 01634-722 912 chas@iskra99.freeserve.co.uk
Nottingham Stop the War Campaign: Mike Craven, mpc@Cs.Nott.ac.uk
Sheffield Committee Against the Bombing of Yugoslavia: PO Box 707 Sheffield S1, p.ward@sheffield.ac.uk
South Essex Committee for Peace in the Balkans: timsneller@compuserve.com
Waltham Forest Committee Against the War: 69a Melville Road, London E17 6QT 0181-520 9347 ake@jarden.demon.co.uk
Warwick Against the War: Dave Ayrton Department of History, University of Warwick, Coventry D.J.Ayrton@warwick.ac.uk
Woodford and Wanstead Committee for Peace in the Balkans: Graham Bush, 3 Grosvenor Road, London E11 2EW, 0181-989 8153

- If your group is not here please tell us. Email llb@labournet.org.uk

Committee for Peace in the Balkans c/o Alice Mahon MP, House of Commons London SW1A 0AA 0171-275 0164 committee@peaceinbalkans.freeserve.co.uk www.peaceinbalkans.freeserve.co.uk

Rambouillet and after

Just what separates Milosevic from NATO? Mike Marqusee examines the changing negotiating positions.

The Rambouillet Agreement was presented to Milosevic as a take-it-or-get bombed ultimatum. It provided not only for the immediate military occupation of Kosova by NATO, but also for the extension of that occupation to the rest of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (ie. Serbia and Montenegro) at NATO's will.

Appendix B: Status of Multi-National Military Implementation Force stipulates: "NATO personnel shall enjoy, together with their vehicles, vessels, aircraft, and equipment, free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY including associated airspace and territorial waters. This shall include, but not be limited to, the right of bivouac, manoeuvre, billet, and utilisation of any areas or facilities as required for support, training, and operations." Appendix B also guarantees NATO personnel immunity from criminal, civil or financial liabilities as well control of radio and television broadcasts.

Responding to the ultimatum on 23rd March (the day before the bombing started), the Serbian National Assembly rejected the demand for military occupation of Kosova, and called on the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN to facilitate a peaceful diplomatic settlement.

The Assembly Resolution called for negotiations leading toward "a political agreement on a wide-ranging autonomy for Kosova and Metohija (the official name for the province), with the securing of a full equality of all citizens and ethnic communities and with respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ... The Serbian Parliament is ready to review the size and character of the international presence in Kosmet (Kosovo/Metohija)."

The Assembly also condemned the withdrawal of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission – which had just been ordered by the US, in preparation for the bombing! "There is not a single reason for this but to put the withdrawal into the service of blackmail and threats to our country."

The essentials of the March 23rd Resolution were carried on the major wire services, but appeared almost nowhere in the mainstream press in either Britain or the US.

On April 22rd, after meeting with Milosevic. Russian envoy (and, previously, a Washington favourite) Viktor Chernomyrdin announced that "Mr. Milosevic had agreed to an 'international presence in Kosovo under United Nations auspices' to implement any political settlement and had agreed in principle to 'the possibility of an international presence led by the UN' if NATO calls off its air campaign". The US and Britain instantly rejected the proposal and stepped up the bombing of civilian targets (Serb TV was attacked that day).

In a UPI interview on 30th April Milosevic called for a "political process" and said that "The UN can have a huge mission in Kosovo if it wishes"; he would accept a "UN peacekeeping force" with "self-defence weapons" but not "an occupation" of the sort demanded in the "Clinton Administration diktat" and at Rambouillet. He also accepted a reduction in Yugoslav forces to the pre-bombing level of 10-11,000, "return of all refugees, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation", "free access for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Red Cross" and continuing negotiations for "the widest possible autonomy for Kosovo within Serbia". On 6th May, the Group of Eight (the G7 plus Russia) issued a statement which the western media claimed amounted to a Russian acceptance of NATO conditions. In fact, the statement called for an end to violence and repression, withdrawal of (unspecified) "military, police and paramilitary forces", "deployment in Kosovo of effective international civil and security presences, endorsed and adopted by the United Nations", a political process toward the establishment of an interim framework agreement providing for substantial self-government for Kosova "taking full account of the Rambouillet accords and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and other countries of the region", and the demilitarisation of the KLA.

The main substantive difference between the G8 proposals and the March 23rd Serb Assembly resolution was the call for "establishment of an interim administration for Kosovo to be decided by the Security Council" – which had previously been barred from any role by Washington.

Despite the G8 statement, State Department official James Rubin insisted, "Nobody in the United States or any of the NATO countries envisages the United Nations Secretariat and the blue-helmet peacekeeping unit to play any role in the peacekeeping force".

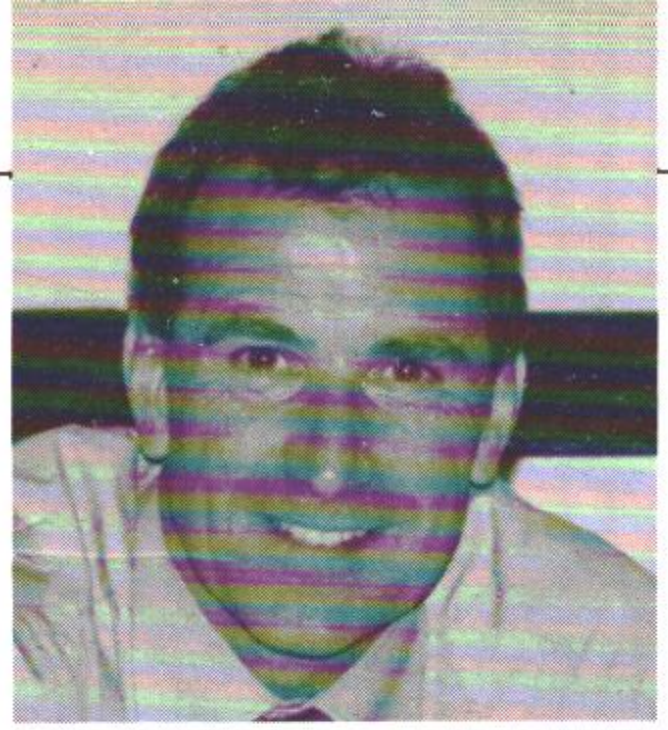
● Based on information compiled by Noam Chomsky.

The Bosnian model

Nearly four years after the Dayton Accords were signed, a vast gulf stretches between their proclaimed objectives and the reality on the ground in Bosnia. All integrationist aspects of the Accords remain a dead letter and ethnic cleansing has been effectively legitimised by the maintenance in power of its perpetrators. Returning refugees are firmly directed away from their homes towards a suitable 'ethnic majority' area.. When refugees do try to return home they are refused security.

Before the conflict, one-third of Bosnia's families were ethnically mixed. Today all politics is deeply ethnically divided. "There is no independent judiciary, no rule of law, no economic activity to speak of," one western official observed recently. Cronyism and corruption are widespread, much of it stemming from the presence of a well-heeled international military force in an otherwise destitute country.

"They create desolation and call it peace," Tacitus once observed. Is this the model the west is preparing for the future of Kosova?



THE **ALAN SIMPSON** COLUMN

Don't let the welfare reform debate get lost in the tumult about how many "Labour rebels" there are. Of course it was important that upwards of 100 Labour MPs either voted for the amendments to retain Incapacity Benefit and the Severe Disablement Allowance or abstained. Without this, there wouldn't have been the news coverage given to fundamental issues of welfare reform and we would not be in for such an interesting summer. But there are more seismic implications in what has just taken place.

The two-day debate (originally supposed to have been squeezed through in the dead hours of Monday night) was a triumph of collaboration between MPs and the disabilities movement. It began some 18 months ago when "reform" proposals were first being mooted and has carried on through all stages of the current Bill. Those looking to celebrate a back-bench revolution would be well advised to look at the tapestry of consultation, lobbying and quiet representation which preceded the vote in Parliament. A great deal of justifiable recognition has already been given to the work put in by Lynne Jones, Roger Berry and Audrey Wise. They would be the first, however, to point out that the triumph came from a much broader base. Frank Field, Gwyneth Dunwoody, Jim Cousins and later, Tom Clarke, helped transform this into the powerful engine of a whole party campaign.

The left can claim to have become the genuinely open and inclusive part of the Labour Party. The "modernisers" – now lost within the self-congratulatory cleverness of manipulating the machinery of government and obsessed with tight, centralised control – forced the middle ground of Labour MPs into a position where supporting some form of amendment became the only choice left to them.

'This is the biggest revolt a Labour Government has faced since 1929. The significance lies not just in numbers. This was a triumph not of Labour's "usual suspects". It was the re-awakening of Labour's usual values.'

The writing was on the wall when the twelve major disabilities organisations walked out of the Government's consultative body the week before. These groups – the RNIB, RNID, RADAR and the like – are not impetuous or controversial by nature. They are not part of the Fourth International. They were, though, thoroughly fed up with "consultations", which had systematically ignored all their central criticisms of the Welfare Reform Bill. They had had enough of being patronised to know when to call it a day.

Be under no illusions about what will follow. We face a long summer in which the disabilities lobby will turn its attention onto individual MPs in the constituencies they represent. All this will take place while Labour Lords lead a cavalry charge of amendments designed to put universal entitlements and the contributory principle back into the centre of the Welfare State agenda. Out of such contradictions are today's politics being written.

In what may turn out to be a rough-and-tumble few months, it is worth summarising what the disputed policy areas were. The first was restricting entitlement to Incapacity Benefit to those with National Insurance contributions for one of the last two years and means-testing it for anyone with a works pension of over £50 a week. As well as being a disincentive to work, this would (on the Government's own projections) make a quarter of a million disabled people worse off.

Abolishing Severe Disablement Allowance would have taken non means-tested, non-contributory benefits mainly from women excluded from the labour market because of care responsibilities. And scrapping Widows Pensions would have broken the link for whole generations who saw NI contributions as something which offered a safety net support for their partner in the event of bereavement.

The fundamentals of the reform debate are, though, much simpler. This battle is about Labour's current obsession with pursuing the Tory legacy of means-testing from cruelty into absurdity. Even the Tories are coming to see that this gave them, ultimately, no cash savings and no public support. It does, however, play the poor off against the destitute and the more disabled off against the less. Why, as one group asked, should Labour deem it OK to take 50p in the pound from a disabled person with a works pension, when it will only tax the richest in the land at 40p in the pound?

This was the point around which traditional Labour began to re-assert itself. It is about redistribution from rich to poor, not from the poor to the disabled.

A year ago Harriet Harman came out with a joint statement with the All Party Disability Group. She said simply that "further savings would come from helping disabled people get jobs rather than reducing benefit entitlement". Those who voted for the Labour amendments took exactly the same view.

This is the biggest revolt a Labour Government has faced since 1929. The significance lies not just in numbers. This was a triumph not of Labour's "usual suspects". It was the re-awakening of Labour's usual values.

New Labour puts the boot

Richard Rieser, Alliance for Inclusive Education, outlines why disabled people are opposing the benefit cuts.

New Labour is falling out with disabled people and their movement again by seeking to force through cuts in benefit entitlement for disabled people, to be redistributed to more "severely disabled" young people. However, the oppression is not greater just because you have a more significant impairment. The cost of being disabled may be just as great for those with "less severe impairments".

They aim to prevent anyone who has not paid National Insurance during the last two years from claiming Incapacity Benefit. So unemployed people – even if they have paid NI for years – could be denied the right to incapacity benefit if they develop an impairment.

Incapacity Benefit will be means tested: anyone on a pension of more than £50 a week will be denied benefit. These moves deny the extra costs of being disabled in our society. The Government should focus on the causes of disablement – prejudice and discriminatory barriers – rather than attack victims of that prejudice.

Under pressure from the Disabled People's Movement – the true political voice of the disabled – the Tory Government carried out a survey establishing that there are 6.2m disabled adults; two-thirds are unemployed, their cost of living is a third more than average; and more disabled people live in poverty than any other group. Hence the Disability Living Allowance, introduced to compensate people for the extra costs of being disabled.

The barriers disabling us remain: inaccessible transport, services, housing. Segregated schools lead to low self-esteem and educational failure. There is a lack of communication for blind people, deaf people or those with learning difficulties.

All this and more already occurs despite the Disability Discrimination Act. Only one in six disabled people win discrimination cases at employment tribunals. The Disabled People's Movement was promised in New Labour's election manifesto comprehensive civil rights legislation. They set up a Task Force – due to report this July – on how this was to be accomplished. The signs of this becoming law are not good. We will need support from the trade union and labour movement to force the Government to honour its commitment.

Margaret Hodge, Minster for Disabled People, who chairs the Task Force, cannot grasp the fundamental idea that disablement is a social oppression like racism or sexism – nothing to do with our impairments or loss of function, and everything to do with the barriers that prevent our equal participation in society. At a Fabian Conference on Disability she announced the Government would be running a publicity campaign for hearts and minds, to see the person and not the disability. This patronising nonsense is firmly rooted in the individual tragedy /charity model of disability and runs counter to a comprehensive civil rights approach. Yet in the USA the Americans with Disabilities Act – which is far stronger than the DDA – was introduced fully over seven years from 1990-97 and has been successful. It introduced comprehensive legislation and 80% of employers welcome it. What is New Labour afraid of? What price social inclusion now?

Give your support to the Disabled People's Movement in their fight to prevent benefit cuts, introduce comprehensive civil rights legislation and stop patronising images. We need higher taxation of the haves to support the have nots, not benefit cuts.

THE FACTS

- Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) – abolished for new claimants who have not paid NI contributions in the previous two years.
- Losers: 16,000 people disabled people annually, 10,000 of them women
- Savings: £310m in first year, rising to £380m over time

Incapacity Benefit (IB) – contribution conditions restricted and benefit reduced for disabled people with occupational/personal pensions.

- Losers: 45,000 in the first year, rising to 335,000 after ten years, average loss £328.00 pw; £370m first year, then £3700m after 19 years
- Savings amount to some £33/4b over 20 years. This is on top of savings from cuts made by the last government, estimated to reach some £313b by 2000.
- Additional expenditure: £885m

Two welcome provisions:

- The extension of benefits to disabled children
- Allowing disabled 16-19 year olds (16-25 in certain circumstances) to access Incapacity Benefit without meeting the contribution conditions.
- Overall the Bill's provisions disadvantage more people than they help.
- While existing claimants are not affected, currently disabled people will be if they stop work later because their condition deteriorates.
- While more women go out to work and therefore build up eligibility, they are still the majority of those staying at home or working part time to care for dependents, so cannot build up the same levels of contribution.

The Bill's supporters claim people who would have got SDA can always claim Income Support (IS) instead and many current recipients top-up their SDA with IS anyway.

- IS is a means-tested benefit and many will not claim if they have to go through a means-test.
- The IS of anyone who has more than £33,000 savings is reduced.
- Anyone living with a working spouse/partner is not eligible for IS.
- Administrative costs are high as every change in circumstance has to be reported and recorded.

The Disability Benefits Consortium representing well over 500 disability organisations throughout the UK, the Child Poverty Action Group, National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Carers National Association are totally opposed to the abolition of Severe Disablement Allowance and the proposed changes to Incapacity Benefit. We believe they are unjust and will cause hardship to many thousands of disabled people, hitting severely disabled women especially hard.

- Further information from: Lorna Reith (Disability Alliance) 0171-247 8759, Duleep Alirajah (RNID) 0171-296 8000 or Laura Jacobs (ENIB) 0171-388 1266.

into disabled people

Mike Ridgeley reports on the widespread backbench revolt against the cuts.

The Labour MPs' revolt against the disability benefits sections of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill is unlikely to stop cuts to Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance. New Labour's notion of welfare reform is to carry on from where the Tories left off, hitting the "undeserving poor", giving limited, conditional support to the "deserving poor", and making means-testing universal.

However, the scale of the revolt suggests that it might be possible to make more headway against this so-called "modernisation" of the welfare benefits system.

Key sections of the Bill are bound to be defeated in the Lords, which will put the proposals under even more scrutiny when they return to the Commons. Much will then depend on the ability of disability groups, unions and other organisations to mobilise a coherent campaign to stop the proposed cuts.

The arguments are simple. Incapacity Benefit (IB) is a national insurance-based contributory benefit. If it is now to be means-tested and subject to new eligibility criteria, what is the point of National Insurance? For although a regressive form of taxation (the rich pay no more N.I. than middle income earners), it is in most people's minds the cornerstone of the contract between themselves and the state.

The IB proposals will hit disabled people's rights to income, regardless of whether they've paid NI for 30 or more years. Yet, as Darling keeps pointing out, it is an income replacement benefit. But the proposals will deny benefit to anyone with a poor employment record over the past two years – why two years? Where is the logic? The proposals also penalise those whose occupational pensions and other income brings them up to half average male earnings: again, where is the logic?

As for Severe Disablement Allowance, the Bill will primarily hit women who have been out of the labour market because of family or other caring responsibilities: so much for the Government's so-called Carers Strategy.

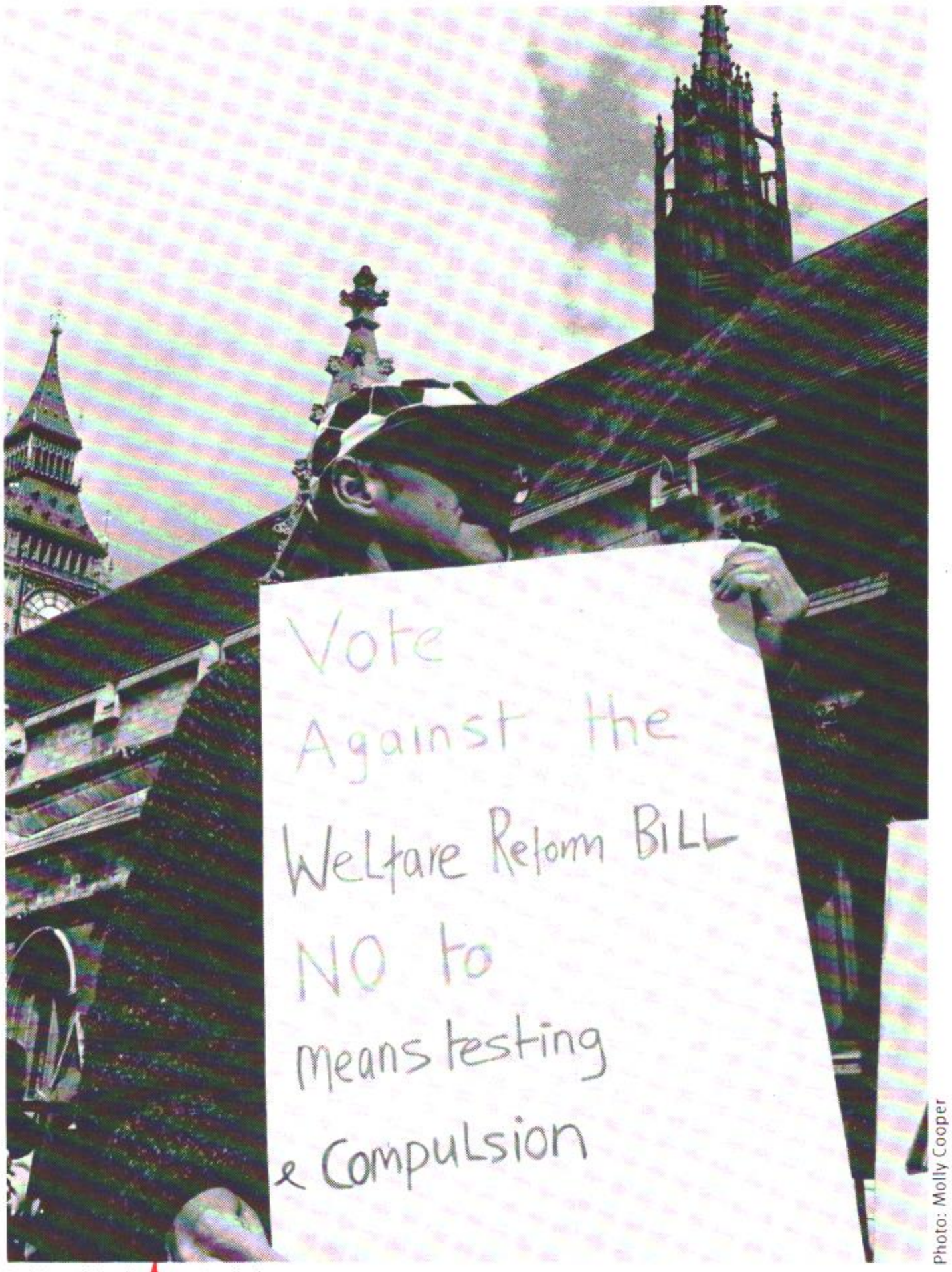


Photo: Molly Cooper

Lobby of Parliament 17/5/99

The Bill takes away from disabled people their "lifetime" awards of Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance – now everyone will be up for review, including the terminally ill. And it takes away the right to lifetime bereavement pensions of widows aged 45 or over.

It's hard to see how these cuts "modernise" the welfare benefits system: the term can only be understood in Treasury-speak, because the Bill will cut the benefits budget by £1.2bn. In exchange, other parts of the Bill will benefit specific groups of disabled people to the tune of just £90m. The cuts will force hundreds of thousands more disabled people onto means-tested benefits. This is all totally objectionable, and even establishment disability organisations have felt unable to continue their involvement with DSS ministers.

Disability campaigners have pointed out that the severest critics of the Tories' previous cuts in disability benefits included Gordon Brown, David Blunkett, Margaret Beckett, and Angela Eagle (the minister currently responsible for administering such abominations as the Social Fund): Eagle even wrote a pamphlet calling for an end to means-testing, but of course that was in pre-modern days.

Smash this cruel Bill

John Stewart, Treasurer of the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, calls for Labour Party members to put pressure on their MPs to oppose the Asylum Bill when next voted on in the House.

The Immigration and Asylum Bill has now finished in Committee and is awaiting its Report and Third Reading in the Commons before going to the House of Lords. As Neil Gerrard states on the facing page, no substantive changes have been made to the Bill in Committee – Government loyalists ensured that only amendments supported by the Home Office were allowed through.

The Bill will deter people fleeing war and oppression from coming to the UK by increasing the obstacles they face in their journey here and then isolating and impoverishing those who do make it. It will also make the lives of the settled black community more difficult by increasing the potential for discrimination. Asylum seekers will be dispersed around the country to "designated accommodation" where they could easily face hostility from people not used to these new arrivals. Social security payments to those asylum seekers who have managed to claim asylum under the new, more difficult, conditions will be ended and replaced by food vouchers, topped up by cash payments of around £1 per day. The Carriers Liability legislation imposing fines upon people transporting asylum seekers into the UK without papers will be continued and the fines will be increased.

Internal checks will be stepped up with employers and marriage registrars forced to check on the immigration status of employees and people wishing to marry. Detention of asylum seekers in places like Campsfield and Harmondsworth, as they approach the conclusion of their legal case, will be increased. The right of appeal for long-stayers (people who have been in the UK for over seven years) is likely to be abolished.

The Bill is overwhelmingly opposed by ordinary Labour Party members who are dismayed that a Labour Government could enact such cruel legislation. At branch and GC meetings around the country motions opposing the Immigration Bill have been carried overwhelmingly. Party members will be looking for a lead from Labour MPs – many of whom are privately unhappy with the Bill but, so far, have felt unable to speak out against it. As a start Labour MPs should be preparing to vote against the Bill on Third Reading. To help strengthen their resolve Party members around the country should move resolutions opposing the Bill and asking the Government to withdraw it. These motions should be drawn to the attention of local Labour MPs and forwarded to Jack Straw at the Home Office.

- For more information on the campaign against the Bill or for speakers to meetings contact the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (0121-554 6947) or the National Assembly Against Racism (0171-247 9907).

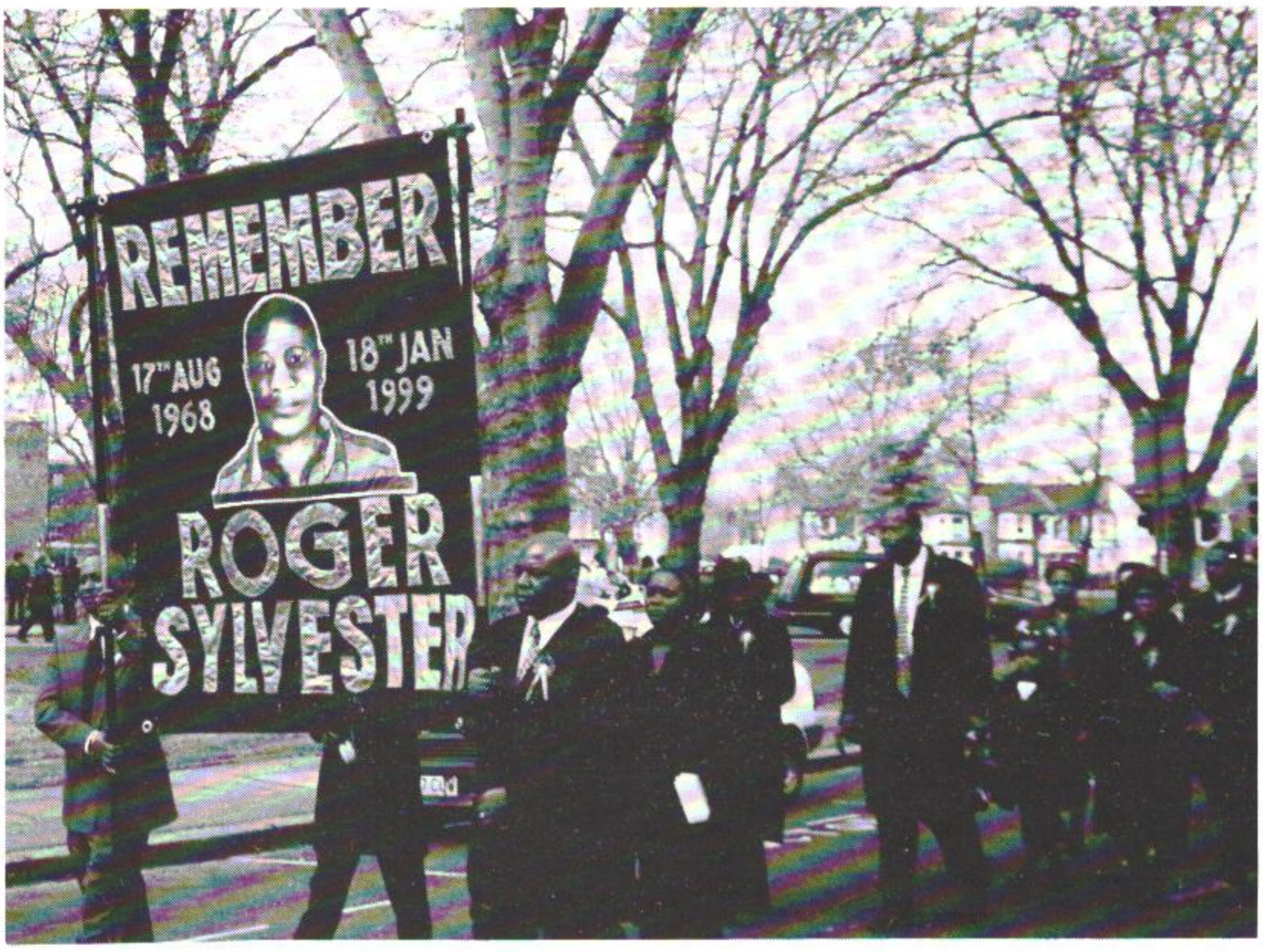


Photo: Ed Hall

Roger Sylvester, an Islington UNISON member, died on 11th January in Tottenham. Police were trying to restrain him "for his own safety" under the Mental Health Act. After one week in a coma, Roger's life support machine was turned off. The police admit that at no stage was Roger violent, but they have made a series of statements including stories of crack cocaine and aggressive behaviour which have smeared him. Amazingly, these statements have now been withdrawn and an apology has been issued, but the family are still demanding justice and call for a public inquiry.

- **Contact the Roger Sylvester Justice Campaign, PO Box 25908, London N4 2PJ.**



People demonstrate against the Immigration and Asylum Bill.

Photo: Paul Mattsson

Even Tories 'left' on asylum

Neil Gerrard MP, a member of the Standing Committee for the Immigration and Asylum Bill, exposes the Labour Government's intransigent stance on this unjust legislation.

It has been bizarre to sit on the Committee dealing with the detailed examination of the Immigration and Asylum Bill listening to Tory members attacking a Labour Government from the left. Their supposed concerns for human rights and for asylum seekers shouldn't fool anyone for a moment, but it does illustrate the draconian nature of the Bill that they can do this. As the Committee stage ends, the Government has made few significant concessions. It looks likely that there will be a shift on detention, with improved access to bail, and better safeguards. Some appeal rights may be preserved for people already in the country who might otherwise have lost them, and there are some other minor improvements.

But proposals at the heart of the Bill to take all benefit rights away from asylum seekers remain. Not a single person giving evidence to the Committee has supported the voucher system's miserable cash allowance of £1 a day for adults and 50p for children.

We already know from the experience of local councils operating vouchers how demeaning they are, and how asylum seekers stand out in supermarket queues as a result. Simple everyday things like travelling on a bus or buying a pair of shoes for a child become impossible. The Government claims that a national voucher scheme will be much better because many more shops will accept them. They are determined to persist with an essentially cashless system. But no Minister has yet answered why we can't just give them cash instead. Nor is there any explanation of how an asylum seeker is expected to live on 70% of income support.

The root of this appalling system is the argument that cash benefits act as a draw to the fraudulent asylum claimant. The Government says quite openly that their support system is designed to act as a deterrent. So we will have a financial penalty that will inevitably penalise genuine applicants in the hope of deterring others. Even if I accepted that the vast majority of asylum claims were fraudulent, which I don't, I could not begin to justify deliberately and knowingly penalising the genuine.

The refugee crisis in the Balkans has highlighted the Bill. Those Kosovars being flown to the UK now are being immediately given permission to stay for a year, entitlement to benefits and permission to work. Yet those who arrived from Kosova over the previous year are mostly still waiting for decisions on their cases, and many are surviving on local council vouchers. An asylum seeker from Kosova in the future, getting to the UK on their own rather than being brought here, would be stuck in the new support system.

These contradictions are alerting some people who might otherwise not have been concerned. Some Labour MPs representing areas where there haven't been refugees in the past are beginning to realise what the Bill means. The task now in Parliament before the final stages of the Bill in the Commons is to build support to restore a humane and just system for helping those who come here fleeing persecution to settle and start rebuilding their lives.

New Parliament has to bac

On 12th May, 129 MSPs were sworn in and a new era in Scottish politics began. The implications of setting up the Parliament, the electoral process, and events since the election, will reach further than Scotland, especially if similar voting systems are introduced in the rest of the UK.

With 73 members elected under first past the post, and 56 elected via eight regional lists, it was always going to be extremely difficult for any party to gain a majority. Labour's final tally of 53 constituency wins and three list seats compared with the SNP gaining seven and 28, the Tories repeating their General Election result of no constituency seats, with 18 from the list, the Liberal Democrats with twelve and five, and one each to the Scottish Socialist Party, the Greens and Dennis Canavan, meant it was clear that coalition talks would begin.

The deal eventually hammered out made Lib Dem leader Jim Wallace Deputy First Minister, with a further Lib Dem place in the Scottish Executive. A position was reached on tuition fees, which had proved to be one of the most controversial issues of the campaign, with the setting up of an Independent Inquiry, to examine funding for higher education, including fees. Additional education funding was also ensured, with 1,000 more teachers in addition to the 5,000 classroom assistants promised in Labour's manifesto. The deal was not settled without controversy in both camps, but as one astute political reporter observed, many Labour MSPs were persuaded by the opportunities presented by the proposed Inquiry, seeing potential for arguing for a more redistributive solution, and at the prospect of additional funding coming into education generally.

On the doorsteps (the ones I visited at least) the main issues raised were not always related to the Scottish Parliament, and most concerns were expressed about welfare benefits, particularly for people with disabilities and their carers, and pensions. While not everyone was entirely in agreement with the Government's priorities – the increase in fuel tax hit hard in rural areas with poor public transport – budget measures to increase pensions and upgrade the winter heating allowance were popular. Plans to provide increased nursery places and child care support were welcomed, as was the minimum wage, already making a difference to those on the lowest rates of pay.

The Tories' fightback failed to materialise and Labour held former Tory seats relatively safely, although just holding Ayr by 25 votes.

The Parliament has made steps towards achieving gender balance, with 80 men and 49 women, Labour achieving an absolute 50/50 balance – perhaps proving the sceptics wrong about twin-

Left triumph in Scotland?

Politics will never be the same again, reports Allan Green, National Secretary of the Scottish Socialist Party.

In Scotland's first parliamentary election new political forces have broken through the pro-business four-party stranglehold.

There were around 250,000 votes for socialists and greens in the regional lists. More than the raw numbers, however, the election of Tommy Sheridan for the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), Robin Harper for the Greens and Denis Canavan in Falkirk West has already had a tremendous impact. The SSP in the six days since the elections had far more media coverage than in the previous six months.

The SSP polled highest in Scotland's five cities. In Glasgow, Tommy Sheridan was elected with 7.25% of the vote (21% in his own constituency). In the council elections the SSP contested 64 of the 79 Glasgow seats and won 9.3% of the vote. The Scottish Socialists outstripped the Liberal Democrats and are neck and neck with the Tories. With PR likely for local elections, there is a realistic prospect of socialists being elected all across the country.

The SSP beat Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in every head-to-head constituency and council contest. However, in some of Scotland's smaller towns and in ex-mining communities the SLP had an impressive vote. This was despite the SLP membership base being so small that they had to include English-based candidates to make up their numbers. It remains to be seen whether this level of support for the SLP will be maintained, especially with the recent increased profile of the Scottish Socialists.

The SSP has proved that a radical, democratic, pluralist socialist party can make a serious breakthrough in electoral politics and build an enthusiastic membership and an effective branch structure. A steady stream of new recruits – many from New Labour, the SNP and the unions – has resulted in a mailing list of around 2,000. On a proportional basis, this would be the equivalent of around 22,000 in England.

Hugh Kerr MEP is heading the SSP list for the European elections. The contrast with the fortunes of socialists inside New Labour could not be more stark. Left wingers such as Alex Smith have been systematically excluded from any winning position on Labour's list.

Many socialists in the Labour Party have said that Labour may have its faults but there's nowhere else to go. In Scotland, there is a credible socialist alternative that can look to the future with some confidence.

ck the people

ning! Sadly, the system has been unable to ensure the election of any Black or Asian members – which must be addressed by the political parties and the Parliament's Equality Committee.

We need to ensure the Parliament delivers on its promise of being more in touch with the people, and that its actions make a difference to their lives and living standards. This election has shown that we can't take the voters for granted and that we will have to work to keep their support in future – particularly as the regional list system now has now opened up all sorts of possibilities of tactical voting.

We have six Labour and Co-operative MSPs, with a Co-operative Agenda focusing on advancing the social economy and the mutual sector, anti-poverty work and establishing genuine community ownership and participation in housing and other services.

I feel privileged to be representing a constituency which was once the home of Keir Hardie, and which suffered so much during the miners strike and subsequent pit closures. Many people I represent have a long history in the labour, trade union and co-operative movements, and learned their politics at the sharp end. My job is to make sure they have a voice in the Parliament and a say in the future. I have a lot to live up to, but I intend to do my best!

Eddie Tucker adds: Dennis Canavan, standing as an Independent in Falkirk West, achieved Scotland's highest majority of 12,192, in a result that sent shock waves from Labour's Glasgow HQ right down to Millbank. Labour was humiliated in a vote which, combined with reactions in Wales, was a warning shot by traditional Labour voters against the control freak tendency and interference in devolved institutions by London.



Cathy Jamieson

Control freaks pay the price in Wales

John Ivor Lewis, Swansea West CLP, explains Labour's disastrous results.

Tony Blair received a severe blow in the Welsh Assembly elections, with Labour failing to get the expected overall majority. It won 27 of the 60 Assembly seats to Plaid Cymru's 17. The Tories hold nine and Liberal Democrats seven. Turnout was only 46% as hundreds of thousands of Labour voters failed to support the Party.

This seismic shift in the political landscape of Wales was not foreseen. Bedrock seats fell to the nationalists. The Rhondda in Welsh history, politics and culture is synonymous with working class struggle and loyalty to socialist values, yet a swing of 35% to the nationalists turned a Labour General Election majority of 24,931 into a Plaid Cymru majority of 2,285. Wayne David, a high profile politician and leader of the British MEPs, who will forever be haunted as the person who lost the Rhondda for Labour, had given up his Euroseat in anticipation of a seamless transition to the Cardiff Bay Assembly.

Neil Kinnock's former stronghold of Islwyn also fell to the nationalists on a 35% swing and Llanelli on a swing of 21%. Ironically it was the totally unexpected loss of Llanelli that finally, after an agonising wait, secured Alun Michael his top-up seat under the PR list system and with it the prize of Wales' First Minister. Had Llanelli stayed Labour, Blair's favourite would have failed to be elected and the Welsh Labour Party would be in the throes of a third leadership contest.

In contrast, Rhodri Morgan, the overwhelming choice of Party members for the leadership, was the only Labour candidate to improve on his General Election result. The dull and uninspiring campaign managed by Peter Hain, which will not have done his political career any favours, failed to enthuse traditional Labour voters. Only a quarter of the Welsh electorate had supported devolution in the referendum. Public perception persists that the Assembly will be a weak talking shop without the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Many Labour voters are unhappy with Blairism and its embrace of right wing polices that were previously vehemently resisted in Wales. Michael is identified as the Blairite parachuted in to keep Wales "on message". The disgraceful stitch up of the leadership election emerged time and again on the doorstep and confirmed people's unease at the growing centralisation of power in the Party.

The election has created a viable and radical opposition to Labour in Wales. Plaid has shown it is possible to defeat Labour and its minimalist agenda in its own heartland by appealing to its traditional values. Labour in Wales has to govern as a minority. Who would have predicted that?

Eddie Tucker adds: In a commendable feat that many would have thought as unlikely as Rhodri's one-legged duck swimming in a straight line, the Socialist Party, left wing nationalists and others produced a United Socialist (US) slate for the Welsh Assembly which unfortunately for them was totally ignored by the voters. As in Scotland, the only left party not to co-operate in an alliance was the Socialist Labour Party. Plaid Cymru benefited from the protest vote in Labour's heartlands, and the US failed to score over 1% in any of the regional lists. Coming behind Beany of the Bean Party means it's back to the drawing board, comrades.

too bold

Going Green at the edges

● Left alternatives to Labour failed to break through outside Coventry and Liverpool, both former Militant strongholds. However, the Greens virtually doubled their councillors nationally to 25, winning seats that were traditionally Labour – in Braintree, Brighton, Kirklees, Lancaster and Oxford. In Oxford and Lancaster, they have seven and five councillors respectively.

● Millbank's imposition of candidates against the wishes of local Labour Parties has reaped electoral failure. In Newark, Labour lost control after the candidates were imposed and locals in safe seats withdrew at the last minute.

● In Liverpool, Blairite Ben-Tovim (elected as leader on a postal ballot of all members rather than by Labour councillors) led the Party to another defeat with the return of the "Liverpool Labour Party" at the expense of official Labour. The Lib Dems retained control of the council, which has been outside Labour's control since the Left lost leadership of the council. The leadership postal ballot, the stitch-up in Wales and the Euro elections show that Millbank is willing to use whichever electoral system suits it at the time.

● Tories kept control of Wiltshire County Council at its AGM despite ending up with one less living member than they needed. On legal advice, it was decided that the councillor who died half way through the meeting was still conscious when it started so they maintained their one-vote majority.

● The Socialist Party's seizure of a second seat in St Michael's Ward in Coventry showed that the Party was not a one man band around former MP Dave Nellist. The SP can now form an official group on the Council, put resolutions and sit on leading committees. The Defend Coventry Housing Campaign also stood candidates, fighting the largest housing privatisation scheme by Labour outside Glasgow. The SP did well in its second target seat (20% of the vote) and achieved a 9% vote in a seat it didn't even leaflet. The Socialist Labour Party refused an electoral pact with the SP and stood in St Michael's winning 2.3% of the vote.

Dave Nellist told *LLB*, "This is the beginnings of a serious base on the council, when a candidate standing for the first time is able to win a seat on radical socialist policies. It illustrates that there is a constituency to the left of Labour. This result opens the door for socialists to give that section of society a vote."

The strange case of carer Susan May

Andy Parr reports: On 12th March 1992, full-time carer Susan May discovered the body of her aunt Hilda Marchbank. The frail 89 year old had been brutally beaten and strangled and her home ransacked. Eighteen days later, Susan was arrested and charged with the murder which came against a background of a series of threats and attacks on old people in the Oldham area. The prosecution case rested on stains on the wall of the bedroom, and alleged scratches on the victim's face.

The police falsely claimed that Susan spoke of "scratches which she could not have known about unless she was the murderer". A WPC originally seconded to act as a counsellor to Susan after the murder was called as a prosecution witness, along with fifty other people. Only one was called in Susan's favour. No witness was called to testify to the defendant's good character or her demeanour during the time when she was alleged to have killed her aunt and the discovery of the body.

More than ten people could have testified to her normal behaviour. Police originally claimed the motive for the killing was to finance a secret affair with a younger man. He vehemently denies making inconsistent statements as alleged in court. No substantiation of an alleged "spending spree" by the couple was evei produced. During the trial, a subsequent motive of an even less plausible nature was put forward. Susan and her aunt had "rowed" and Susan had "snapped". The "fingerprint in blood" issue was said by the judge to be the prosecution's central plank. According to the police, there were three faint stains of Susan's fingerprints next to the bed. No tests to establish the accuracy of this claim were carried out. Expert witnesses to address the blood stains issue and the even more shaky prosecution theory of the time of death were inexplicably not called.

The criterion for the referral of cases to appeal by the CCRC includes the production of new evidence. Yet a great deal of evidence was never heard and as this was available at the time of the trial, they were deemed not legally admissible at Susan's appeal led by Mike Mansfield over two years ago. Any attempts by Susan's family to campaign or raise awareness of the case have been neutralised by continuous police harassment of her son and two others. Her case is now supported by Billy Power and Paddy Hill (Birmingham Six), Jimmy Robinson (Bridgewater Four), Liz Davies and several MPs, yet Susan remains in Durham Prison, isolated, ill and depressed.

● Write to Susan May, RE0252, H Wing, HMP Durham, Durham DH1 3HU. Ask your MP to support John McDonnell's Early Day Motion (513).

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Anger over bigot bomb attacks

The horrific nail bomb attack in Brixton on 17th April, presaging the further attacks in Brick Lane and Soho over the following fortnight, provoked an immediate response from the local community: this was a racist attack.

Jon Rogers
Secretary Lambeth UNISON

The media cast around for alternative explanations, even though it is now clear that the police themselves applied the Macpherson definition of a racist incident and accepted the obvious very promptly. In the days following the incident, a variety of spontaneous expressions of anger came together to produce the call for a demonstration to join the May Day rally in Trafalgar Square.

This demonstration, bringing together the local UNISON branch with the National Black Alliance/National Assembly Against Racism, the Anti-Nazi League and other local organisations, became an expression of unprecedented unity and diversity. The murderous Soho bombing the night before underlined the determination of the 2,000 marchers to stand up for all our rights. In the week before the demonstration Lambeth Council's Liberal Democrat Mayor launched a fund to help victims of the bombing and the (would-be) flagship "New" Labour authority launched a public declaration against racism. In the short period between the first bombing and the arrest of a man in Hampshire there was a genuine and universal sentiment of resistance to racism, homophobia and bigotry. This unity is still needed – even if the bomber is behind bars.

The bigotry which inspired the London nail bombs is alive and well and expressing itself in racist leaflets and graffiti even in Brixton. The extreme right may be on the ropes as a political force but they still threaten the safety of communities. The racists of the British National Party must be allowed no platform and no party political broadcasts in the run up to the Euro elections. The extreme right and the hatred which it preaches can only flourish if official racism legitimates their obnoxious views – and ministers will need to examine some areas of policy very closely if they are to be true to their professed anti-racism.

In early May Jack Straw spoke to the Lambeth Police Community Consultative Group at Brixton Town Hall. Following the very welcome news of an arrest he was well received, but unless the Immigration and Asylum Bill is dropped he will be to blame for creating the environment which will nurture the next nail bombing bigot.



Brixton march to Soho, May Day. Photo: Ed Hall

Police failed to warn gays and lesbians of Soho bomb

Peter Tatchell of OutRage! slams police failure as complacent and irresponsible.

While the police deserve mostly praise for their liaison with the lesbian and gay community since the Soho bombing, their failure to forewarn the homosexual public that gay venues could be attacked was a grave error of judgement.

A week before the bomb, police suspected that Old Compton Street might be a target. Accordingly, officers alerted some gay businesses and organisations.

This alert was, unfortunately, badly executed. Stonewall was posted a police warning dated 27th April. This letter did not arrive until 30th April (the day of the bombing). As the police had serious concerns about the gay community being attacked, why was this warning not phoned or faxed to Stonewall and other key gay rights organisations? Who made the decision to send the warning by second class post? It was also a mistake for the police not use their community consultation structures to alert the most obvious and important gay groups; those involved in police liaison through the London Lesbian and Gay Policing Initiative (LLGPI).

For nearly two years, the LLPGI has been urging the police to set up a data base of lesbian and gay groups in London, to ensure swift communication with the homosexual community in the event of an emergency. This recommendation was also made by OutRage! six years ago, after the delayed police warning to the gay community when serial killer Colin Ireland was on the rampage.

The most serious police misjudgment was, by far, the decision to warn some gay bars but not the wider gay public. This lulled many lesbians and gay men into a false sense of security. Because the police did not issue a public alert about the possibility of gay venues being bombed, most homosexuals did not take the threat seriously. They heard Sir Paul Condon and Jack Straw suggesting an exclusively racist motive for the bombings, and assumed the gay community was not at risk.

Condon should have gone on national television on 27th April to advise the gay community that it was a potential target, and announce publicly that Old Compton Street and other gay districts were under heavy police surveillance. This might have deterred the bomber. London and the gay community could, perhaps, have been spared the carnage of Friday 30th April.

Euro election in a spin

Christine Shawcroft, Canning Town and Poplar CLP, reports that New Labour fears that even Party members need persuading to vote.

At election times, I don't usually canvass Party members. Visit them when I'm in their block, yes. Ask them if they can help, deliver leaflets, make sure they've got the poster and blu tac to attach it to the window, yes. But ask them to vote Labour? No. I sort of take that for granted. Clearly, if the Party's Euro literature is anything to go by, I'm assuming far too much.

For their £2,000 handed over for the Euro elections (totally voluntary to help the Party, and if you don't you can't have delegates to Annual Conference), constituencies get a freepost leaflet to all electors and a letter to members. The letter comes in an envelope with a large photo of Tony Blair on the front – he's obviously been placed by the NEC at number one on all the regional lists.

There is also a classic voters' come-on, to the effect that Labour will take the lead in Europe (whatever that means) and asking them to help by voting Labour. On any normal election leaflet this would not look out of place, but on a letter to members it's nothing short of bizarre. The letter then rambles through two closely typed pages pledging us to bring strong leadership to Europe, not to stay on the sidelines like the Tories, to influence the issues that really matter, and other meaningless verbiage. But the entire first page and much of the second is begging Labour members to make sure they get out and vote Labour. I sense spin doctors coming unspun here.

Panic seems to have set in about mass Labour abstentions a la Welsh valleys – and independent candidates a la Dennis Canavan. The system is designed to lose Labour seats. Euro candidates tell us this is a good thing because Labour holds too many seats at every level and this is simply not in tune with the new, inclusive politics. But are they now worried that it may actually be about to lose us too many, because members are so fed up with the contortions over the regional lists that they won't bother to turn out? The candidates, so carefully carved into pleasing rankings, seem now to be so many liabilities. While Rt Hon Tony Blair MP features large in the leaflets, the candidates have small pictures and even smaller blurbs.

No-one seems to be expected to vote because they're just so excited about the candidates. This is all about deflecting egg from certain high-up faces. And one thing that isn't being promised to members with all these pledges to be at the heart of things is the one promise that would get to the heart of their concerns – and allow them to actually vote for the candidates in future elections.

PS: Please remember that it's not enough to support the Grassroots Alliance in your heart. It's not enough to intend to vote Grassroots Alliance. You actually need to make that pen mark on the ballot paper.

Islington calls in big business chums

Mike Marqusee reports: New Labour plans to use Islington as the site of an experiment in big business-run education. In retrospect, it's clear that the story about local MP Jeremy Corbyn's separation from his wife Claudia and their disagreement about where to send their son to school was planted to prepare the way for the damning Ofsted report on the repeated failures of the borough's education department, and the emergency privatisation measures which followed.

It is also clear that senior council officers and leading councillors have been discussing precisely this eventuality with David Blunkett and selected friends in big business for some time. The day after the privatisation announcement, "London first", a big business consortium including BA, BT, KPMG, Ernst and Young and others, was in negotiations with the authority.

The plan is to abolish the education committee and turn the service into a "joint venture" controlled by an independent board comprising representatives of business, parents and the local authority. The plans go way beyond "Education Action Zones" and may be unprecedented. It seems that Islington's parents and children are to be the rats in New Labour's laboratory. How convenient for the spin-doctors!

The Ofsted report is in fact an indictment of the "naming and shaming" policies of leading councillors and officers and vindicates the local NUT, who argued repeatedly that the key failure was the lack of support from the authority, not the alleged incompetence of teachers.

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THE **LIZ DAVIES** COLUMN

Nine weeks into the war in the Balkans, and the complete human disaster caused by NATO's military intervention could not be clearer.

Hundreds of innocent civilians in Serbia, Kosova and Montenegro have been killed, including convoys of Kosovar refugees. NATO has flouted the international rules of war – using cluster bombs and depleted uranium shells (both banned by the Geneva Convention), and targeting civilians in the vegetable market and hospital in Nis, the Kosovar village of Korisa, and the Serb TV station in Belgrade, to cite only a few examples. The democratic opposition in Yugoslavia has been weakened and support for Milosevic reinforced.

The bombing and the withdrawal of the OSCE monitors which preceded it gave the Milosevic regime the chance to escalate the murders and forced displacements carried out against Albanian Kosovars. It is clear that for the NATO leaders, the Kosovars are only pawns in the game. They will be betrayed, just as the Kurds were after the Gulf war in 1991.

I regret that a recent issue of *Tribune* grossly misrepresented my position on the NATO intervention and in particular on the prospect of a ground war. As I have made clear, in speeches up and down the country, in articles published in the *Morning Star* and in press releases, I am strongly opposed to a ground invasion.

Some on the left have presented a ground war as some kind of sanitary alternative to the destructive and ineffectual air war. We should not kid ourselves. War is always terrible, whether it involves bombing from the sky or an attack on a village from the ground. Sending in ground troops would not result in some "honourable" medieval-style hand-to-hand combat; it would mean the bombardment of towns, villages and mountains with

'As I have made clear in speeches up and down the country ... I am strongly opposed to a ground invasion'

high-tech ground missiles, tanks, napalm, etc. – backed up by an intensified air campaign. In any ground war, Serbian troops would be fighting to defend a territory which they regard as their own. History tells us that such conflicts are long drawn out, involve a high number of casualties, and rarely end with either side winning. In the meantime, the Kosovar refugees would be condemned to wait indefinitely in refugee camps, becoming the Palestinians of the 21st century.

I am sorry to see a Labour Prime Minister and a Labour Government playing such a negative role. While others in Europe seek a peaceful solution, our leaders seem intent on pursuing a strictly military one to the bitter end.

Since Easter, I've attended a number of anti-war meetings and I was privileged to be one of the speakers on the Stop the Bombings demonstration in London on 8th May. That same day, I also spoke at an anti-war fringe meeting at MSF Conference attended by 60 people. Earlier, a motion calling for an end to the bombing had been narrowly defeated on the floor of Conference. The labour movement has reacted slowly to the bombing, but I get the feeling it is now waking up to the horror of the Government's war policy, and that protests are on the increase.

Ballot papers for this year's NEC elections have now gone out to party members. Elsewhere in *LLB*, there is a checklist of activities to ensure that the Grassroots Alliance maximises its vote. Last year, the Party sent a clear message to the Government by electing four of the six Grassroots Alliance candidates. This year, we aim to re-emphasise that message by electing all six! Between us, we secured nominations from 138 Constituency Labour Parties.

Cathy Jamieson, elected last year to the NEC Constituency Section on the Grassroots Alliance ticket, has won a seat in the new Scottish Parliament. Congratulations, Cathy, on a well-deserved victory for a socialist and a feminist.

Congratulations also to the Labour MPs who voted against the outrageous proposals to restrict eligibility for incapacity benefit. It's quite sickening watching Labour Ministers use Tory arguments, such as suggesting (falsely) that most of those receiving incapacity benefit are in the top 40% income bracket, or that children and those with severe disabilities will gain from the cuts made to other disabled people. The needs of all people with disabilities should be met by contributions from the whole of society, not by taking away scarce resources from one vulnerable group to help another.

The answer to those who argue that universal benefits are unfair because they benefit the rich as well as the poor is to raise taxes on the rich – something that New Labour sadly refuses to contemplate.

Grassroot Alliance slate

NEC: **Ann Black, Bill Butler, Liz Davies, Mark Seddon, Christine Shawcroft, Pete Willsman**
National Constitutional Committee (Constituency Section): **Theresa Pearce**

Sheffield UNISON shut down

Chris Croome, suspended shop steward, Sheffield UNISON, reports

UNISON's "presidential team" has suspended the Sheffield Metropolitan Branch. According to UNISON, this was due to complaints from members about "alleged mismanagement of the Branch and its finances". In reality, this is a political witch hunt.

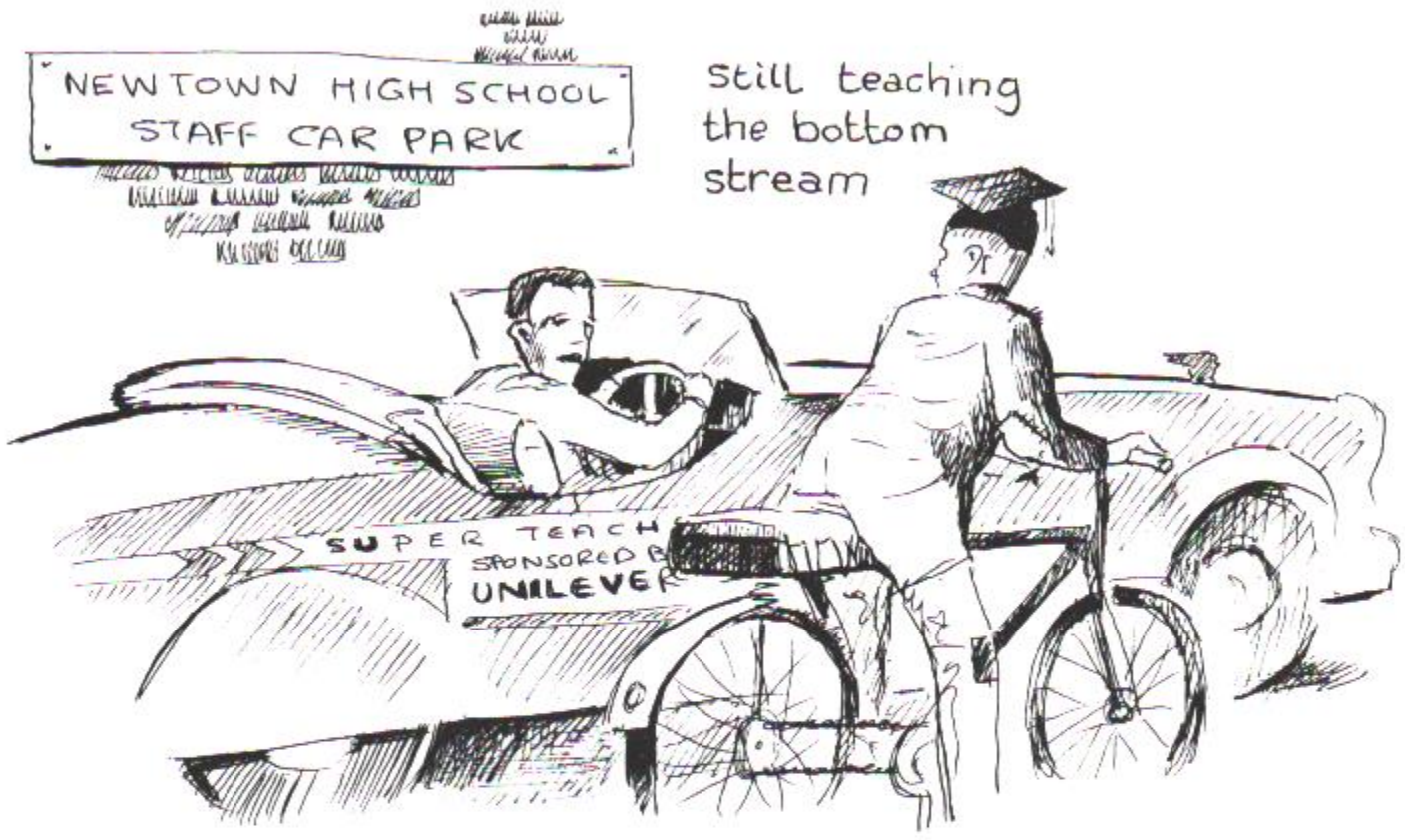
A minority of branch officers and a small number of select stewards – who'd been working closely with the Council to try to smash the left wing – have been reinstated and set up in a new office.

This is a heightening of the investigation which has been on-going for 18 months. UNISON's NEC is taking disciplinary action against a number of offices, but, "for legal reasons UNISON cannot disclose any details of these charges". The timing of the suspension, three days before the local elections, seems to indicate that the union did not want to shut down the branch under a Liberal Democratic Council. There can be no doubt that Rodney Bickerstaffe has an unwritten deal with Blair to "sort out" the left wing branches.

The Region has managed to get the local media to run stories of huge numbers of employees applying to join the branch since its suspension when in reality, the common response from members has been: "What's the point of being in UNISON, why don't we all just leave?"

The campaign against the suspension has got off to a good start and hundreds of members have signed a petition calling for a Special General Meeting.

● For further details of the campaign against the suspension contact the former Branch Chair, Andy D'Agorne, woodstock@gn.apc.org



Teachers vote 95% for action

Penny Russell, Hammersmith and Fulham NUT, reports that the NUT is determined to spike performance related pay and possibly their General Secretary too.

The recent NUT ballot to boycott appraisal and its links to performance related pay demonstrated overwhelming support for action. Ninety five per cent of members voting said Yes to a boycott of appraisals and sent a clear message of opposition to the Government's plans to use appraisals to determine teachers' pay.

The Government's Green Paper, published in January, caused much anger among teachers for its proposal to link pay to pupils' performance in SATs and public exams. The whole Green Paper showed a complete lack of commitment to state education with a selection of piecemeal solutions to the problems caused by persistent underfunding and undermining of the education system under the Tories.

The Green Paper was followed by a consultation questionnaire sent to all schools, resulting in the largest ever return to the DfEE. The results of this exercise have yet to be released but according to a letter circulating to CLPs and MPs, the DfEE is accusing the NUT of having hijacked the responses. A series of farcical consultation meetings took place, with glitzy presentations in draughty school halls by education department officers, desperately trying to calm the very real anger expressed by teachers present. Obviously there has been an overwhelmingly negative response to the Green Paper and as teachers we have no confidence that these consultations will result in anything other than cosmetic changes to the proposals in the Green Paper.

The NUT ballot takes place in the context of a leadership challenge to Doug McAvoy, the NUT General Secretary, with voting about to begin in June after the half term holiday. Christine Blower, President of the union in 1998, is the only other candidate. Unlike McAvoy, who will be relying on a sympathetic press and its drip of "loony lefty" stories, Blower has been attending meetings throughout the country. She has won nominations from around sixty associations and is a very credible alternative to McAvoy, a man who seems more and more reluctant to stand up to this Government. With Blower as General Secretary we are much more likely to see the ballot for strike action, demanded by conference, take place. *LLB* supporters should vote for her and hold meetings in their schools to publicise her campaign.

FBU resists employers' attack

The threat of the first national strike in Britain's fire service since 1977 came a step closer at the FBU's Annual Conference in Bridlington on 11th May. Members voted overwhelmingly to ballot for national strike action if fire authorities unilaterally attempt to impose changes to the national agreement on pay and conditions.

Mick Shaw
FBU Executive Council

Britain's fire authorities have been facing a funding crisis for the last decade or more due to inadequate Standard Spending Assessments which have not kept pace with the pressures of inflation and, in particular, the cost of the unfunded Firefighters Pension Scheme.

Many authorities have managed to balance the books year after year by making cuts – closing fire stations, cutting fire engines and firefighters' jobs. But, opposition to cuts from both the FBU and the public has intensified and councillors are running out of cuts that they can make.

Therefore, they are forced to cut costs elsewhere and came up with the salaries of firefighters and control staff. FBU members are determined that they will not pay for the funding crisis of the fire service through cuts in their pay packets. If the employers try to enforce worse pay and conditions, they will provoke a fight.

There is no doubt which side Home Secretary Jack Straw will back. At a Local Government Association Fire Conference in March, Straw gave the fire service employers a green light by giving them his wholehearted support.

In an interview in this month's *Fire* magazine, Employers' Secretary Charles Nolda makes clear the pressure from central government to take on the FBU and speculates that the Government may outlaw strike action in the fire service.

If New Labour wants to take on the FBU, it will face a group of workers who are prepared and enjoy considerable public support. Banning strike action will only make their problems worse.

The funding problems of Britain's fire service need to be solved by increased public expenditure – not by attacking the men and women who do a difficult and dangerous job for a fraction of the pay of Jack Straw, his cabinet colleagues and their army of "advisors".



Photo: Paul Mattsson

FBU lobby, February.

Union takes a swipe at control freaks

Jim Mortimer reports from MSF's Annual Conference.

Delegates hit out at central vetting of Labour candidates at their conference in Harrogate. They supported a very critical resolution on the structural changes in the Labour Party and opposed any vetting or veto by Labour's NEC of potential candidates selected within the rules.

A resolution, carried with near unanimous support, expressed concern at the methods employed by the union's NEC in recent internal investigations. It was felt that the rights of those being investigated – including the London Regional Council following its opposition to a directly elected Mayor and the introduction of private capital into London Underground – had not been properly observed.

One of the main talking points was the allegation of financial malpractice at the highest level of their union. This was reported by letters to all branches and in the press.

The issue was not resolved at conference. Delegates narrowly accepted a ruling from President Dave Cooke that nothing should be said that might be prejudicial while investigations were taking place and disciplinary procedures were in operation. He said that the National Executive Committee would issue a full report once these have been completed.

Delegates were critical of Government policies on a range of issues. These included pensions, employment policy, the Private Finance Initiative, public ownership of utilities, public sector pay, free education, the European Monetary Union, the abdication of responsibility for interest rates and the timidity of the Government's proposals on employment and trade union rights.

One of the liveliest debates at the conference was on the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. A motion opposing the NATO bombing, pointing out that it had not been authorised by the Security Council of the United Nations and was thus contrary to international law, was narrowly rejected. An NEC motion, condemning the actions of the Yugoslav forces against the ethnic Albanians in Kosova and welcoming the efforts of the G8 ministers to secure a peaceful solution to the conflict, was carried.

Trade Union Notebook

● The Skychefs dispute at Heathrow airport is now in its seventh month. Further information/speakers: 0498-757 367.

● **1,300 Brent Council UNISON members had a one day strike on 5th May. The council is trying to cut London Weighting and increase working hours for some staff, using the pretext of the single status agreement.**

● A new union organising in the finance industry has just been formed. UNIFI will have 200,000 members as a result of a merger between the TUC affiliated banking union BIFU, Barclays staff union UNiFi and the NatWest Staff Association NWSA. UNIFI is working towards uniting all workers in the finance industry in one union. The union is approaching the Lloyds-TSB staff union to discuss possibilities of merger.

● **30,000 UNiFi members (formerly in the NatWest Staff Association and BIFU) have been balloted for strike action over a three per cent pay offer after a consultative ballot overwhelmingly rejected the offer.**

● RMT's dispute with London Underground over guarantees about pay and conditions if members are transferred under the "public/private partnership" continues. Further negotiations with management are expected following consultation of RMT members in a referendum which closed on 19th May. Affiliate to the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation by sending a donation to CATP, 47c Wadeson Street, London E2 9DP.

● **Manchester UNISON has won an important victory in the campaign for a 35 hour week for all Manchester Council workers. Since 1st April the council has been employing all new starters on 37 hours per week. This has sparked a dispute in areas where employees have been contracted to do 35 hours. This termination of a 25 year old local agreement prompted the UNISON branch to ballot on three one-day strikes. The ballot was won and the first strike was due to take place on 19th May. A few days before the strike the Council backtracked. New starters (in traditional 35 hour posts) are to be guaranteed a maximum working week for at least two years. This interim agreement is to allow time for new negotiations.**

● The Labour council in the London Borough of Waltham Forest has voted to contract out Housing Benefit and Revenue services to ICL. UNISON expressed concern at the sale, pointing out ICL's poor record on industrial relations. Over 100 staff – many on temporary contracts – will be transferred under TUPE terms and there are obvious fears for their future employment and conditions. ICL – which admitted they had no experience of running an operation of this sort – offered a £10m saving over seven years. Labour councillors suggested it was a deliberate "loss-leader" bid.

Leyton and Wanstead CLP passed an emergency motion recording its disgust at the sale. Even delegates on the right of the Party castigated the sell-off and questioned whether there was any point being in the Labour Party.

● **The Tameside Care Workers have been in dispute since 30th March 1998 with the council-owned Tameside Care Group. Long-awaited tribunal cases are now due to start on 1st June. The company has recently tried to settle by offering the strikers £400,000 (between 217 of them). Most of the workers have found other jobs, leaving 80 of them in dispute. The company made pre-tax profits of £775,831 last year.**

● The Association of University Teachers ballot for industrial action over its pay claim voted 58 per cent in favour of strike action. The employers in the old universities offered 3.5 per cent when the union asked for 10%. AUT's executive propose a campaign of industrial action beginning on 25th May, followed by escalated action.

● **The number of trade unionists in Britain has risen for the first time since 1979 – in the last year trade union membership grew by 4,000 to 7.1 million.**

● The civil service union, the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, is in dispute with the DOE Construction Service over market testing. The employers want to hand the Police Authority's estate maintenance contract to private sector company COMAX, threatening 40 jobs in the DLO.

● **Most employers expect the implementation of the Employment Relations Bill to result in trade union recognition claims. More than 60% of companies employing over 5,000 employees and 50% of companies with over 500 employees expect recognition claims, according to a survey carried out for the *Financial Times*.**

● RMT recently conducted a referendum of its Tube members, asking them whether they supported the privatisation policy and its effects on their working conditions. The result was:

NO: 2,184 (96%)
YES: 70 (4%)

Seaside strife for UNISON

Jon Rogers, Lambeth UNISON Branch Secretary, reviews a forthcoming attraction in Brighton.

The Annual Conference of public service union UNISON takes place in the middle of June. After last year's Conference compelled the National Executive to organise a demonstration against the low level of the minimum wage, the leadership is determined to try to clamp down on Conference and make it more "presentable". If these proposals had been in place last year, they would have stopped the call for April's national demonstration.

UNISON officials want to learn from Millbank's "control freaks" in a misguided desire to keep close to a government which is delivering very little of the union's policy agenda. The Annual Report includes the comments that: "We should not lose sight of the overall picture and the hundreds of measures enacted which we approve of and have campaigned for over many years" and "the most effective ways of influencing government policy were seen as being through; providing ministers with an early warning on the pressures felt by union members...promoting a constructive social partner dialogue on issues such as productivity...developing policies within the constraints set by the Government..."

This miserably inadequate approach to the people who brought us the £3.60 minimum wage and the 40% threshold for recognition ballots has also contributed to the suspension of the Birmingham and Sheffield branches, both of which had been in conflict with New Labour local authorities immediately before union officials moved in – with the help of the employers – to remove all local shop stewards and take over the running of the branches.

Ironically for UNISON's trainee control freaks, these suspensions will

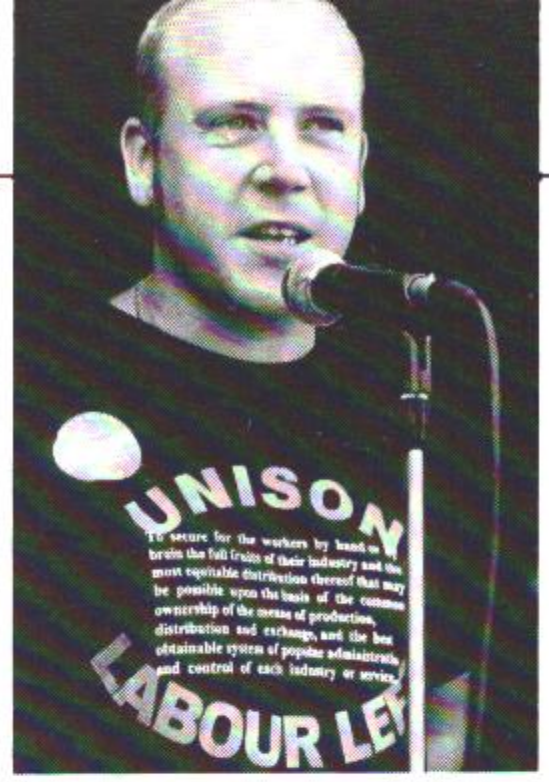
be bound to lead to a major row, which will hardly help to establish UNISON "reliability" in the minds of the Government and their hangers on. The NEC has produced draft "guidelines" which would have the effect of preventing union branches from campaigning on controversial issues. These "guidelines" have to be read alongside rule changes which would make it easier for activists to be disciplined. To promote these rule changes the NEC has paid for and issued an explanatory pamphlet – even before Conference has voted them through! The left needs only one third of the delegates voting at Conference to reject this arrogance in order to put a spanner in the witch hunt.

There are an increasing number of cases which appear to be politically motivated – mostly aimed at members of the SWP (or those associated with them). The left will need to respond vigorously to these various related attacks upon union democracy if UNISON is to be able to mobilise the gathering opposition to the employers and the Government. There is a desire to undermine branch autonomy in order to secure the position of the union's bureaucracy in the face of falling membership and increasing pressure to decentralise and devolve power and resources in the union in order to improve recruitment and organisation.

Given the very proper concern about waste and financial mismanagement in the union (typified by a staff severance package far more generous than most union members could dream of), the NEC's proposal for a subs increase could be blocked if enough of the left can ally with all those concerned to promote branch autonomy. Without doubt it is only by withholding a subs increase that conference can really assert its authority over an NEC which has, in the last year, adopted an increasingly cavalier attitude towards conference decisions.

The left also needs to concentrate on making positive progress at Conference as well as defending democracy. There is, for example, every prospect of securing support for a follow up to the Living Wage demonstration next year in London, and of firming up opposition to the Private Finance Initiative and Best Value.

We will also have to ensure that at the Conference of Britain's largest union, there is a discussion on the current war in the Balkans, which at present does not appear on any part of the agenda where it is likely to be debated. As with so many issues in UNISON, more than half the battle will be to have the debate at all!



THE GEOFF MARTIN COLUMN

● I watched the results of the Scottish and Welsh elections coming through on Sky News in a bar in Majorca.

Disloyal as it may sound I raised a glass of cold San Miguel to Dennis Canavan for having the courage to take on the Millbank fixers and beat them hands down. I'll do exactly the same for Christine Oddy if she holds on to her Euro seat as an independent.

You'd need to be a complete mug not to spot that this loyalty business is abused wholesale by those whose loyalty is only to themselves. The trade unions are going to have to wise up to the new political landscape that's opening up around us.

If it's fine and dandy for New Labour politicians to take our cash and then scuttle off into smoke filled rooms once the ballot closes to stitch up coalition deals with whoever takes their fancy, then why is it so outrageous to suggest that the unions should lend their support right from the start to whichever credible candidate best represents our members' priorities? I would still like to hope (dream?) that the best candidate will be standing on the Labour ticket but if it's a choice between a pro-privatisation, Millbank dalek and an experienced local trade unionist, the very least we should do is think long and hard about it. New Labour have lumped us with this so-called "New Politics" so they can hardly grumble if we choose to use it to our best advantage. In the spirit of this new climate never again will I urge my members to return councillors in New Labour authorities which have spent the previous four years kicking the staff and services to bits.

We've already seen UNISON members taking matters into their own hands and standing as independents on key local issues like PFI and privatisation in areas like Tameside and Wakefield. Good luck to them.

● Talking of local elections, I have now found out a bit more about why I failed the "life experience" test to become a Labour candidate for the GLA.

I can reveal exclusively that Millbank have had their telescopic lenses trained on our house for months and have a mass of photographic evidence confirming the following: "Mr Martin finds it extremely difficult to insert the duvet into its appropriate cover, has no cappucino maker and in fact the only hot beverage he is known to consume is Sainsbury's red label tea"

An alternative view of my rejection was offered to me by a national official of my own union: "They think you're a loud mouthed wanker and you've got about as much chance of being endorsed as an official Labour candidate as you have of winning the Eurovision song contest."

Better get the old guitar out then.

● Just who is this Jamie Shea bloke who's on the box 24 hours a day spinning the latest NATO bombing outrage against civilian targets?

I swear to god that he was working the taxi rank outside Wimbledon station less than three months ago.

How he's now managed to blag his way into one of the top jobs in American imperialism beats the hell out of me.

● I'm sick and tired of listening to Man Utd fans moaning about their ticket allocation for the European Cup Final.

The simple solution would have been for UEFA to have set a stipulation that tickets would only be allocated to Man Utd fans living within a 30 mile radius of Old Trafford. On that basis more than half of the 25,000 they've been allocated would have been sent back.

● Finally, on this years' May Day march a bloke came up to me and asked if I used to be in Secrets Now! I kid you not.

It turns out that he sang in a group called Hitlist whose drummer worked with us in the late 70's. Yer man is now a CWU activist which pleased me no end.

Anyway, I took his number so watch out for the return of 30-something political rock and roll and don't say that you weren't warned.

Cancel the debt!

If you thought last year's hurricane disaster would lead to serious steps to alleviate the indebtedness of the countries affected, you'd be wrong. Mike Phipps reports.

Hurricane Mitch swept across Central America last autumn killing tens of thousands and washing away roads, bridges, buildings and farmland. Honduras needs $5bn, and Nicaragua $1.4bn for reconstruction. Yet the international debts of these countries to western banks are $4bn and $6bn respectively.

Campaigning organisations' very real contribution to tackling the immediate crisis has not been matched by any longer-term governmental strategy to reduce indebtedness. Cuba, France, Austria and Canada unilaterally cancelled Nicaragua's and Honduras' debts, but other donor countries in the "Paris Club" and the International Development Bank have offered merely a moratorium on debt repayment. This is of little value to the countries concerned so long as the interest is allowed to accumulate, the equivalent of over $2 million a day.

As predicted, the decline of media interest in the disaster has allowed governments to take a "business as usual" approach. The British Government blandly asserts that compliance with IMF economic reforms is the precondition for any progress. This ignores the fact that these neo-liberal reforms privatised basic services and created mass unemployment and poverty, allowing transnational companies to carry out deforestation, open-cast mining and river diversion to irrigate their plantations – all of which exacerbated the impact of the hurricane in the region.

New Labour holds up the much-trumpeted Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative as a sign of its commitment on this issue. This initiative involves a smaller outlay than the cost of building Paris Eurodisney and is aimed primarily at ensuring regular repayment. It was recently condemned for merely guaranteeing continued indebtedness – effectively keeping countries in the clutches of the IMF – by a Jubilee 2000 conference in Honduras. The conference drew representatives from 16 Latin American countries and called for debt service to be limited to 3% of national budgets: precedents exist for this, such as Germany in the early 1950s. The Nicaraguan government spends half its revenue on debt service repayments. Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Esquivel's message to the conference

Truth, justice and the British state

Brian Campbell writes: Trevor Bracknell was a working class Englishman who was shot dead in a pub in South Armagh in December 1976. British police told his father that the IRA had killed Trevor and he was advised not to travel to Ireland for the funeral.

Sitting beside Trevor Bracknell when he was shot was his friend and workmate, Jimmy McCreesh, who was shot three times but survived. Today he is a Sinn Fein Councillor. Two others were killed, one the 16 year-old son of the bar owner.

Trevor Bracknell had moved to South Armagh with his wife Anne, a nurse who had gone to England to find work. She met Trevor, they married, and returned to her native South Armagh where Trevor found a job and was accepted into the local community.

The IRA didn't kill Trevor Bracknell. The killings were claimed by loyalists who attacked the bar because it was the headquarters of the local IRA. It was one of eight sectarian murders in the area around that time. There were suspicions that the RUC or UDR was involved. Local people claimed to have seen a car similar to the getaway vehicle used by Trevor Bracknell's killers drive into the RUC base in Keady, six miles away, shortly after the attack. Two weeks earlier, an RUC patrol had gone into the bar and carefully sketched its lay out. But these suspicions and rumours were hidden away because there was no evidence to allow them to be spoken as facts. Until now.

Evidence has now emerged that all the killings of innocent nationalists in South Armagh in the 1970s were carried out with the assistance of an elite squad of RUC officers. One of that squad, John Weir, has written an affidavit giving details of many incidents along with the names of those who planned and carried them out, including members of the RUC, UDR and British Intelligence.

The affidavit from Weir, who was sentenced along with another RUC officer for his part in a sectarian killing in 1979, corroborates other evidence, and the mass of detail is convincing. It includes new information about the Dublin and Monaghan bombs that killed 33 people in 1974. That information, along with other facts that have recently emerged, may force an inquiry into what was the largest loss of life in any incident in the thirty years of conflict. And it may finally confirm the involvement of British Intelligence.

The lid is being slowly prised off. Together with the Bloody Sunday Inquiry and the increasing demands for an inquiry into the Pat Finucane murder and the conduct of British agent Brian Nelson, who was the UDA's chief intelligence officer, Britain's dirty war is finally set to be exposed.

When inquiries begin, the names are named. We have seen it recently in South Africa and Spain, and over the years in South and Central America. Wherever there has been a popular revolt and the state has searched for a counter-insurgency response, there have been state-sponsored death squads. Ireland has been no different.

Judicial inquiries force the foot soldiers to spill the beans on their political and military masters. It is no wonder there are members of the British military and political establishment who have long worked against the Irish peace process. Chief among them are operatives within Military Intelligence and the RUC.

In the Spanish state last year one of its former ministers was sentenced to jail for his part in the dirty war against ETA in which 22 civilians were killed. The same – and worse – happened in Ireland. Jimmy McCreesh and Anne and Alan Bracknell, Trevor's son, are mounting a campaign to expose those who killed Trevor and the other people in South Armagh.

Their campaign, like that of many others, has been one result of the peace process. The victims of state violence are demanding truth and justice. Can the British state give it to them? And if it does, can it remain in Ireland?

denounced the debt as "a massive and systematic violation of human rights."

Today Third World countries are four times as indebted as they were in 1982. In the 1930s the unilateral suspension of debt repayment by some Latin American countries was the springboard to economic growth. Their debt burden today, far from being a necessary stage towards economic advance, is undoubtedly the biggest obstacle to progress.

Jubilee 2000 is organising a series of initiatives for debt cancellation this month culminating in a human chain around the G7 summit in Cologne on June 19th. A Central London demonstration along the Thames on June 13th will coincide with the launch of a boat sailing for Germany, carrying petitions, banners and messages for the G7 leaders.

- For more information, contact Jubilee 200, PO Box 2000, London NW10 7WT, 0171-401 9999, email@jubilee2000uk.org, www.jubilee2000uk.org

Victory for extreme nationalism

Liz Knight reports: Turkish chauvinist parties made gains in the recent general and local elections. Their rapid growth is shown by the 18th April results, whose victors were the DSP (Democratic Left Party) with 22.2%, and the MHP (Nationalist Action Party, better known as the Grey Wolves) with 18.1%.

One factor contributing to this was the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, used by the state and media to whip up Turkish chauvinism against the Kurds. Another factor was the state's successful attack on the Islamic Party, forcibly removed from government in 1997. A third factor has been the corruption scandals surrounding the two major centre-right parties (DYP and ANAP), which lost credibility with voters.

HADEP, the pro-Kurdish party, still gained the largest share of the vote in many south-east areas, but due to the way the electoral system works, gained no parliamentary seats, although they increased their share of local government seats. The results overall will be seen by the extreme nationalists as a mandate for their policies.

The MAI clones: the fight continues

The fight to stop the treaty from hell is far from over, reports Caroline Dumonteil.

The defeat of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment at the OECD was a severe shock to the US. They were the main backers of the treaty which would have permitted corporations to invest in and withdraw from nations at will, regardless of social or environmental considerations, and even to sue governments if barriers were put in their way.

The conclusions drawn from this were that the treaty's opponents, an ad hoc international alliance of NGOs and individuals now called 'civil society', should be consulted and that the whole process should be more transparent. Despite denials, the MAI is now being inserted into new trade negotiations, and the main negotiating bodies still show a complete contempt for any form of openness or democracy.

For example, in 1988 the European Commission set up an 'Investment Correspondent Network' to push investment into the World Trade Organisation. Collaboration was sought from the Chief Executives of large European corporations such as BP, ICI, Daimler-Benz and Fiat and corporate lobby groups. It also surveyed over 2000 businessmen (sic), asking them to rank in order what they would like to see in a multilateral investment treaty. They were also asked for recommendations on how 'to improve the communications strategy of international rule-making negotiators'. The aim was to produce a 'pre-approved' strategy that would be hard for national governments to refuse. They are now encouraging the creation of similar networks in other sectors.

Citizens' groups were not informed of this but instead were invited to meetings with broad and ill-defined agendas and received inadequate or even misleading documentation. For example, completely different versions of an official proposal on investment in the WTO were given to them.

As Commissioner for Competition Policy, Leon Brittan represents all European countries in trade negotiations. Not only did he sign us up for the Transatlantic Economic Partnership in what was virtually a private deal between Clinton and Blair, but he also aims to insert three new items into the next round of trade negotiations. To the three areas of agriculture, services and intellectual property rights, he wants to add investment, competition and public procurement, the effect of which would be to include the measures contained in the MAI, clearly rejected by us, 'civil society'. This would represent a great extension of the WTO's powers.

The World Trade Organisation is said to be democratic since each country has one voice. However no voting is allowed and decisions are actually taken by the US, EU, Japan and Canada. Martin Khor of Third World Network describes how this group meets in secret and then presents a position to the remaining representatives at the last minute. They suggest in the name of 'consensus' that if delegates fail to agree, they will hold the whole negotiation up. The WTO Dispute Settlement Panel, consisting of unknown 'experts', also meets in secret and takes decisions which effectively remove the rights of states to decide on their own domestic and foreign policies, such as the EU policy on bananas. The disgraceful battle over the appointment of a new WTO Director General, where arms are being twisted to prevent the selection of a candidate more representative of the views of poorer countries, also illustrates the way the US tries to impose its will against the interests of other countries. Khor describes the WTO as a neurotic organisation: things that go in straight come out twisted into another reality.

Far from agreeing to any extension of the WTO's power to include the MAI investment rules, we are demanding a three-year moratorium on any further negotiation on these issues. Before a headlong rush into a new 'round' at Seattle this November, there should be a thorough assessment of the effects of the existing trade settlement. A petition to this effect has already been signed by over 700 groups: contact ronnieh@foe.co.uk.

Goodbye to democracy

The euro is not just an economic problem – Steve McGiffen, editor of international radical left magazine *Spectre*, joins the debate.

The debate over the euro is in danger of becoming an argument about economics. This may seem an odd statement to make about a project which is clearly economic in nature, and which will have enormous economic implications for the UK. I would argue, however, that EMU is primarily a political measure and that it is on the political, and not the economic level, that democratic socialists must oppose it.

The economics are well-rehearsed and as the promised referendum approaches, opinion is dividing between the Golden Age and Apocalypse schools of thought. Being myself on the Four Horsemen side of the argument, I would argue vigorously that the euro is a bad idea from anyone's point of view except that of some major corporations. It is not in the interests of working people in any of the eleven founding member states and it would certainly not be in the interests of Britain's workers, still less of the country's unemployed, pensioners and other vulnerable groups.

This is not, however, my principal objection. As a democratic socialist, I would have been uneasy about the Maastricht plan for monetary union even if it had included an article socialising the means of production – had the drafters somehow found a way to make this compatible with total direction of the macro-economy by a small group of unelected, unaccountable central bankers.

I was first accused of apocalyptic talk during a debate in Birmingham, on grounds that I had described the euro's introduction as "the abolition of parliamentary democracy, at a stroke, in eleven countries." Only someone much more wedded to the notion of liberal democracy than I am could describe its "abolition" as apocalyptic; on the other hand, only those who see it as having no value at all could remain unmoved by these words from the Treaty on European Union: "...neither the European Central Bank (ECB), nor a national central bank, nor any member of their decision-making bodies shall seek or take instructions from Community institutions or bodies, from any government of a Member State or from any other body. The Community institutions and bodies and governments of the Member States undertake to respect this principle and not to seek to influence the members of the decision-making bodies of the ECB or of the national central banks in the performance of their tasks."

In the face of such absolutism, arguments about economic pros and cons become irrelevant. And Article 107 means exactly what it says. When the social democratic leaders of thirteen of the EU member states signed an accord which committed them to co-ordinating mildly reflationary policies, ECB chief Duisenberg reminded them in no uncertain terms that they were in breach of the Treaty. Economic policy, Chancellor? None of your damned business.

The two great forces for positive change in our century have been organised labour and the drive for the emancipation of women. Both movements decided very early in their histories that, for all its limitations, parliamentary democracy was important. Elected assemblies offered excluded groups the chance to carve out a democratic space in which they could, even under capitalism, exercise some influence over economic decision-making. Despite this, now that this influence is being quite openly done away with, the whole process enjoys the enthusiastic support of the TUC. Trade unions have demanded, and in some countries and individual firms won, the right of their members to be informed and consulted by their employers, yet they happily throw away the same hard-won right at national and international level. Feminists rightly refuse to tolerate women's exclusion even from so trivial an institution as the MCC; yet there has been, as far as I am aware, no protest from this quarter at the establishment of absolute rule by a body which must, until and unless women reach a point where they are equally represented at the commanding heights of the banking profession, imply permanent domination by rich, white males.

Article 107 excludes not only those – such as women, blue collar workers, people from ethnic minorities – who are systematically excluded from the highest decision-making bodies, but also small business people, farmers, teachers, poets, architects, members of the clergy – even Prime Ministers. Staying out of EMU means that the British people retain the right to influence economic policy, a limited right in a world where most resources are not under social ownership, but one which has helped to reduce injustice, exploitation and inequality. Don't give it up.

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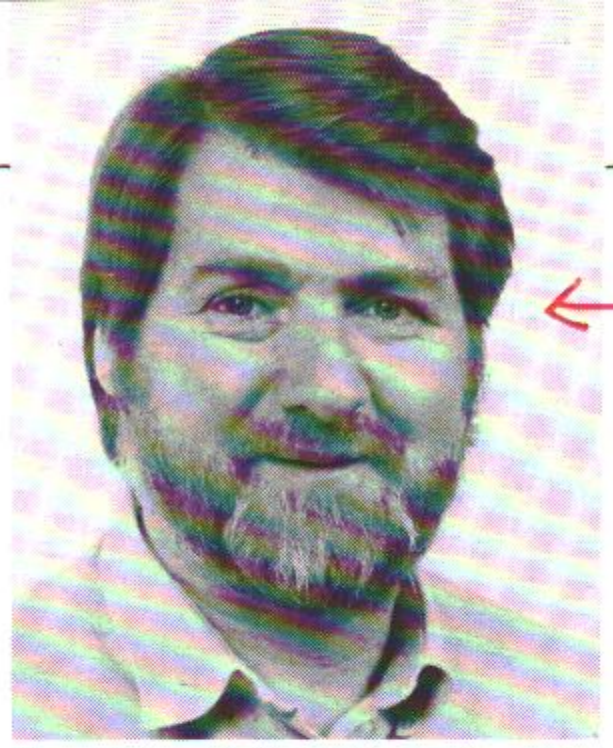


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THE MICHAEL HINDLEY COLUMN

To use the word the English choose when not wanting to commit themselves to an opinion, the Euro-elections will be "interesting".

Voters in Scotland and Wales have recently expcrienced PR, but the Euro-elections will be held under a different system again. The ballot paper will present difficulties: the list will be presented horizontally and not vertically. New South Wales has abandoned its PR experiment not least because the ballot papers proved to be unwieldy and confusing. I reckon a lot of voters will still look for the candidate they know rather than be ready to put a tick next to the party. This will give a welcome advantage to individuals who stand against the party machines, as will be the case in the West Midlands where a brave and exasperated Christine Oddy will stand as an independent candidate. She has had a long and futile battle to get a place on New Labours West Midlands list commensurate to her abilities and hard work. Christine lacks the brown-nosing skills requisite nowadays. Several "successful" Labour candidates in winnable positions on the list have personally told me that they simply and quite cynically swatted up what they knew New Labour wanted to hear as if it were an examination.

Naturally, the New Labour list is dominated by graduates and careerists. There are some decent, hardworking MEPs too in high positions, inevitably on the right of the Party. New Labour's control-freakery, now well established and no longer able to be passed off as a paranoia of the left, has alienated vast swathes of the Party and reports on the ground suggest indifferent non-co-operation is the best Blair plc can expect from its previously loyal "stakeholders".

The Euro-election is going to be the "against" election. Previously Labour has done well because it could persuade voters to make a protest "against" the Tory Government. The Tories know they cannot muster an "against Blair" campaign – it's difficult to campaign against one of your own. They can, however, rally their troops "against" Europe, single currency, majority voting, decline in national sovereignty etc. and that is still a potent force sufficient for them to stage and claim a recovery of sorts. In my home area of East Lancashire, long the heartland of working class Tory voters, the Conservative Party in the last two local elections has made great gains in winning back seats directly from Labour which they lost in their dark days. They have done this by a combination of returnees and huge Labour abstentions. Blair has always intended jettisoning real Labour – policies and voters – but the vote is haemorrhaging more quickly than Blair plc expected, hence the manic drive for an alliance with the Lib-Dems. In short, New Labour will lose seats and the Tories will probably gain seats. Under PR the Lib-Dems will gain too – which will not dismay Blair. PR also gives the Greens a real chance of winning seats. The continuing unease about GM food is just right for the Greens and the two parties of big business (New Labour and Tory) cannot come across as the consumer's friends with any credibility .

Labour anti-Europeans in all their forms from abiding "leave the Common market" to critics of further integration (and both these positions are widespread in numerical support) will have the choice of parties left of Labour in most regions – in the West Midlands, the Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Labour Party. Previously left critics of Europe reluctantly voted Labour or abstained. For the politically uneducated Euro-critics there is the BNP and the well-funded UK Independence Party. An expected and thoroughly deserved low turnout will mean that the smaller parties could do well, not enough to win but enough to eat into Labour votes particularly and deny the New Labour Party the odd seat.

I have left the largest imponderable to the last. The war in the Balkans will be a decisive factor in the elections. By polling day the war could be much worse. Already the chatterati among *Observer* and *Guardian* readers are in anguish as they realise you cannot have a nice clean war for humanitarian purposes and Blair has set New Labour irretrievably up as the War Party. Few, if any, senior politicians in Europe are convinced by his bellicose intent, nor by the lachrymose photo opportunities for the First Lady. On the contrary, day by day Blair is seen as a dangerous liability. In his madcap "I'm more bomb-happy than even the Yanks" posturing he is forcing the Europeans to contemplate not only European security minus the Americans, but minus the British, too.

Blair is reaching the breaking point. There is a madness in his actions which speaks not of an heroic Churchill in a real hour of peril, but of the superficially brilliant, but fundamentally brittle and unstable Anthony Eden at Suez. Blair can only go forward now to Armageddon. He cannot be the one who signs up for the inevitable compromise with Milosovic. Other lurking figures in the Cabinet are ready for that.

● Michael Hindley is standing down as an MEP. He will continue to contribute to *LLB* occasionally. We thank Michael for his support and his incisive political comments that have contributed greatly to our international coverage.

Rich pickings from world's poor

Mike Phipps reviews *Your money or your life* by Eric Toussaint, published by Pluto, price £17.99 pbk and *The Globalisation of Finance: a citizen's guide* by Kavaljit Singh, published by Zed, price £12.95 pbk.

These two books are a sorely needed antidote to the hype about the benefits of globalisation with which we are constantly bombarded. It is chilling to learn that worldwide income levels are falling, that consumer spending in Africa has dropped 20% over the last 25 years and that even before the economic crash in Indonesia, more than one in four people were officially poor (this could now double).

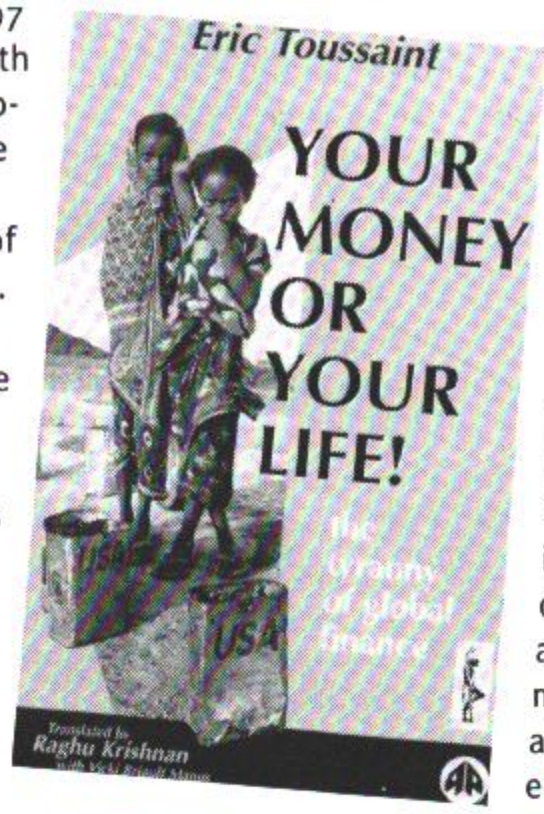
Toussaint's figures on global poverty are quite startling. 1.3 billion people survive on less than $1 a day. In the last six years there has been an eightfold increase in the poor in the former Eastern bloc. The "feminisation" of poverty is also increasing: as fewer children go to school, due to the imposition of fees in many countries, it is women who have the highest rates of illiteracy (a staggering 61% in India). As governments cut health care, it is women who suffer most, as shown for example by increasing rates of death in childbirth. Recent research indicates that dowry deaths, far from being a remnant of a "backward" society, have grown in number with the development of free market capitalism.

Why is this happening? The simple answer is structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) – IMF-dictated economic restructuring to allow poorer countries to keep up with the interest payments on their massive national debts. These programmes deliberately target free education and health services. They demand price deregulation, driving farmers into bankruptcy and insist on trade liberalisation, further destroying local production and allowing domestic capital to move out of productive areas. They also demand wholesale privatisation of state industries and services (also benefiting western capital) and regressive sales taxes that hit low income groups hardest.

Yet most of these IMF programmes have led to countries becoming increasingly indebted and impoverished. Small wonder then that the IMF also favours strengthening these countries' internal security apparatus to deal with social unrest!

Toussaint's case studies show that much of the money loaned to regimes in the 1980s went straight into the private accounts of dictators – Argentina is a case in point. Yet civilian administrations are now obliged to pay the loans off by further bleeding the people. More alarmingly, a ruthless SAP under the Habyarimana dictatorship in Rwanda in 1990 ruined hundreds of thousands of coffee farmers. These, along with the growing urban poor, became potential recruits for the Interahamwe militias and army. In short the regime channelled social discontent into its plan for genocide in 1994. Today, survivors of that genocide are paying for the weapons used to commit the crime. Elsewhere there are clear links between the rise of indebtedness and the growth of the arms trade.

Singh's book focuses more on the disasters caused by deregulation and globalisation. Even before the 1994-5 stock market and currency crash in Mexico, liberalisation had resulted in huge deficits, tighter credit for farmers, steep increases in wealth concentration, rising prices and an increase in infant mortality due to malnutrition. The 1997 crash in South East Asia provided a more spectacular illustration of the problem. Mainstream pundits were quick to blame the weaknesses in these countries' financial systems. But they neglected to point out that these weaknesses were a direct result of the IMF policy of deregulation in the region. Evidence now suggests that IMF conditions for rescue operations – deflation and shock therapy – have actually worsened the situation. Equally, IMF-inspired financial bailouts are resulting in public money being spent to rescue private markets – so the principle of no government intervention in the economy is quickly suspended when a bailout is required. "Profits are for private owners," the *Financial Times* observed, "while losses are covered by the taxpayers."



The effect is to create a "social safety net" for international speculators. For example much of the $17 billion rescue money earmarked for Thailand is effectively being ransacked by international bankers. Meanwhile failing companies in the region are being bought up at knock-down prices by these investors and restructured. The results are a catastrophic effect on jobs and the expulsion and scapegoating of migrant workers. The knock-on consequences are severe for people in Bangladesh, Vietnam and other poor countries in the region that depend for survival on remittances home from migrant workers in the "Asian tigers".

Both books have some solutions, however. One obvious idea is to expropriate dictators' foreign assets – Mobutu's money stashed abroad is the equivalent of Zaire's foreign debt! Another would be capital controls, for example the Tobin tax: a proposal that would slow down short-term currency flows and bring in $33 billion in revenue. When you consider that just $40 billion (one twentieth of the sum spent in 1997 on military spending worldwide) could bring universal access to clean water, education, health, sanitation and basic nutrition, then the full irrationality and inhumanity of global capitalism is clear to see.

These two books do a superb job of explaining the nature of the problem and showing how obvious the solution could be.

Correspondence

I don't know what conference or what speaker Jane Cosher was listening to – but it certainly wasn't me. Never in my entire political career have I ever said "that certain levels of corruption were permissible in some societies".
It might have been better if she had found the courage to speak up at the time so that I could have corrected her misunderstanding – instead she gave succour to the tabloid media who chose to quote her disgraceful misrepresentation of my views.
An apology in *LLB* is surely the least I can expect – perhaps the *Express* will then quote that – but I doubt it!
Pauline Green MEP,
London North

● *LLB* unreservedly apologises for this misrepresentation of Pauline Green's views.

Anti-war pleas ignore how it began – Milosevic's oppression of Kosovars and others. Given this has increased since the war began, abandoning armed conflict now would have damaging consequences.

The prospect of international brigades being mobilised to defend the Kosovars was a romantic delusion. NATO is, and remains, their only hope. Principled activists on the British left did not give lectures to the Sandinistas, ANC or Sinn Fein on how to conduct armed struggles. Self-determination for Kosova is entirely reasonable and just. To blame NATO for the refugees' horrendous plight is like placing responsibility on the allies in World War II for the holocaust. Just as Hitler's campaign of genocide was already long under way and Milosevic's pursuit of ethnic cleansing has also long been clear.

The only change is the attitude of the opposition, from appeasement to active armed resistance, in the latter case following changes of governments in Britain and Germany. Millions are now paying the price of the reluctance of Kohl, Major, and Clinton to act against Milosevic when his stormtroopers were rampaging through Bosnia.

Support for the war's objectives should not embrace tactics such as cluster bombs and depleted uranium which extend the conflict to unborn generations, undermining NATO's claims to the moral high ground. Bombing the Chinese embassy was an act of unparalleled ineptitude, wrecking hopes for consensus outside Europe supporting the war aims.

Any settlement resulting in Milosevic's forces continuing to occupy Kosova would be seen as legitimising mass murder, rape and destruction. This would be the biggest disaster of all. Bosnia, Albania and Croatia would be under renewed threat and racist and fascist groups everywhere from Combat 18 to the Ku Klux Klan would be resurgent.

Failure to beat Milosevic would be paid by increased racial attacks, nail bombings and ever-growing suspicion and intolerance. Therefore, reluctantly, I believe the war against him must be continued until victory is achieved. Many others on the left, from Ken Livingstone to the German Greens, recognise this. Isn't it time *LLB* did likewise?
Colin Hall,
Leicester

Changing political perspectives are both interesting and necessary. A common Tribunite theme in the 1950s was the undesirable use of the unions' block vote at Party conferences. Now we are concerned about how they can retain their influence with the operation of OMOV. Alan Simpson's faint praise of Harold Wilson in your April issue indicates another possible shift of viewpoint for some socialists. (Those seeking further enlightenment on the achievements of the Wilson years are recommended to read John Cole: *As It Seemed to Me*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1995).

The controversy over Ken Livingstone's bid for the chance to stand for London Mayor can take place only because Labour won the 1997 election. Can we look forward to an article in *LLB* in a decade's time pointing out the benefits we have gained from Tony Blair's ability to win elections – or does anyone believe that the Tories would have adopted our policies anyway?
Ernie Gillians,
Henfield

The spectacle of the two great war-mongering nations who produce 65% of the world's exported weapons (USA 40%, GB 25%) claiming might is right and dropping missiles on defenceless Iraqis and Serbs under the guise of morality is ugly in the extreme. Blair's chilling enthusiasm fills me with a sense of shame, particularly as I have little doubt that the whole grisly charade in Yugoslavia has been masterminded by the CIA, which has painstakingly stimulated ethnic hatreds in order to destabilise the region and leave it at the mercy of US financial aid.
Bob Spooner,
Leeds

PERISCOPE

Tottenham replay sensation

NEC candidate **Delyth Morgan** is listed as being backed by Tottenham CLP. This is strange because she lost the nomination there two months ago.

How come? Well, a CLP which had nominated her complained to HQ and Tottenham CLP were "encouraged" to give her another chance! At the next GC, after some opposition, it was agreed that she could address the meeting and her nomination was narrowly backed.

Nice to have friends in high places.

Das Capita – Volume One

Brighton Council Leader **Lord Bassam** is pushing ahead with privatisation of the council tax and housing benefits sections, lining up a firm called Capita to take on the work. That couldn't possibly be the same Capita that he worked for until only a matter of weeks before the deal was done, could it? And these are the council leaders Blair wants to turn into all-powerful mayors.

Vote early, vote often

Any reader with £25 may wish to take advantage of **New Labour's Centenary Membership scheme**. You can name up to three extra members – they do not need to sign the form, and no proof of age, eligibility or even existence is required. Membership cards will be dispatched, and next year, bingo! – four votes for the NEC GrassRoots Alliance slate. So sign up your babes in arms, your pet cats, your Tory friends, today.

Poor Mandy

Does no-one outside No. 10 have any sympathy for him ? Periscope notes that the latest edition of the PMS ***Parliamentary Companion*** (an authoritative journal listing Ministers, MPs and Peers, members of Select Committees and senior Civil Servants) has the words 'Post Mandelson Edition' emblazoned on its front cover. (We presume this is meant to be a selling point.)

Glyn Fraud

The biggest scandal in the revelations that Labour Euro MP **Glyn Ford**, parachuted into number one in the South West Regional Lists, used his office expenses to pay for his laundry, gardener and a log cutter(!) isn't that he abused the system in this way – it is that nothing that he did appears to be against the eurodosh rules.

NEC elections: vote now

If you're a Labour Party member, the clearest way to send a message to Tony Blair about the direction of our Labour Government is to vote for the Grassroots Alliance (GA) candidates for the NEC. Last year, the election of four of the six Grassroots Alliance candidates sent alarm bells ringing at Millbank. A repeat performance will be needed to remind our leaders we're still here. After the undemocratic manoeuvres around the selection of candidates for the Welsh, Scottish and European elections, not to mention the pending decision on the London Mayor, a vote for the GA is the clearest way for Party members to signal their discontent with the current extreme centralisation of power.

By voting for the GA, Party members will speaking loud and clear on cuts in Incapacity Benefit, the Immigration and Asylum Bill, ties to big business, privatisation, and the need for a realistic minimum wage and increased public sector pay. Let's make it clear that on these issues, it's the GA, and not Millbank, that speaks for Party members.

- Ballot papers are out. The deadline is 14th June.
- Remind any member you know who voted for the GA last year to do so again.
- Remind members that they have six votes – and they should use them to vote for the six GA candidates. They are the only genuine independents.
- GA leaflets are available from *LLB* (0181-985 6597) Individual leaflets for Liz Davies and Christine Shawcroft are also available from *LLB*.
- All of the candidates will address local meetings. Mark, Pete and Liz can report on events at the NEC. Call *LLB* if you want to arrange a local meeting.
- Please notify *LLB* of any evidence of "dirty tricks" from the opposition – any mailings that seem to have come from Labour Party offices and any phone calls to Party members on behalf of a slate of candidates.
- Don't forget to vote for Theresa Pearce for the National Constitutional Committee.

GRASSROOTS ALLIANCE SLATE, CONSTITUENCY SECTION

ANN BLACK • BILL BUTLER • LIZ DAVIES

MARK SEDDON • CHRISTINE SHAWCROFT • PETE WILLSMAN

Is Labour listening?

Ann Black, a member of the National Policy Forum, calls for members' voices to be heard.

In Scotland and Wales our vote suffered thanks to passionate campaigning by committed nationalists, Labour's London-imposed candidates, demoralised Party activists and bewildered traditional supporters. One third of local council votes went to the Tories, previously considered clinically dead, and turnout in core areas barely reached double figures. Omens for the European elections are not good.

Delaying the right to roam will play badly in the country. Forcing through cuts in disability benefits won't make MPs loyal.

National Policy Forum members cannot walk away from our responsibilities. Conference will decide Labour's manifesto on health, welfare and crime and justice. The Forum, supposed to ensure wide-ranging debate, should provide a chance to reconnect with our roots and rebuild the party.

We can propose alternatives within policy papers arising from the consultative process. We hear little from the policy commissions, but we are in touch with members through meetings and forums and well able to reflect their views. At the NPF meeting in July Party managers can ignore the grassroots, outvote their representatives and plump for a Conference of platitudes or can listen and learn.

Welfare will set the tone for Labour's second term. Themes emerging repeatedly include:

- universal welfare provision – overwhelmingly preferred to means-tested benefits. Administrative costs are minimised, everyone pays in, everyone draws out.
- the basic state pension, and the income support top-up, should be indexed to earnings, not prices, and restored to its real value before the Tories broke the link. The Minimum Income Guarantee should go automatically to all pensioners, with those on higher incomes paying more tax.
- no private sector pensions. Many want SERPS retained, and those unable to work should receive the credits currently envisaged only for carers and the disabled. There are problems with making pensions optional: do we let the improvident starve, or support them, causing resentment among those who have contributed?
- child benefit increases – welcomed, but lone parents still face higher costs. Labour should adjust benefits so children from all families have equal life chances.
- coercing single parents into work reduces parental choice. Like other parents they should be allowed to bring up their own children.
- entitlement to benefits should be restored to 16- and 17-year-olds with no other means of support. They should be allowed entry to the New Deal on the same basis as 18-year-olds.
- tax fraud should be treated as seriously as benefit fraud. This means prioritising high income tax fraudsters.
- the Government should deal with high housing benefit bills through controls which outlaw extortionate rents, not through leaving tenants with a shortfall between their allowance and what they have to pay.
- a majority accept, reluctantly, our pledge not to raise income tax rates in this Parliament, but want to review them for the next. Lifting the National Insurance ceiling at least to the start of the 40% tax bracket is widely favoured. No-one moving from benefit into work should face marginal tax rates above the basic rate of income tax.

If socialism is the language of priorities, welfare, both internationally and at home, must come well ahead of warfare.

We welcome comments from branches, constituencies and forums, sent to your NPF or NEC representatives before 18th June.

- Ann Black is a member of the Labour Reform Steering Committee.

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