LABOUR LEFT BRIEFING

March 1999

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Labour's choices for regional government

Let the members decide

inside... ● Wales Labour Party ● Chile ● Grassroots Alliance slate ● Union Supplement ● GM food ● National civil rights movement

Labour Left Briefing

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AGENDA

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Front cover photo: Paul Mattsson

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End of the universe?

THE CREATION of the welfare state is rightly seen as one of Labour's finest achievements. Under New Labour's welfare reforms the Government is turning its back on this tradition creating a welfare system that is influenced by the workfare schemes in the US and targeting in Australia. It represents "the death of universalism".

It should be no surprise by now that Tony Blair would use the *Daily Mail* to bury one of Labour's fundamental touchstones. Blair used the article to attack the "something-for-nothing-society".



The masters of spin have aligned New Labour with all those who blame the poor for society's failings. Lone mothers have been a target for the new right for ten years. Once again those in power have used the right wing press to stigmatise the poor.

The measures are described by Blair and Darling as tough; all claimants including lone parents and the disabled will be compelled to attend a "Gateway" interview, Incapacity Benefit has been cut by £750 million and the stakeholder pension scheme replaces SERPS with a private scheme. These are reforms that even the Tories thought were a step too far.

Labour needs to return to the principles that launched the welfare state – full employment and universal welfare benefits. Work-focused interviews will not create full-time well paid jobs. As a recent forecast of jobs growth by Cambridge Econometrics shows, nearly all job growth in the next decade will be in part-time work. This is the reality of Labour's workfare – poverty will not disappear. Opportunities dictated by the free market mean a low wage economy. The outcome is likely to be a growth in inequality.

New Labour claims that the welfare reforms will target those most in need. This is quite likely to lead to affluence testing with tax on child benefits and an increase in means testing. As a number of writers, including former Thatcherite John Gray have pointed out, once the welfare state is reduced to a safety net there is no guarantee that benefit levels can be maintained. Those who are able to take out private pensions and insurance will want tax cuts. The universalism that creates the solidarity necessary for a cohesive welfare system will start to erode. We only need to look at the recent Australian general election, with the return of a right wing tax cutting government, to see the failure of targeting as a means of defending the poor.

The revolt of Labour MPs against the single parent benefit showed that New Labour's welfare plans can be opposed. It is time for those who claim to be "Old Labour" in the trade unions to come off the fence. The welfare state is being buried by New Labour. It's time to say no.

Freaks out of control

In Wales and London, Party members have shown their growing frustration at Millbank's clumsy attempts to impose Government appointees to lead our new devolved regional governments.

The vote for Rhodri Morgan against Alun Michael was astonishing by any standards – a "victory" for New Labour against almost two thirds of its own membership in Wales and a "victory" achieved by the tired old methods of the bureaucratic and unaccountable use of the union block vote. Above all it was a "victory" achieved by an almost unprecedented intervention by Tony Blair himself.

At least Rhodri Morgan was granted the privilege of being on the ballot. Ken Livingstone may not get that far. If they succeed in excluding him from seeking Labour's nomination for London Mayor against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Party members and the electorate, New Labour's message will be clear. Our flagship reforms on devolved government will be exposed as a sham and it will be clear that our leaders would prefer to risk losing the government of London to our political enemies rather than have a Mayor of London who promises to meet the needs of the people.

Nominate, don't wait

The deadline for much Labour Party Annual Conference business is 9th April. This means that, for most CLPs, March is the last chance to nominate for the NEC and the National Policy Forum and to select delegates to Annual Conference.

For the NEC, the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance is standing Ann Black, Bill Butler, Liz Davies, Mark Seddon, Christine Shawcroft, and Pete Willsman.

Candidates need nominations from CLPs in three different regions in order to stand. We need to get the maximum number of nominations for these six comrades; the success of 1998 is a hard act to follow, and if we slip from those heights it will be easy for the Millbank Tendency to allege that the left is on its way out.

Almost as important are nominations for the National Policy Forum. Each region has three places on the NPF up for grabs. As for the NEC, each CLP can make one nomination. Candidates need to be nominated by five CLPs from their region. Unlike the NEC, the winners will be decided at Annual Conference by a ballot of delegates on a regional basis.

Which is why it is important to get reliable conference delegates selected. It would be preferable for a region's representatives on the NPF to be elected by a ballot of all members in their region. Until that happens, Conference delegates should be mandated to vote for the candidates supported by their GCs. ❑

"Truth and justice now!"

Sola Sierra and Alicia Lira Matus sat and watched every day of the Pinochet hearing. Sue Lukes asked them about women in Chile and the struggle for human rights.

"CHILEAN women's struggles for freedom and social demands started when the Spanish colonised Chile. Indigenous women like Fresia Guacolda, alongside other leaders, played an important part in the efforts to get the Spanish colonisers off our land. Later, during the struggle for independence, women like Javiera Carrera and Paula Jara Quemada risked their lives to help, until we gained independence.

From 1925, the struggle in Chile intensified, initially creating women's organisations. Along with men, they then became active in setting up the workers' movement, especially in the north, in the nitrate works, against exploitation by the English owners.

In 1945, the first Chilean organisation to campaign for women's rights was formed. Women who led that included Elena Caffarena, Olga Poblete and Amanda Labarca. In 1948 they succeeded in getting the vote for Chilean women and immediately women stood for parliament. The first elected were Julieta Campusano of the Communist Party and Maria de la Cruz, an independent.

After the coup of 1973, women became completely involved in the struggles for human rights. Firstly relatives moved to try to save the lives of the thousands of Chileans who were arbitrarily arrested and taken to the new detention centres set up in stadiums, derelict sites, torture houses and barracks. As they went from one place to another, desperately searching, the first Association of Relatives of Disappeared Political Prisoners, was formed. Later, relatives of those executed, of political prisoners, of those banished to isolated parts of Chile, and of exiles set up associations too; in all of them women formed the great majority. Later still, the economic situation forced us to develop other sorts of organisations, with new names. We set up "Shopping Together", "The Common Cooking Pot", "Sharing the Table" and "Women for Life".

These movements became so strong that they began to lead the struggle against the dictatorship. The first mass mobilisation in Chile after the coup was the celebration of International Women's Day, 8th March, 1978, in which thousands of women outwitted the repression to come and demand an end to the killing of our children. The folk group of the Association of the Relatives of Disappeared Political Prisoners gave its first performance at this rally: it still sings at human rights events today.

It was women's organisations that prevented the government imposing a law to stop any further actions seeking justice for human rights abuses. Today they continue to organise, not only in Chile but also with other relatives of victims, especially those in the Americas, who have formed FEDEFAM (the Federation of Associations of Relatives of Disappeared Political Prisoners). We would like to see all the junta tried for the tragedy they brought to our country, which has not finished yet. All our martyrs demand it: Truth and Justice Now!"

Demonstrators oppose Pinochet at Belmarsh magistrates court.



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON

SOLA SIERRA is the president of the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Political Prisoners of Chile. She started her community activity at school, organising girls' clubs that mirrored women's organisations, and went on to work in the Department of Social Development under the Allende government.

After the coup, she helped the families of political prisoners, and when her husband was arrested and disappeared, became involved in the Association, as well as helping to set up the Human Rights Commission. During the long struggle to find the disappeared, she has attended many international events, helped to set up a Latin American organisation of relatives, and been received by many international figures. She gave evidence in Spain in 1997 in the initial proceedings against Pinochet.

Alicia Lira Matus is the head of communications for the Association of Relatives of Executed Political Prisoners in Chile. She was also a member of the Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners from 1986 to 1992 and was its president. On 13th August 1986, her brother Diego was arrested and brutally tortured, later escaping from prison in January 1990. On 8th September 1986, her husband, Felipe Rivera Gajardo, was dragged from his home by a military patrol in the middle of the night, and taken to a deserted place, where he was shot, his body left in the street (three others were similarly murdered that night alone).

Alicia has been active in many human rights organisations during the dictatorship and the "transition to democracy", and is now involved in the National Human Rights Assembly. She has been arrested countless times, and is now recovering from an operation on her knee, which she needed after being beaten by armed police in front of the presidential palace in February 1998.

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Millbank is put on the defensive as massive crowd takes stand on Ken

Ken Livingstone MP

IT IS almost impossible to express how humbling it was on 15th February, in the middle of a 48-hour tube strike, to witness nearly 2,000 people packing Methodist Central Hall in Westminster to hear the case for my right to seek the Labour nomination for mayor of London. It looked likely at about 6.45pm that we would fill the room booked for 500 people. By 7.15 the Central Hall staff were packing in extra chairs, as camera crews and radio broadcasters beamed the events out live. By 7.25 we could see that the room was full to capacity and still the public were flowing in.

Finally, the Central Hall advised me that the only thing to do was to move everyone to the main hall.

The atmosphere among the members of the public and the Party activists who packed the room was fantastic. The half-hearted Millbank spin that "only" 1,000 people attended was matched only by the Labour MP who was confidently informing colleagues that there had been just 400 in the audience! It should have clarified to every spin doctor who was there that there is tremendous anger from Londoners about being told who they can and cannot vote for by a bunch of people meeting in private. Those apparatchiks will also have seen the massive pool of enthusiasm that exists for really changing our capital city for the better. It is time for the Labour Party to ride that wave of enthusiasm.

The balance sheet of the weeklies demonstrated that the spin doctor's craft is overrated. Derek Draper wrote an extraordinary article in the *Spectator*: "One of Blair's favourite maxims is that 'you must not fight the battles of the past'. If he rules out 'Red Ken' that is precisely what he will be doing".

Labour's spin doctors had gone onto the offensive before the meeting, their underlying message being that I was using "anti-Labour" methods and supporters to force my way into the Labour nomination. This line was fed to the *Observer* the day before the rally as a means to shape the following day's coverage. What the spin doctors do not understand is that the more they attack me, the more the public smells a rat.

The spin actually amounted to a smear. Unnamed officials in the Greater London Labour Party had briefed the *Observer* that I would be ruled out of the ballot on the charge that I would be sharing a platform with Jo Brand and Lee Jasper (who were criticised for being non-Labour Party members), and that my campaign is part of some anti-Labour plot.



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON

Let Livingstone stand rally, 15/2/99.

Actually, Lee Jasper of the National Black Alliance has already rejoined the Labour Party, and he is a long-standing Labour voter who represents a cross-section of black organisations. He is precisely the sort of person Labour must involve. It would be a reprehensible insult to the black communities in London if anyone seriously argued that I should not speak on a platform with him.

Jo Brand has done numerous benefits for the Labour Party (including Emily's List) and regularly donates to the Party. Anyone who saw her brilliant handling of the media all day would know that Jo is not someone to mess with.

I regard it as a compliment, not a criticism, that I am able to draw in support among the general public. The polls show that I am ahead among ordinary Londoners as well as among Party members and that my support is strongest on the question of whether I should be allowed to stand.

The reality is that no Labour mayor could be elected to then wage war against a Labour government, as I pointed out in my open letter to Tony Blair in the *Guardian* in January. The membership of the Labour Party in London would not stand for anybody who used the position to pursue their own agenda rather than working with the Government to resolve the problems London faces.

Nonetheless, I am disappointed that the Greater London Labour Party regional office is being used as a bunker to wage a systematic campaign against my candidature. It defies belief that officials can argue that there will be an impartial selection procedure after the recent frenzy of bias and innuendo. A press release issued by the regional press office on 29th January accused me of trying to "dupe Party members". Margaret McDonagh would do the London Labour Party a great service if she would advise the anonymous officials quoted in the press to find another strategy. You cannot have the regional office favouring one candidate over another, or trying to discredit one of them, and then expect Party members to depend on the neutrality of the regional office.

Not only is this a question of fair play, but about the character of the Labour Party as a democratic and outward looking political force in British society.

- Stand Up for Ken benefit, Hackney Empire, 10th March. Box office 0181-985 2424.
- "Let Ken Stand" badges are available from 50p each from Ken Livingstone's Right to Stand, PO Box 20052, London NW2 5ZH.
- Resolution: "We support Ken Livingstone's right to be on the shortlist for the selection of Labour's candidate for mayor of London".

Staff still nursing a grievance

Helen Weatherley, Vice-Chair Kingston Hospital UNISON, reports: The recent announcement of this year's pay award for nurses resulted in neither surprises nor solutions. Instead of tackling the nursing shortage, the divisive award will create more problems than it solves. As predicted, the starting pay for newly qualified nurses leapt by 12%. Everyone else got 4.7%.

Good news for nurses? The words "inflation" and "busting" were bandied about freely. Unlike the last two pay awards, this year's will not be staged, and there have been mandatory uplifts of London and other allowances that in recent years have been at the discretion of individual trusts. However the response hasn't been overwhelmingly enthusiastic; one poll showed that 91% of responding nurses felt the award wasn't enough.

The larger rise in starting pay has been achieved by taking out the first two increments on the scale for newly qualified staff. Apparently the idea is to attract people into nursing. It will stop those nasty media stories about training for three years and only getting paid £12,500 a year when you finish. In the meantime, the majority of the nursing workforce, who are on either lower or higher grades, have been left wondering why they too don't deserve 12%.

Frank Dobson seems to think he has the answer: he has proposed performance pay and a complete restructuring of grading. All this has been pushed through without consultation with unions, who won't have forgotten the nightmare that was clinical grading in the late eighties. And how do we assess performance pay for nurses? Even personnel departments are shuddering at the thought. It's possible that units achieving waiting list targets, for example, will be financially rewarded, penalising those "inefficient" hospitals who go filling up their beds with emergency admissions.

Of course there is the predicted sting in the tail to this year's award: part of the funding will have to come out of project development money, in turn raising serious doubts about the likelihood of an equal pay rise for all other health workers. Staff Side organisations have already expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the award although they will inevitably be making a formal acceptance shortly. However, the future isn't as gloomy for nurses as it is for the NHS; with agency rates soaring and nurses able to earn up to 50% more per hour on a casual basis, we can swan off and tell the Government where to shove their 12%.

Tube strike causes major disruption

Diana Udall, London Transport Regional Council of RMT, reports on a successful strike: The 48-hour strike in support of guarantees of job security, pension rights, and for improvements in conditions, was well supported both by RMT members and also by members of other unions not crossing picket lines. On average London Underground Ltd were providing a less than 50% service.

One of the greatest problems that management had was keeping the stations open. This was only achieved using managers and administrative staff, whose qualifications could certainly be described as questionable. They were desperate not to have three stations in a row closed as this would mean the trains would have to stop running through that section. We do know that trains were running contrary to LUL's own safety procedures for a short while early on Monday morning.

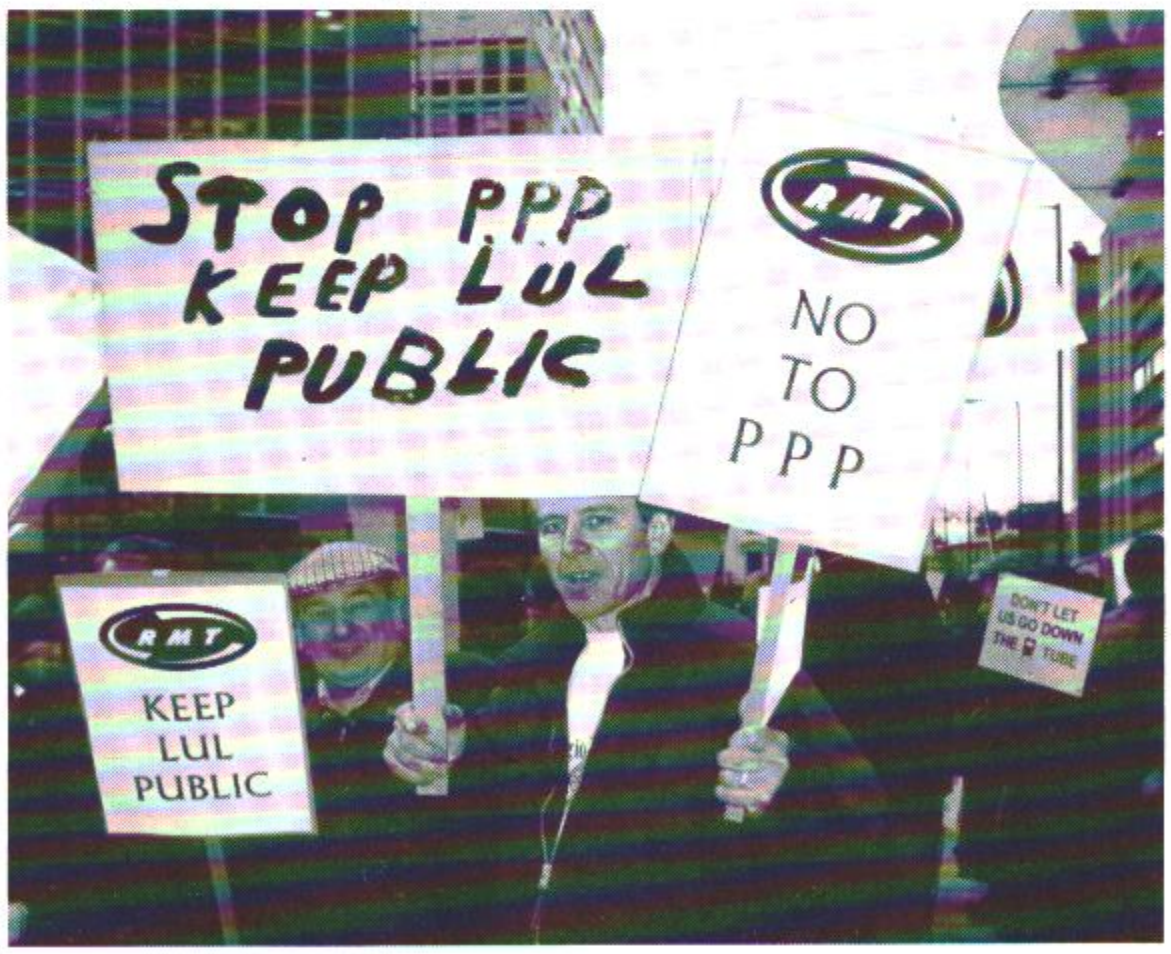
The support the union has received from the public continues to be good – the pickets received little hostility. The media, LUL management, the Government and big business have been doing their best to play down the action and to paint the RMT as being outrageous and unreasonable to deflect attention away from the issue of tube privatisation. The London Chamber of Commerce suggested that LUL workers should be banned from striking, the *London Today* news programme picked up on that and ran a phone poll (unfortunately I never did find out the result.)

John Reid, the Transport Minister, suggested that the RMT did not want investment in LUL. What nonsense – of course we want investment in the system – it's just that there are much more acceptable alternatives which the powers that be are not prepared to consider. LUL want us to be "reasonable – like the other unions" ie. co-operate and make the proposals work. Privatisation of all or part of the underground is wrong, it won't work and is very expensive. The lessons of the main line have not been learnt. The Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs has met with RMT representatives and plans to raise objections to privatisation in Parliament.

The RMT will be considering its next steps following consultation with workplace representatives. But this is not the RMT's fight alone. The public campaign against tube privatisation must be built and given a higher profile. There are plenty of things to be done:

- articles in local papers, stalls in shopping centres, markets etc.
- raising the issue at your trade union branch.
- letter to ministers, MPs and LUL.
- help the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation, c/o John Leach, 47c Wadeson Street, London, E2 9DP, 0181-981 8065.
- visit the CATP website: http://keepthetubepublic.listbot.com .

Lobby of John Prescott, 5/2/99.



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Cuts are a burning issue

John Cryer, MP for Hornchurch, asks if London can afford to make cuts in the fire service.

LONDON IS facing yet more cuts in the fire service. The London Fire and Civil Defence Authority has voted to cut five fire appliances from the Greater London service. This follows the axing of more than 60 machines in the past 13 years, with the loss of 1,200 jobs. Fourteen of those machines have gone since the Docklands' bomb three years ago, which makes me wonder whether London would be able to cope with a major disaster today.

The five new targets for cutting are Heston and Hillingdon in west London, Finchley in the north, Addington in the south and my own station of Hornchurch in east London.

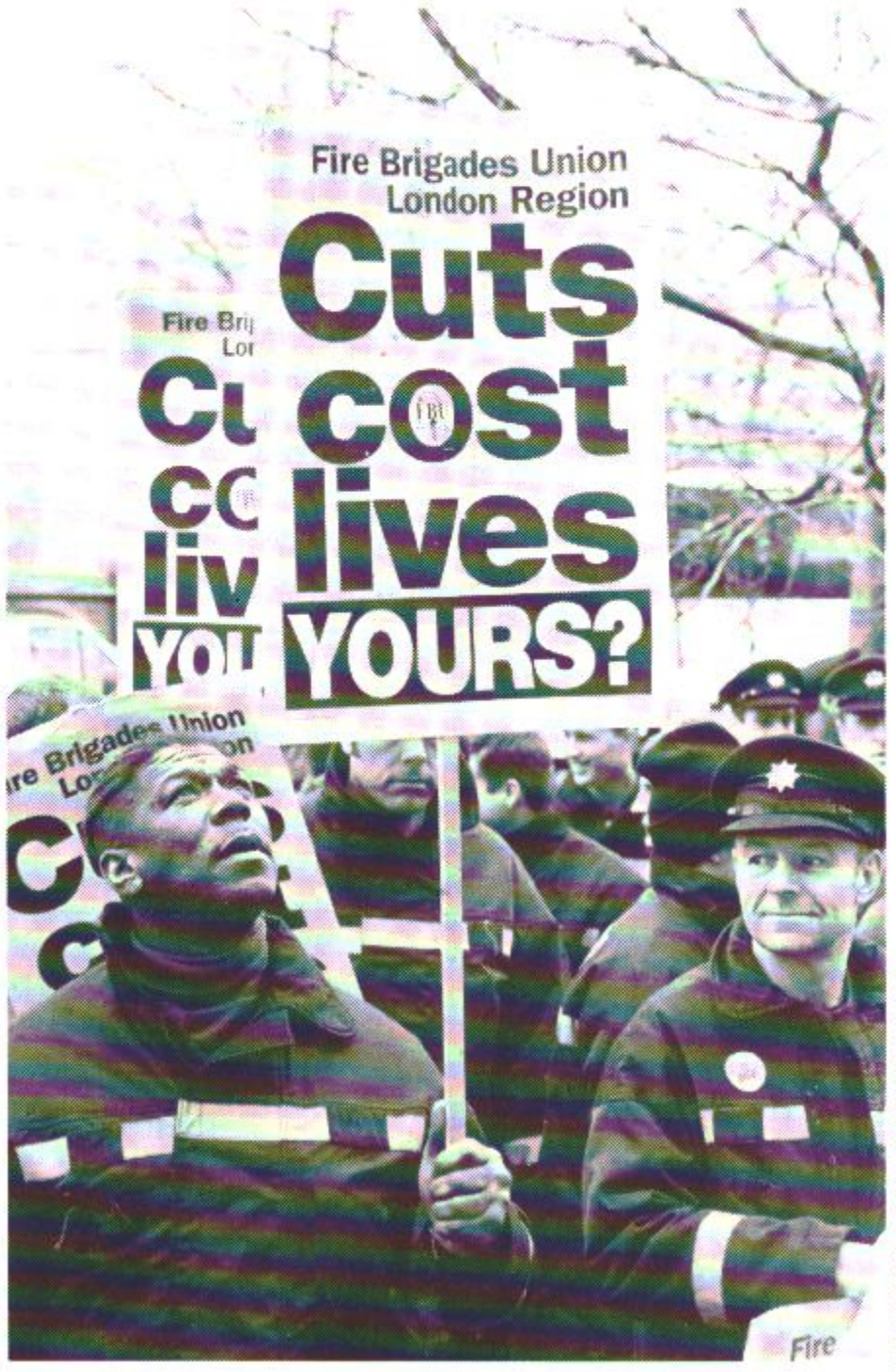
The LFCDA is insisting on going ahead with the attacks on the service, despite having £5m in reserves, and an underspend this year of £6.5m. Sentimental old fool that I am, I had hoped that the LFCDA might have taken seriously the FBU's slogan, Cuts Cost Lives. Apparently not.

A key factor in the fire authority's finances is the pensions' issue. This year, pensions will cost over £70m, out of a total budget of around £300m. This is because firefighters have never had a proper, funded pension scheme. Now there are fire authorities that are seriously considering attacks on firefighters' terms and conditions – and even their pension entitlements – in order to balance the books. Such attacks, I am sure, will be resisted by any means necessary. The least firefighters should be able to expect is a decent pension.

What the London Fire Authority should be doing is actually defending the service, not blithely seeking out maximum financial rectitude and potentially sacrificing lives in the process.

But this goes to a much wider issue. The idea seems to have gained considerable favour that we can have proper public services without actually paying for them. This is clearly nonsense and the Private Finance Initiative is one of the results of such a view.

Ultimately, our public services can and should be defended by the people who work in them and use them. The Essex firefighters demonstrated this superbly and defeated the cuts' programme foisted upon that country by its vindictive authority. Where will the future battles come?



Firefighters lobby the CDFA.

PHOTO: PAUL MATTSSON

Join the march for a living wage!

The UNISON-inspired demonstration on April 10th against the low rate of the minimum wage has now attracted the support of some 20 national organisations. Jon Rogers, Branch Secretary Lambeth UNISON, reports.

THE CALL for the demonstration has begun to capture the imagination of activists – so that even in London, capital of the soft south, a serious debate is under way about why the UNISON Region cannot book more than one train to the demonstration in Newcastle – and whether branches should also be booking coaches.

UNISON is doing some serious work to publicise the demonstration to its members – but socialists and trade unionists should not leave this work up to the national officials of the union. The approach adopted by UNISON national officers continues to bear the mark of their original opposition to a national demonstration. The NEC (still sulking that UNISON Conference wouldn't let them put the subs up) have not allocated any additional money to regions or branches to organise the march.

The ambivalence of the union to its own demonstration is best reflected in the current plan that there will be no rally with speakers at the end of the march through Newcastle. Instead there will be a marquee to which we can retire for a bit of face painting and juggling while the young people (under 25) queue up for a concert which doesn't finish until after the London train has set off south. There is nothing wrong with an imaginative approach to making an event fun, but UNISON will be culpable if it doesn't take this opportunity to seize a public platform from which to proclaim our opposition to a minimum wage of £3.60 – and our demand for a minimum of £5 an hour.

As well as going to Newcastle to have fun, marchers will be there to make a point to the Blair Government – and we will expect to see UNISON General Secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe on TV that evening to make it. Plans are already afoot for an alternative rally with left speakers if the union doesn't carry out the spirit of the Conference decision to call the demonstration.

- Campaign for a living wage march 10th April, Newcastle. Call 0800-09600 for details and leaflets.

Members 2–1 for Morgan as union bosses take the Michael

By our Welsh correspondent

SO THE votes are counted and the whole process of choosing Labour's leader in Wales is done and dusted. Rhodri Morgan won 47.32% of the votes cast, Morgan's challenger, Blair proxy Alun Michael won 52.68% of the votes and won the election. Many people will be relieved that the whole business is finally over. But there is also a feeling that much about the election leaves a bad taste.

Labour's official press release detailing the results speaks volumes about the conduct of this election. The three parts of the electoral college are listed with the unions first; MPs, MEPs et al next, and "the bloody infantry" – Wales Labour Party members – at the bottom of the heap. Rhodri Morgan beat his challenger in the members' section. Of 21,000 Welsh Labour Party members, more abstained than voted for Alun Michael.

One of the more curious aspects of this election has been the beginning, at least in his own eyes, of the political rehabilitation of the former Welsh Secretary, Ron Davies. It has been done slowly but surely and with some subtlety. A speech here and a well-orchestrated media opportunity there, Ron Davies has consistently refused to play the ghost at the banquet. Some pundits actually believe that Davies could well enjoy the last laugh, particularly if Alun Michael fails to be elected to the new National Assembly. In that situation, the choice of Labour Leader would be with the newly elected Labour Assembly Members.

There is another possibility, even if Alun Michael is elected to the National Assembly. It's called the GLC scenario. Alun Michael leads the Labour campaign, as Mackintosh led the London Labour campaign for the first GLC elections. Quite reasonably, Michael would expect, as did Mackintosh, to be the first Labour Leader of the new body. New GLC members were having none of it. At the first caucus meeting, Mackintosh was out on his ear and Ken Livingstone was the beneficiary.

If people in Wales see Alun Michael as Blair's Vicar-on-Earth, many now see Peter Hain as Michael's curate, a young(ish) man with his eye very clearly fixed on preferment.

Many long serving "traditional" Labour Party members were outraged by Hain's splenetic, even sinister outbursts mid way through the campaign, when he said that there were people – he called them splitters – who should leave the Labour Party and join Plaid Cymru. He had in mind those, not necessarily even on the left, with the temerity to stand up to Millbank. Some even detected a touch of menace in Hain's ill-considered remarks. Did he mean that if the malcontents did not leave, they might be pushed or even thrown out?

The late SO Davies was seen as a malcontent by the powers that be and they had him out. When SO stood for the last time as an officially endorsed Labour candidate in Merthyr Tydfil in 1966, he slated his Tory opponent. Remember that this was the year of the Aberfan disaster "we ... do find it difficult to forgive the arrogance of those ignorant and pompous creatures who merely visit us in the hope of fooling us to vote for them". He went on to decry "the presumption of this fellow who never, until he came here to try to get you to give him your votes, took the least interest in our many problems."

Wales is a long way from Putney and Millbank Towers and those who seek to emasculate Labour's traditional beliefs would do well to bear that in mind. Tony Blair said that the whole purpose of devolution was to give people in Wales the opportunity of doing it for themselves. How does it look, people ask, when we ask the electorate to vote for Labour candidates when the leadership in London couldn't even trust us to choose our own Labour leaders?

Grassroots Alliance
Provisional slate for nominations

National Constitutional Committee (Constituency Section): Teresa Pearce

Conference Arrangements Committee (Constituency Section): Audrey Wise

National Policy Forum:
Eastern: Russell Cartwright, Jenny Holland, Mathew Willgress (youth)
East Midlands: Helen Anderton, Gary Ransford
West Midlands: Pat Tough, Raghib Ahsan
London: Doreen Cameron, Kumar Murshid
North West: Kath Fry, Valerie Wise
Scotland: Pauline Bryan, Gordon Munro, Linley Park
South East: Ann Black, Claire Wadey, Simon Hewitt (youth)
South West: Ella Davison (youth)
Wales: John Lewis, Maggie Simpson, Veronica Wood, Darren Jones (youth)
Yorkshire and Humberside: Eddie Hart, George McManus, Alexis Powell, Gerry Ramsden

Brent marches on Downing St.

Dave Statham, Brent East Labour Party, was on the march.

800 people from Brent marched on Downing Street to protest at Government cuts in the borough's funding.

The Labour Government's Revenue Support Grant settlement for local authorities resulted in vicious cuts. Brent suffered particularly badly because of the removal of the ethnicity factor from personal social services; the original announcement of cuts of £17.5 million, after intensive lobbying was reduced to a mere £15 million!

Thankfully the people of Brent are not taking this lying down. A packed meeting of over 200, called by the Trades Council, Law Centre and local unions, heard Council leader Paul Daisley say they would continue to lobby the Government but in the final analysis would make a legal budget. Despite the short notice around 800, including school students, pensioners and trade unionists joined the march on 6th February.

A meeting on 25th February at Copland High School, Wembley will be addressed by Paul Daisley and two of Brent's MPs – Ken Livingstone and Barry Gardiner. Brent's third MP is no stranger to *LLB* readers – Paul Boateng and is living up to his Class Traitor of the Month title. His only reported remark is that it is "challenging" and he obviously cares more about his ministerial career than about his constituents and their services.

The cuts might include the closure of three libraries, the Youth Service and 500 job losses. The Council's budget meeting on 8th March will be lobbied from 6.30pm at the Town Hall in Forty Lane, Wembley – all support gratefully received.

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Standing up for the grassroots

Christine Shawcroft reminds us why it is important to nominate her (and the other Grassroots Alliance candidates) for the NEC and to do it now.

IT'S THAT time of year again. Long before anyone has heard the first cuckoo of spring, it's time for the first NEC nominations. In fact, by 9th April, you need to have made all your nominations, for everything.

Some people are saying that the campaign for the NEC, NPF etc this year is bound to lead to a worse result for the left, as we are up against a well organised, well funded machine who were slow getting their act together last year and didn't see us coming.

However, I think we can build on our success last year, and do even better. Members First can't have got a slate ready yet, or we'd have heard about it. Their existing members of the NEC have not exactly fallen over themselves to stick up for constituencies' rights, and one will not have won friends and influenced people by declaring that Ken Livingstone shouldn't stand as Labour's candidate for the Mayor of London because he's "too old".

I'm not getting any younger myself, but I still have the temerity to put myself up for nominations for the NEC again this year. I think the battle for Livingstone's right to stand can still be won, and will be doing my damnedest as part of that campaign. And if we do win that, the moves to control tightly all selections for everything will have suffered a great setback. Maybe left MPs will be allowed to seek reselection for the next General Election after all.

Rank and file members are growing disenchanted with their Government seeming to be in the pocket of big business. A leadership wanting to retain the middle class vote in key marginals is acting rather strangely in supporting Monsanto in the genetically modified foods debate. Middle England doesn't like to think that it's eating, and its children are eating, poisons. How many votes can Monsanto deliver?

Public opinion has moved a long way since the Falklands War. Governments no longer find that waging war in a far away land of which we know nothing is a vote winner. On Iraq and GM foods, the Government would have no chance of winning support at Conference, but only the Grassroots Alliance members of the NEC are articulating the concerns of the Party and the country at large. We need more people prepared to argue for rank and file concerns and not buckle under pressure, and that's why I'm standing.



Christine Shawcroft at the CLPD rally, 1996.

Labour's chickens are coming home to roost

Colin Hall
Leicester East CLP

BUREAUCRATS at Millbank are reported to be "concerned " about falling Labour Party membership levels and the possible damage that may cause to our forthcoming election campaigns. Such sentiments are about as convincing as the stories being peddled by guests on daytime TV chat shows. For a decade or more, despite occasional well-promoted "membership drives" by John Prescott and others, activists have faced almost incessant attacks on three fronts. These attacks have taken their toll, with attendance at many ward and constituency meetings their lowest in decades.

Firstly, successive Labour leaders have pursued policies illustrating outright hostility to their own members' views. It becomes increasingly difficult to defend the actions of those who claim to act in our name. By gruesome coincidence, my 1999 membership renewal notice arrived the morning after the first Blair-sanctioned blitz on Baghdad. I cannot think of a single act more designed to demoralise, demotivate and discourage involvement in the Party. Blair's continuing despicable attacks on single parents and failure to assist trade unionists and the low-paid have also been cited as the final straw by ex-members. Will their past contributions be replaced in the long term by new-found friends in big business? I doubt it.

The second attack arises from Labour's all too obvious weaknesses at local government level. Too many authorities give a convincing impression of Millbank muppets rather than defend their communities. Thatcher's attacks on local public services, far from being reversed, are continued as councils remain trapped within the siege mentalities developed during the eighties.

Discontent is reflected in ever-dwindling turnouts in local elections. At present, there is a political vacuum as the Tories and Liberal Democrats are beset by their own problems, but this will not remain the case forever. There is the danger of a populist nationalist force emerging with all the adverse effects that would entail.

Finally, there is the internal policing structure at regional and national level. Employees of the Party, when asked to deal with perfectly legitimate enquiries from those who contribute towards their livelihood, regularly exhibit the charm of particularly ill-trained nightclub bouncers. They severely undermine our claims to act in the name of justice and democracy. Too many members who persevere within the Party are denied basic rights. One of my CLP's branches has been suspended since August 1994. Even by deplorable modern standards, this must surely set some kind of record (unless of course, *LLB* readers know different).

Yet we continue because the Party is still the only home for those of us struggling for an alternative society. Last year's NEC elections show the forces of progress remaining in the Party outnumber by far those of all the ultra-left parties combined. We will continue to resist the Victorian notion that politics should be the preserve of the middle-class. Ignore those who say Blair is impregnable. Ten years ago they probably said the same about Stalinism and apartheid. ❑

Forums: it's not good *just* to talk

***Partnership in Power* has drawn more members into Labour's policy-making processes. Local forums are great fun. But does the talking translate into influence or even create the policies we want? Ann Black is doubtful.**

THE RENEWED welfare debate highlights these questions. Some proposals are positive – we can welcome personal advisers to guide claimants through the maze of entitlements, and assist them in seeking work. Requiring claimants to attend an interview may even be acceptable, if they are not forced to leave their children or take any job at any price.

But talk of tough treatment and harsh crackdowns will terrify anyone who is injured, sacked or abandoned. People will be called for interrogation within three days, threatened with losing all means of subsistence, and branded as spongers. That is the message that ministers are broadcasting.

The National Policy Forum (NPF) welfare paper echoes this in a muted form. Helping the unemployed and the disabled into work deserves praise. But failure is blamed solely on the individual, and they are punished for it. Carers and disabled people will receive credits towards the new state second pension. There is nothing for those who cannot get jobs for other reasons.

The language, even more than the reality, widens the gulf between the responsible, virtuous and provident many, and the feckless or unfortunate few. The undeserving poor will be harassed off benefit, and the deserving poor will survive on charity.

Stakeholding has been ditched. When the many buy private pensions, private long-term care insurance, and – as the middle classes expand – private medical treatment and private education, why should they pay taxes at all? The welfare state can only unite the nation if everyone contributes and everyone draws out, and this means a core of universal benefits, recouped in tax from the higher paid.



Ann Black

Most members, in my experience, share these concerns. They were raised, though no votes were taken, at the NPF in January. They have no place in the welfare consultation paper, and many officially recorded points from that meeting have also been lost.

For instance, families moving from benefit to the Working Families Tax Credit will still forfeit 55p for every pound they earn. More than a quarter of a million will still lose over 70p in the pound through benefit withdrawal and tax.

The lowest paid face the highest marginal tax rates and the Forum recognised "the need to look ahead to further changes to the tax and benefits system to address unemployment and poverty traps". Instead all reference to the problem has been dropped.

CLPs and unions have until 6th April to submit comments and amendments to the final year papers on welfare, health, and crime and justice. As with resolutions, NPF members will not see these. We will get only a summary in June, with just one week to formulate alternative positions for Conference. So please help by sending copies directly to your Forum representatives.

Tony Blair said recently that he welcomed dissent as long as it came from "real people". This is not as silly as it sounds: the combined readership of *Tribune*, *LLB* and the *Guardian* is not enough to win further terms in government. I believe that the centre-left accepts that responsibility, and can truly speak for all, not only the many.

● Ann Black represents South East CLPs on the NPF and is a member of the Labour Reform Steering Committee. She is standing for the National Executive Committee as part of the Grassroots Alliance slate in 1999.

Giving Labour's ostrich stance the bird

Now is the time to change Labour's nuclear weapons policy, writes Walter Wolfgang, Vice-chair, Labour CND.

"A much larger issue now confronts the nuclear powers: whether the world is better served by a prolonged era of cautious nuclear weapons reductions towards some indeterminate endpoint; or by an unequivocal commitment on the part of the nuclear powers to move with much greater urgency towards the goal of eliminating these arsenals in their entirety. I firmly believe that practical and realistic steps can readily be taken towards that end. But the real issue here is not the path – it is the willingness to undertake the journey." – General Lee Butler, retired, who for 33 years was involved in US nuclear weapons planning.

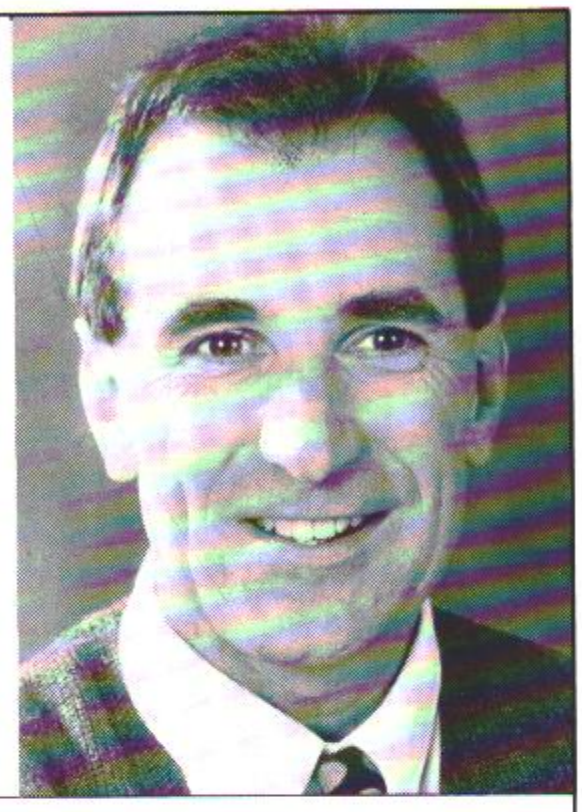
Labour has a paper commitment to global nuclear disarmament but has shown an unwillingness to undertake the journey. It has refused to vote for resolutions promoting global nuclear disarmament in the UN and supported the negative stance of the US. The commitment to retain the Trident missile system – basic to Labour's recent defence review – entails a refusal to enter into further nuclear weapons reductions or negotiations until the nuclear weapons of the US and Russia are counted in their hundreds rather than thousands. Moreover the Government still retains a capability to replace the Trident missile system if it so wishes. Here is the central contradiction in Robin Cook's arguments against India's and Pakistan's nuclear proliferation, which are even more relevant to Britain.

Labour must adopt a policy of scrapping Trident unconditionally. Only a refusal by UNISON to support the relevant resolution led to the narrow defeat of such a proposal at the 1997 Labour Party Conference. Now we have a new policy-making structure designed to make such a commitment more difficult to attain. Still, politics are more important than structures.

A new draft document on Britain in the World – which includes defence – has just been published. It will be discussed at the 1999 Labour Party Conference, but only finalised and adopted at the Labour Party Conference in the year 2000. CLPs must now start sending amendments to the Policy Forum.

On 13th March Labour CND is running its own Policy Forum at Conway Hall in London. Members of the Policy Forum and the NEC will explain the new procedures, MPs and others the politics. *LLB* readers can brief themselves on how to change Labour's nuclear weapons policies to one of scrapping Trident, promoting global nuclear disarmament and finally ending Labour's ostrich stance.

the Alan Simpson column



The Secretary of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs.

EVEN AS we speak, the debate about genetically modified foods is itself being genetically modified. I have had to rewrite this column twice since listening to the *Today* programme and then reading the day's papers.

Before attempting to unravel the science from the spin, and the economic interest from public ethics, let me pause and invite you to join in a moment's celebration. The tidal wave of public reaction against genetically modified foods gives the left the most incredible political opportunity. It is an invitation to reconnect with the politics of change (rather than just talk about it). It is a challenge to catch up with social movements clamouring for food safety, sustainable agriculture, social ownership and accountability, and to connect these with a different internationalism that the developing world has been begging us to think about for years.

As Monsanto and the biotech companies prepare to take Britain to court if they are prevented from flooding the market with GM crops, we face stark choices – between corporate feudalism and defence of social democracy. How sweet it is that, within this debate, it is the model of democratic socialism that offers the only coherent alternative to the mess we are currently in.

But back to the crops. Much of the debate about gene foods still has to be viewed against basic and fundamental questions. Are they safe? How do we know? How can we choose? And where will it take us? For me, the whole debate falls at a prior question: do we need GM foods at all? The answer to this is clearly no. We are already stuck with agricultural surpluses – farmers are given absurd subsidies to over-produce, or for not producing anything – and we have seen a corporate transformation of agriculture into agribusiness. This has left a legacy of environmental pollution and health damage that the public is starting to kick against. Gene foods were supposed to be the miracle wonder cure that would save intensive agriculture for big business. But do we want them?

The most important point to understand is that the industry never wanted us to be able to ask this question, or to get an intelligible response. That is certainly how the "safety" debate has been handled. We are told (variously) that this is revolutionary science but that we should view the crops as simply an extension of crop variety. It is the latter argument that has helped the industry avoid proper scrutiny.

Genetic engineering is certainly revolutionary. It breaks all of nature's rules. Putting genes from a fish into a tomato, or from a petunia into wheat or persuading vegetables to produce their own insecticide is not the sort of interbreeding that takes place in a wild party of garden organisms. Science can now cross boundaries that nature never permitted. The honest answer about where this takes us is: "We don't know".

SEED multinationals and biotech companies have recognised this for years and have worked hard to ensure that the processes of scrutiny get nowhere near to addressing these uncertainties. GM crops are dealt with as "novel foods" but as "substantially equivalent" to the ones into which errant genes have been piloted. It means that they are not subject to the tougher scrutiny of new drugs (under the Medicine Acts). There are certainly no tests to see what impact gene crops have on other parts of the eco-system: how second generation crops themselves mutate; what cross pollution takes place or what new toxins are produced (either directly or in nature's response).

Such a multitude of uncertainties would normally prompt a cautionary approach. But in gene foods we have globalisation at its crudest. Global capital sees mega bucks to be made out of the colonisation (by patent) of the food chain. Big profits drive societies towards bad judgements. This is not an anti-science criticism, but an objection to poor science being used for private profit rather than public good. Across the international landscape you would be hard pressed to find a legislative process or a scrutiny system which is not thoroughly permeated by the biotech industry and agribusiness. That is why parliaments have found it so hard to give a lead.

Don't knock Jeff Rooker or Michael Meacher. They have worked wonders in digging Labour out of the legacy of indifference and collusion left by the Tories. But the challenge to the multi-nationals' appropriation of our future is coming from the public itself.

Asserting the right "not to buy" unsafe food is important but is not an ultimate answer. This will require a fundamental shift in favour of sustainable agriculture, labour-based subsidies and shorter and more direct lines of food accountability. If the left leaves the shaping of this debate entirely to environmental NGOs, we will only have ourselves to blame. If the public, in turn, regards us as irrelevant to the front line of their fears, who can blame them for looking for political ethics elsewhere?

Put gene genie back in the bottle



A wing and a prayer

David Pope, Chair, PCS DETR Transport London Branch, reports that safety will be threatened in the air traffic control sell-off.

READERS MAY recall Labour's ambivalent attitude to the proposed privatisation of the National Air Traffic Services (NATS), shortly before the last General Election. This was after Labour had opposed similar plans in 1994 and 1996. The Labour Government is now consulting on proposals to sell 51% of NATS in a Public Private Partnership (PPP).

NATS, part of the Civil Aviation Authority, employs 5,200 staff in air traffic control (ATC) from nine major UK airports and three en-route centres (guiding flights passing through our airspace). They provide an independent and impartial service to all airspace users – commercial, military and private. British airspace is the busiest in the world and to cope with increases in the volume of traffic (up by 8% in 1998), NATS requires investment of £1b over the next ten years.

Last April the House of Commons Select Committee on Transport came out strongly against privatisation of NATS. In June Gordon Brown announced that he intended to introduce a PPP as a means of achieving "adequate levels of investment and efficiency". This has led to a consultation document proposing a sale, untying NATS from government financial constraints and allowing it "to manage itself in accordance with best private sector practice".

The Institute of Professional and Managerial Staff, representing air traffic controllers, has argued strongly against PPP. IPMS national officer Joe Magee stated that the introduction of a profit motive would inevitably undermine safety because NATS would have limited options for increasing its profit levels.

"NATS cannot simply put up charges to customers. These are governed by international regulation and, under European law, en-route ATC services must not be run for commercial profit. NATS earns 98% of its income from charges to airlines and is not in a position to diversify, because its only business is to provide air traffic control".

Magee said this left just two ways in which NATS could boost profits for shareholders: cutting its running costs – which in practice could only be achieved by shedding staff – or pushing more traffic through the system. Both would mean greater pressure on staff at a time when air traffic control systems were already under enormous strain.

"This is the scenario facing NATS – a Railtrack of the skies".

Students and workers unite

Chris Knight
Chair Barking Branch, NATFHE

TWO HUNDRED Graphics and Fine Arts students occupied the Greengate site of the University of East London on 11th February. They were angry that staff contracts had expired without replacement, causing teaching to grind to a halt. Many had not seen a tutor for weeks. They draped a large banner across the occupied building: "Welcome to UEL! On your first day, bring paper, pencil and a tutor!".

The remaining staff were so demoralised and under-equipped that anarchy reigned. There were photography courses but no cameras, video courses but no videos, computer graphics but no computers. Such was the chaos caused by local mismanagement that in a recent assessment, students had been given a few hours, a day or even more time to do examinations, which were then marked regardless of these differences! The occupiers wanted this scandalously irregular assessment anulled.

The Barking Bateria – the samba band which had inspired and sustained the victorious Barking campus occupation of May-June 1998 – struck up on the steps. On the evening of Monday 15th February, this band plus occupiers arrived at Euston to picket with RMT workers on strike against tube privatisation. The *Flying Picket*, new paper of the Euston-based strike-support group, hit the streets that evening. As it did so, an actual flying picket formed up and moved down the road, band playing and banners fluttering, heading for a nearby depot where scabs were attempting to cross picket lines.

Next day, back at Greengate, railworker Steve Headley addressed the student occupiers on the college steps, thanking them for their solidarity. He joked that last time he could recall such student-worker unity was May/June 1968. At noon, with the RMT banner behind and a police escort clearing our path, about 100 of us marched two miles to the Stratford main campus to meet management. Vice Chancellor Gillian Tucker emerged, waving aloft a white sheet of paper. Written on it were management's surrender terms. The illegally conducted assessment would be annulled. Contracts of all recently departed staff would be renewed. Computers, cameras and other equipment had been ordered. Huge rejoicing and applause as the occupation was declared ended. It had been a swift and stunning victory.

- Further information: Peter Morton (Assistant Secretary, Strike Support Group), 145 Imperial Avenue, Victorian Rd., London N16 8HL; tel: 0171-249 0041.
- The London School of Samba rehearses at the Waterloo Action Centre, Bayliss Road (back of Waterloo Rail Station) every Sunday evening at 7.30 pm. All would-be drummers welcome.
- The Barking Bateria rehearses term-time Thursdays, 5.00 pm, Room N001, University of East London, Longbridge Rd., Dagenham, Essex (Barking tube).

The state of the unions

Over the next four pages, *LLB* takes an in depth look at where the British trade union movement is after nearly two years of Labour in government.

Unions: time to do or die

New research indicates crisis in the trade union movement. It suggests there needs to be a change of direction at the top, argues Jon Rogers, member of the UNISON London Regional Committee, writing in a personal capacity.

IT IS WELL known that trade union membership and power has declined at the national level since the defeats of the 1980s. UNISON's membership, for example is currently about 20% below the combined membership of the "former partner unions" (NALGO, NUPE and COHSE) in 1989. In spite of increased attention to recruitment and organisation, the membership of the large unions, including UNISON, continues to decline.

The strategy of the TUC and union leaderships to reverse this decline has, until recently, seemed to rely upon the positive effects of a Labour government on trade union law and the industrial relation climate. In his New Year message to UNISON branches, General Secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe welcomed the consultation with the union from the Government. The preliminary findings of the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) suggest that the nature and extent of trade union decline demands a rather different response.

The survey, the fourth in a series begun in 1980, presents an accurate picture of change in British industrial relations. The survey findings confirm the harsh experience of rank and file activism in today's trade unions and reveal, for example, that:

- there has been a 35% reduction in the total number of shop stewards since before the miners' strike in 1984, down to 218,000 from 335,000
- the proportion of all workers who are members of trade unions ("union density") has declined from 58% in 1984 to just 36% today
- less than half of all workplaces recognise trade unions – down from two-thirds in 1984
- in nearly half of all workplaces there are no trade union members at all in the workforce – up from just over a quarter of all workplaces in 1984.

Where trade unions are present in the workplace, the survey shows the increasing difficulties facing shop stewards. Management have moved to limit the range of issues which are negotiated with the unions and prefer to "consult" directly with individual employees, further undermining the union.

In these circumstances the unions become less effective in delivering on the "bread and butter" issues. This threatens the union movement with a downward spiral of declining power and falling membership. If the unions cannot break out of this trap the chances of exerting any influence over the Government will completely disappear.



Jon Rogers

The WERS survey also points to the limited benefits of the Government's legislative programme to reverse trade union decline. Even if the statutory union recognition arrangements had not been sabotaged to appease the CBI they would have little to offer. Just 1% of workplaces currently have a majority of employees who are union members but no union recognition agreement.

To use statutory recognition to break into other areas of the private sector, unions will need to confront hostile employers. Unfortunately the survey shows that the attitude of employers is vital to the level of union membership. In workplaces where management favours union membership, 62% of workers are union members. This falls to 23% where management is neutral, and just 7% where management is hostile. In 84% of workplaces where managers are hostile to trade unions there are no union members currently employed.

Turning the tide of anti-unionism would take a major commitment of time and effort. Although an increasing number of union officials, including at senior levels, appear to recognise this, the enormous conservatism and inertia of the movement stands in the way of the dramatic changes to the structure and the culture of the unions that are required. Enforcing – and fighting to increase – the minimum wage may offer one opportunity for unions to reach out and try to organise the unorganised. The WERS survey shows that low-paid workers are particularly concentrated in non-union workplaces. These workers can be drawn to trade unionism through initiatives such as the UNISON-inspired demonstration in Newcastle on Saturday 10th April, particularly if this becomes the centrepiece of a continuing campaign to take on the cowboy employers who profit from poverty pay.

However, the current structure of most unions – based quite rightly around organising existing members in organised workplaces – simply does not lend itself to organising unorganised workers. Equally the expensive centralised bureaucracies of the major unions are virtually useless to rejuvenate trade unionism at the grassroots, which is where it matters.

In the USA, the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU), similar in size to UNISON, gained 60,000 members last year. The approach of the SEIU is to devote a massive proportion of its total resources to recruiting and organising workers, and to decentralise resources to its branches in line with their recruitment and organisation performance.

British trade unions need to stop spending their time trying to get an audience with a government that plainly has little time for working people. The resources we save need to be ploughed into local union branches to recruit and organise unorganised workers and bring new blood into the union movement. After twenty years of waiting for a Labour government it's time to start rebuilding the unions. By doing so we may well put ourselves in a better position to have real influence over Blair. ❑

First step or last word on

John McIlroy, author of *Strike*, outlines just how the CBI has diluted union rights in the Bill based on *Fairness at Work*.

THE Employment Relations Bill had its second reading in the Commons on 9th February. The only opposition came from a Tory amendment. Labour MPs loyally backed the Government. This was in accordance with the TUC's welcome of the Bill as "an historic achievement". Yet its provisions represent further and significant dilution of the rights to recognition which TUC leaders have made the centrepiece of union resurgence under New Labour.

The Bill is based broadly on the White Paper *Fairness at Work*, published last year. This contained two important concessions to the employers that the unions had vigorously resisted. The TUC argued strenuously that a simple majority in a ballot should be sufficient for a group of workers to attain recognition. In response to the CBI's demand that the "yes" vote should represent at least 40% of relevant workers, the TUC pointed out that more than two thirds of current MPs would not have been elected if this hurdle applied to parliamentary elections. They cited Blair's statement in Scotland before the 1997 referendum: "There will be no fancy tricks, no special majorities – a simple majority of those voting will be enough". Nonetheless, fancy tricks won the day. The 40% barrier, described by TGWU leader Bill Morris as "unworkable", found its way into the White Paper.

The TUC had also rejected the CBI contention that small firms should be exempt from recognition laws. John Monks claimed: "Even a threshold of 20 employees would exclude over five million from rights of recognition". Once again New Labour came down on the side of the employers: the White Paper proposed that it apply only to firms with at least 21 workers.

Union leaders quickly swallowed their pride and surrendered their position. Threats of massive demonstrations and revolts of up to a hundred Labour MPs swiftly dissolved. Monks was soon pronouncing the proposals "a lot better than we expected". That was far from the end of the story: appetites sharpened, the CBI was soon lobbying Employment Minister Peter Mandelson and his right wing successor Stephen Byers to ensure that the Bill itself would contain further concessions. And these have turned up carefully customised to give the CBI most – but not all – of what they wanted in the new Bill.

The TUC has consistently demanded that unions should have the right to put a recognition claim before the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) – the body which will oversee the legal procedure – when they feel they have a winnable case. They have repeatedly stated "we oppose any formal trigger mechanism – it would be another and unnecessary barrier". Right on cue the Bill includes a requirement that unions demonstrate that at least 10% of relevant workers are union members before they can set the recognition ball rolling. Moreover the CAC will not accept an application for recognition unless it feels the union is "likely to have the support of a majority of workers".

Ballots will only be held where the CAC feels they will be won and that means jumping the 40% hurdle. Given these difficulties union leaders emphasised a proposal in the White Paper to allow recognition automatically if 51% of workers were union members. It was claimed that most unions would use this "fast track" as a high proportion of current recognition campaigns involve situations where more than half the workers are already in the union. The Bill now restricts this loophole. Even where a union already has 51% of workers in membership the CAC can still order a ballot rather than automatic recognition. It can do so if it feels this would be "in the interests of good industrial relations" or if it has evidence that significant numbers of union members do not wish the union to represent them. The room for manoeuvre this nonsense gives employers requires little emphasis – why would workers join a union but reject the protection they pay for?

"Bargaining for skills" – involvement in training – has been central to the TUC's pitch for partnership with employers. The unions insisted that where they succeeded in gaining recognition for collective bargaining, it should not be only about pay and conditions but also training. Once again the Bill comes down on the side of the employers who opposed this. Companies will have to provide unions with information and consultation about training: they will not have to bargain about it with a recognised union. Again, the TUC urged that once there was a recognition agreement, facilitated by the CAC, there should be no "opt-outs". All variations in an individual's conditions of employment should be "within the framework of the agreement". The Bill, however "safeguards" the "rights" of employers and employees to negotiate individual contracts outside the collective agreement – although workers must not be "forced" into doing this. There is a thread running through the Bill: if unions are to be recognised then it must be very much on the management's terms – they are

Bill is no union payback

Steve Wilkinson, London Regional Publicity Officer, UNISON writes: The Employment Relations Bill was published without the usual Tory hue and cry. For over a year, the Tories have tried to frighten Labour leaders into retreating on pre-election promises, claiming that the Bill was payback to unions for their support. The cheque for the so called payback may now bounce in some union's accounts.

We should remind ourselves that the labour movement has usually viewed the law as an enemy rather than a friend. Historically the struggles of ordinary workers and trade unionists have generally forced laws onto the statute books, rather than them being handed down from on high.

The problem with the genesis of this Bill is that it has emerged from negotiations between the CBI, TUC and ministers from the DTI.

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workers' rights

to be management's helpmates, not its antagonists. Even the "bargaining unit" (the group of workers to be balloted over recognition) is to be defined by the CAC so that it is "compatible with the need for effective management". Remember the bad old days when unions were independent autonomous organisations protecting workers against management?

The concessions to employers don't stop with recognition. Where unions are not recognised, members will have the right to be represented by union officers when they are summoned by management to disciplinary or grievance hearings rather than, as the TUC wanted, on all issues rising from employment. Workers sacked for participating in lawful strikes will not have automatic rights to reinstatement as demanded by successive TUC congresses. The best the Bill can do is provide a right to compensation for strikers sacked in the first eight weeks of a dispute. After eight weeks the position remains as it was under the Tories. There will be no further action over "zero hours contracts". The time-honoured commitment to rights for all workers from day one of employment continues to gather dust. The two commissions established by the Tories to facilitate members suing their unions will be abolished. But their powers will be transferred to the Certification Officer.

There are some good things in the Bill. The qualification period for unfair dismissal is reduced from two years to one – but not the six months that prevailed in 1979. There are new protections against blacklisting and victimisation of trade unionists and the promise of regulations to prevent discrimination against part-time workers. Some of the problems with strike ballots – such as the requirement to give employers the names of those voting – are diminished. Employers will no longer be able to insert waiver of unfair dismissal clauses in fixed term contracts but they can still include waiver of redundancy rights. The limits on unfair dismissal compensation are raised but not, as promised, abolished. Paid maternity leave is increased from 14 to 18 weeks and extended rights to maternity and parental absence introduced. But these are the minimum required under EU directives and the absence of pay undermines their utility.

The Bill increases fairness at work only at the fringes. The recognition procedure is complex and protracted, riddled with opportunities for employer prevarication and litigation. Failure to succeed entails a three year moratorium while employers can also use a complementary procedure for derecognition. There is no duty on employers to "bargain in good faith". Even if unions win the ballots what workers get in the end is not recognition, but incorporation of terms and conditions laid down by the CAC in their contracts of employment. So after everything they have to resort to the courts for enforcement in the face of intransigent employers. Most of the other rights represent shoddy compromises over what were after all the unions' absolute priorities.

The achievements in the Bill look even more limited when we relate them to the minimum wage set at £3.60 an hour and £3.20 for young workers. And the awesome bulk of Conservative legislation is still supported by New Labour, still in violation of international labour conventions and still, as we saw recently in the action over the privatisation of London Underground and the dispute at the UCLH NHS Trust, used to thwart union objectives.

It would be wrong to condemn union leaders for not securing a better deal in the Employment Relations Bill or not achieving repeal of the existing internationally condemned legislation on picketing, secondary action and prohibition of union discipline of strike-breakers. It is justifiable to criticise their silence, which legitimises the status quo, their exaggeration of minimal concessions and their failure to begin a genuine campaign to mobilise trade unionists in support of a just, fair, legal framework.

The only way the present Bill will become, as Bill Morris insists, "a first step not the last word on workers' rights" is if trade unionists themselves force the issues. We can begin to do this by supporting the national demonstration for a living wage called by UNISON for 10th April in Newcastle and the Reclaim Our Rights initiative for a massive march on May Day. And, of course, by using the provisions in the Employment Relations Bill, whatever their inadequacies, to launch campaigns for union recognition in the workplace.

TRADE UNION NOTEBOOK

- UNISON members at University College London Hospital are striking over conditions of service – for the second time. The action, which has its origins in plans to bring in private finance into the NHS, was blocked when the High Court ruled that it was unlawful to strike for guarantees for future employees.

The dispute has exposed serious differences within UNISON – the NEC voted to commence a disciplinary investigation into the branch's officers (high profile members of the SWP) even as the branch was being balloted for action.

- Send donations and messages of support to UCLH UNISON, Middlesex Hospital, LONDON, W1H 8AA.

- UNISON members in Southwark are planning to strike against their Labour Council's plan to attack their conditions of service.

A decisive vote for action has come in response to proposals by the Council to break away from the new "Green Book" national agreement for local government workers – and to impose a system of job evaluation dreamt up by a private consultancy.

- Send messages of support and donations to Southwark UNISON at 177-179 Walworth Road, London SE17 1RW.

- A London based Strike Support Group has been launched to organise trade union solidarity. It meets every Monday at the Cock Tavern, Phoenix Rd. (Euston / King's Cross) at 7.30pm.

- The 90 locked-out Tameside Care Workers, all UNISON members, are due to have an Employment Tribunal starting on 1st June. They still need support and donations, which should be sent to Tameside UNISON, 29 Booth Street, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancs. Requests for speakers or further details on 0161-308 2452.

- All out strike action is being taken by UNISON members employed in Sheffield Councils Housing Benefits section against Labour's proposal to privatise the section with a nine year contract.

- Messages of support to Sheffield UNISON, 175 Arundel Gate, Sheffield S12 LQ, tel. 0114-276 642l; fax 0114-273 6307.

- Despite a tribunal order requiring that Granada give the 21 sacked Hillingdon Hospital workers their jobs back, nothing has happened. The women, all UNISON members, are now organising protests outside Granada premises.

- Messages of support etc. to: Hillingdon Strikers Support Campaign, 27 Townend Way, Northwood, Middlesex, HA6 1TG. Donations (regular standing orders are particularly welcome) can also be paid into account number 2853884 at Lloyds Bank plc, 21/22 High Street, Uxbridge, UB8 1JD (sort code 30-98-91).

LLB page 15

Unions that stay male, pale and stale are set to fail

John Perry, T&G lay organiser, looks to the US experience to argue that unions have to be strengthened at the grassroots for the movement to blossom.

FAIRNESS at Work is not the only issue facing unions. As union leaders are reluctant to talk about anything except successes, they conceal the fact that local branches are in ill health. There are many challenges. Even where formal recognition exists, membership is low. Even in the public sector, the density is estimated at 51%. The core activists have been demotivated. Stewards are hard to recruit and meetings are poorly attended. A growing number of members are working for firms with less than 20 workers. Paid officials have workloads far beyond reasonable expectations which they inevitably fail to serve properly, or get trapped in the treadmill of tribunal claims. Without an active grassroots organisation, the opportunities contained in *Fairness at Work* will not be realised.

Also, social, economic and industrial change means that unions have to appeal to non-traditional areas of workers to survive. They need to organise women, young, black and ethnic workers, as well as those working part time or in temporary contracts in the growing private service sector. The lack of contact with such sectors has left "male, pale and stale" unions failing to identify with groups facing discrimination and so, in the main, failing to organise them.

Failure to meet these challenges means that whole areas of work are set to be union-free. In the United States, seeing their unions suffering from organisational ill health, progressive activists have set about changing conservative approaches, attitudes and structures.

In 1997, the AFL-CIO (the US equivalent of the TUC) adopting these "total organising" concepts, ensured that overall trade union membership increased for the first time in 30 years. The AFL-CIO targeted and organised sections of the labour force that have been hard to unionise. It openly warns that: "Every employer who wants to take the low road to poverty wages and replaceable workers: we'll be on your doorstop, in your face and on your conscience."



John Perry

Its strategy, in addition to the aggressive corporate campaign tactics against "bad bosses", includes revamping its union locals at the community level. In October 1998, the AFL-CIO published a commissioned report by Cornell University. The report included a surveys of union locals which identified some essential best practices:

- Leaders need to have an appreciation of the complexity of organisational change and a long-term perspective.
- There needs to be a formal plan of action assessing strengths and weaknesses and attention to resources.
- There should be a process to confront any official reluctance to act.
- The membership needs to be involved in the change process, so as to expand people's horizons beyond narrow self-interest.
- There needs to be innovation in representing members with grievances, bargaining with employers to give paid leave for organising campaigns and coalition building or political action by the grassroots membership.
- There should be communication, education and training initiatives among the membership to support these initiatives.

The findings of the US report should not be treated merely as a blueprint to be endorsed lazily by those working for the "new unionism" agenda. They can help form the basis of branch regeneration. Central to this is the idea in the report of changing unions from having a servicing culture to having an empowering, organisational mentality.

It is particularly important for workplace organisers to resolve grievances quickly. Where shop stewards are not available, in small companies for example, lay organisers in other workplaces should be motivated and given paid release, through collective bargaining, to take on such representation.

Other crucial developments that go hand in hand with such work, are alliances between unions and community groups targeting bad bosses. The use of community pickets and consumer boycotts builds union profiles in the fight to regain industrial leadership in the growing consumer-sensitive service sector. Such organisational innovations do not have a place in a movement currently fixated on cheap insurance schemes, top-down initiatives by centralised leaderships and officials who see their jobs merely as advocating for members at industrial tribunals.

It must be the urgent role of grassroots activists to place such wholesale changes at the top of the agenda. After all, unless we can resolve the question of branch organisation, unions will continue to decline, leaving the workers' movement unfit to organise in the 21st century.

- John would like to hear from activists engaged in the regeneration of grass roots trade unionism with a view to networking ideas and initiatives. Contact: John Perry c/o 177, Lavender Hill, London SW11.

Reclaim our rights

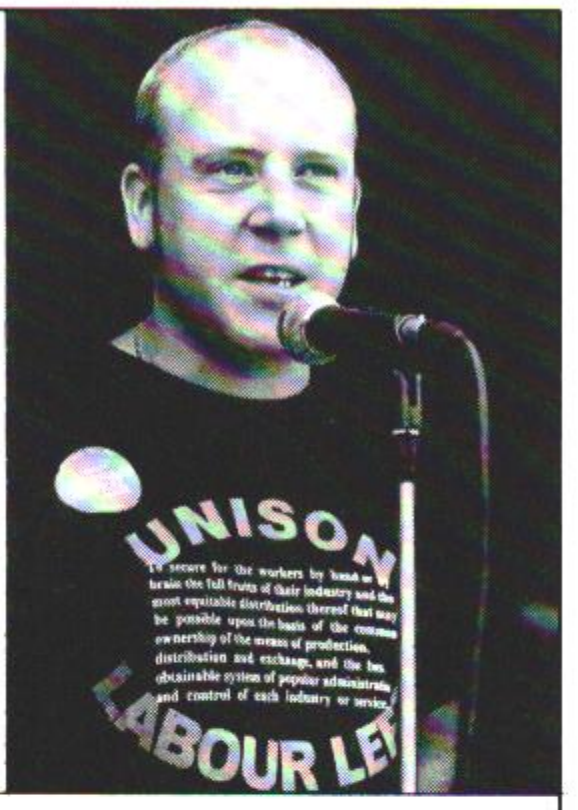
United campaign to repeal the anti-trade union laws

May Day Rally

Help make 1st May union rights day
Assemble Clerkenwell Green at noon
March 1pm
Rally at Trafalgar Square 3pm
Speakers include Tony Benn MP
Organised by the London May Day Organising Committee United Campaign
Chair Bob Crow; Sec. John Hendy QC
Contact: CLWTC, CLAS, Derry House, Penfold Street, London, NW8

the Geoff Martin column

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



● Coming out of Kings Cross tube the other night on my way to the Cuba Solidarity bash a bloke in his late thirties sidled up to me and leant over to whisper something in my ear.

Nothing unusual about that on a Saturday night around Kings Cross but this guy wasn't offering me drugs or access to sexual gratification. He wanted to talk to me about Jesus. In a flash it became clear what was going on.

Was this really the former England manager, Mr Glenn Hoddle, reduced to touting his wacky religion on the darkened streets of North London? I will never know – in a flash he melted into the night before I'd had a chance to utter the hallowed words "Eileen Drewery".

Take my advice. Watch out for miracles and plagues of locusts the next time you set foot on the Grays Inn Road.

● Talking of Hoddle, there's been a lot of media coverage about Blair joining the call for his resignation. No surprise there. When the bandwagon's in town you're sure to find Al Campbell prostrate in front of it while teams of Millbank lackeys lever our great leader on board.

More important from my point of view is the similarity between Hoddle's pick'n'mix mumbo jumbo and the vacuous utterings of Blair himself. These guys are peas out of the same pod. The Third Way and the Hoddle Way have striking similarities. Both complete bollocks and both extremely dangerous.

Never one to jump on a bandwagon myself I was more than happy to give my views on Hod to the BBC. If there wasn't such a dire shortage of secure unit places and community psychiatric nurses he would have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act long ago.

If this sounds flippant just remember that there are many working class people who have been banged up for years for saying and doing things far less barmy than Hoddle's outpourings. It all comes down to cash.

● Flicking through the pages of *Making Music* magazine recently, and daydreaming about my missed opportunity to pick up the baton from the Clash as the saviour of political rock and roll, I came across a quote which stopped me dead.

It said, quite simply, that the moment Tony Blair was pictured plucking on a Fender Stratocaster, rock and roll was finally killed off for good.

Absolutely spot on. What thirteen year old worth his or her salt is seriously going to want to form a three-chord garage band bashing out the sound of modern Britain when the Prime Minister regards himself as some kind of rock and roller? It's enough to make an old punk cry.

Aside from his support for Clinton's bombing of Iraq and the attack on the welfare state this must be Blair's worst crime of them all. The man who killed rock and roll.

● So Mandelson is going to rake in a few hundred grand by flogging off the Notting Hill pile and shifting downmarket. Tragic news. Now that the dust has settled and we've all had a good chance to pick over the bones of the Robinson affair it has become very clear to anyone in the know that Mandelson's fate was sealed at one very critical and pivotal point. The moment he announced that he was planning to ask his mummy to pay off the £373,000 loan from the Paymaster General.

I don't know about you, but I would find it difficult to persuade my dear old mum to lend me a tenner to the end of the month and even then she'd probably want my collection of rare punk singles as security.

Mandelson will be held up to ridicule in the future for exactly what he is. A mummy's boy with a large dose of the Billy Liar chucked in.

If I was the ANC I'd be on the look out for an extra long barge pole.

● Finally, commiserations to Fulham on their FA Cup defeat at the hands of Man Utd. I know that there are a fair few Fulham fans who read *LLB* and I was rooting for them despite the club's unfortunate association with Al Fayed. There was no way Fulham deserved to lose.

But do not be alarmed. Chelsea's international brigade will make amends at Old Trafford in the quarter finals. Chelsea for the double. Grab the odds now and buy me a pint in May!

LEADING WITH THE LEFT

Sacked Skychefs solid

The LSG Lufthansa Skychef dispute at Heathrow airport has entered its fourth month. The strikers, members of the TGWU, are continuing to picket the in-flight catering company in Faggs Road, Feltham, West London, and have also been lobbying MPs.

LSG Lufthansa Skychefs are the biggest airline catering company in the world. The dispute arose from the introduction of new working practices which cut staffing in the transport and loading operations and introduced more flexible rostering which had a highly disruptive effect on employees' lives.

When negotiations to share the savings produced by the new practices broke down, the company insisted that the new practices stay in force.

T&G members voted 75% for strike action. During the first strike day couriers delivered dismissal notices to everyone on strike. Since then there have been further dismissals as more workers joined the dispute. There are now 300 workers in dispute.

The International Transport Workers Federation has helped to mobilise support world wide.

Some of Skychef's customer airlines were reported to be considering a switch to other suppliers.

● For speakers contact Garth King on 0498-757 367.

● Donations to TGWU, 218 Green Lanes, London N4 2HB. Mark the reverse of your cheque "LSG Lufthansa Skychef Dispute".

LLB page 17

Seven sisters on the road to tax

Support for the Tobin tax is building up steam within Labour's sister parties, reports Sean Fitzpatrick.

Canada: The New Democratic Party supports the introduction of a global Tobin Tax and wants to use revenues generated for "social programs, public infrastructure and community economic development".

Belgium: The Flemish-speaking Socialistische Partij calls for a 0.5% levy on all international foreign currency market exchange operations. It says: "In addition to stabilising speculative money flows, this could represent an enormous potential amount to invest in a world-wide social model".

France: The Parti Socialiste's Lionel Jospin supported the tax during the last French presidential campaign, on condition that it is introduced worldwide and that speculative movements are differentiated clearly from long-term investments, which should not be taxed.

Sweden: The Socialdemokraterna has floated the idea of a capital trading tax, but only with international agreement. It wants to use the cash to finance the UN. "If we take the fantastic sums of money which are traded on the international capital market we can see that only five per cent of this capital represents a payment for goods and services. We need political instruments for controlling the movements of international capital".

Norway: The Labour Party's programme calls for an international study on taxing currency transactions in order to finance "global co-operation".

Australia: The Labor Party's Shadow Treasurer Gareth Evans has showed strong interest. He said, "if the Tobin tax is not yet an idea whose time has come, it is an idea the time for talking about which has certainly come".

Worldwide: The Socialist International, the umbrella organisation which Labour is a member of, has agreed to look at the practicality of the tax. "A levy on foreign exchange transactions could raise revenues for IMF Contingency Reserves and slow down purely speculative transactions".

- Some of the information provided from the ATTAC website: www.attac.org

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Tax can be reality — not speculation

Even Gordon Brown now supports some regulation of the world economy, as the latest events in Brazil show the damage that speculators are doing throughout the world. However, Caroline Dumonteil reports on the more effective tax challenge to speculation which is gathering momentum.

ACROSS THE political spectrum there is growing agreement that the liberalisation of global markets has not only failed to deliver the promised benefits, but has damaged many economies. John Eatwell, Treasury economics advisor, argues there has been a general deterioration in trend growth rates in all economies since liberalisation, and the volatility of the financial markets in the 1980s spread to the equity markets during the 1990s. His solution is to transform the Bank for International Settlements(BIS) into a World Financial Authority whose role would be to supervise the financial system, including the IMF.

However, as *LLB* has reported, there is a simple strategy which could both regulate financial markets and generate funds that could be used to reduce world poverty. In the 1970s, Nobel prize-winning economist James Tobin proposed the introduction of a foreign exchange transaction tax. When Tobin first put forward his plan, about $18 billion a day was moving round the world economy, a sum which has increased to $1.5 trillion today.

The main purpose of these flows has changed too, with the proportion of funds used for financial speculation increasing hugely compared to those for investment (350:1 in the mid-1970s compared to 81,000:1 now). It is estimated that over 80% of these purely speculative flows are for round trips of a week or less, and most of this trade is based in only 18 countries. The UK takes the lion's share, handling around 30% of these deals.

Such is the scale of these transfers that even a low level of taxation would produce large sums of money. It is estimated, for example, that a tax of 0.5% would produce around $95-98 billion a year. Given UN estimates that the worst effects of global poverty could be eliminated for about $40 billion a year, such sums could have a dramatic effect if put to good use. Equally, with the rising costs of rescue packages for countries suffering speculative currency attacks, any strategy that increases market stabilisation must appear attractive to even the greatest devotees of a deregulated world economy.

The problems raised by this proposal are both technical and political. Tobin himself, who continues to work on the idea, argues that such a tax would be extremely easy to administer. Highly leveraged financial instruments such as derivatives are very destabilising, but hard to tax since they do not involve immediate cash transactions. However banks are said to be quite capable of estimating their values, so this does not provide an insuperable obstacle. Also such a tax would need to be set at a level which is at the same time proportionate to what it is taxing yet not so high as to encourage evasion. These technical problems are solvable, and the real problems remain political.

Those working in financial services are predictably opposed to such a tax. Industrialists are not, though they are against any money generated going direct to governments. It does seem inappropriate to use it to make up for reduced spending on social or environmental programmes. However, the main arguments are over the identity of the international body that would administer the funds, bringing up all the existing disputes over the UN versus the World Trade Organisation or IMF.

Here again the BIS emerges as a possible option. While the reformist argument for a Tobin Tax would see it merely as a market stabilisation measure, the left see it as one of many strategies aimed at making the whole machine work to a different set of criteria. Though by itself it could not prevent major market collapses, it would help to redress the imbalance between capital and labour. The educational value of even discussing such a measure is unquestionable.

MAI spectre resurfaces

Successful world action wounded the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) but did not kill it. The big business charter has been resurrected at the World Trade Organisation. Caroline Dumonteil reports.

ONE OF the lessons apparently learnt from the failure of the MAI is the need for more consultation with "civil society", but what civil society is saying is that it does not want negotiations on investment to be held in the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Because of the MAI's negative image, the British Government is pretending these new discussions are quite different, talking about blank sheets of paper, and denying the MAI is being resurrected at the WTO. Trade Minister Brian Wilson has also rejected any alternative venue for these discussions despite the UN Committee on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) being the preferred location of developing countries. Discussion on investment continued at the WTO Trade and Industry Working Group in December 1998. It was reported that the main disagreement was not between North and South but within the US contingent, between the US Trade and State Departments.

One possibility is that the US could do a deal with the EU on agriculture in return for investment rights. This would align them with other OECD countries who now see agreement on investment as achievable within the context of the WTO Millennium Round negotiations, where even the countries most opposed to an investment agreement might make concessions in exchange for other benefits.

The UK's position, shared by other countries such as Canada, is that it is worth having piecemeal agreements on matters that are easiest to agree on, just to speed things up. In contrast, the US stance is that little may be gained in the short term, so why bother, given that they can kick open others' markets while protecting their own.

Meanwhile, the UK Environmental Audit Committee's report on the MAI criticises both the contents of the MAI and the handling of the issue by this and previous governments. Future negotiations, it argues, should be more open and include developing countries and the use of environmental and social criteria.

The dynamic of globalisation has systematically eroded both social and environmental rights to the point where it is doubtful whether any agreement satisfactory to the dominant players is capable of including addressing these concerns. There is a fundamental contradiction between what the WTO wants and economic justice and environmental protection.

Euro left's challenge to British "solution"

Andrew Coates, Ipswich CLP, reports from the Second European Convention for Full Employment.

"Wherever people struggle, there is my native land," Caerdydd's Car Cochin (a Welsh choir) sang in the European Parliament on 4th February. Hundreds of labour movement activists, grass-roots campaigners, and members of Europe's left parties turned up with these views in mind for the Second European Convention for Full Employment. In his opening address Ken Coates MEP stated, "In other conferences you will hear much talk of globalisation. But in this conference we are examining the unacceptable face of that process, and working to mobilise resistance to it."

Europe's official workless total remains at over 10%. Regan Scott from Britain's TGWU (European Officer) estimated the real figure at 12%. Disguised unemployment, "outsourcing" to part-time and temporary contractors are no longer purely UK problems. There is no sign that the trend to increased social exclusion and poverty is diminishing.

The Maastricht public spending and debt criteria have hindered growth. With the advent of the Euro there have been calls for a Pact for Employment to counter tight fiscal policies. Left governments in France and Germany are debating a range of pro-employment measures.

The French left coalition led by Lionel Jospin is pioneering an ambitious plan to introduce a 35 hour week. Their efforts to maintain the public sector are not helped by the European Commission's competition drive which has encouraged a new wave of job-destroying privatisations. Despite a decrease in unemployment, France fears a further rise in the coming year. Delegates heard Christophe Aguiton, from the French unemployed movement, argue that to ensure jobs are promoted there must be no reduction in wages. Aguiton, fresh from renewed protest by the French jobless, called for "relaunching the social movement" across the continent.

The British "solution" for unemployment – flexible markets – found no takers at the Convention. Tightening up benefit rules, forcing the under-25s onto compulsory schemes and the older workless into "work tasters" are no substitute for real job creation. Participants were concerned with egalitarian redistribution of work and income.

Even Christian Democrats were prepared to discuss a shorter working week. Radical greens, such as Frieder Otto Volt, backed the creation of a "third sector" between the state and private enterprise to develop innovative employment. There were voices in favour of a general right to an income for all.

The second Convention ended with a declaration for "true full employment." With the British Government so out of step with the European left it is up to activists to promote this positive agenda. ❑

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King Hussein's death may topple house of cards in the Middle East

Western eulogies over the late Jordanian King mask deep concerns about the region's future, argues Tony Greenstein.

NOTHING became his life so much as his leaving of it. Indeed his main achievement was having survived. King Hussein succeeded to his grandfather, Abdullah, who was assassinated in 1952. In 1947 the UN agreed to the Partition of Palestine. The West Bank (Gaza and the Galilee) were allocated to a Palestinian State. Abdullah reached agreement in secret meetings with the Zionists on carving up Palestine. He, or his British troops, would annex the West Bank, the Zionists would have the rest. Abdullah kept to his side of the bargain, and the Zionists, at that stage, were unable to break that agreement. For that they would have to wait until the 1967 War.

Jordan started life in 1921 when Churchill decided to divide the area covered by the Palestine mandate between the Western and Eastern banks of the river Jordan. There is no logical reason for its existence other than the absurd fancies of the imperial map-makers. It was created to separate off the proto-Zionist state in Palestine from the French in Syria and Iraq.

Hussein was a faithful, though sometimes too independent, friend of the West. It was he who launched a bloody war against the Palestinian fedayeen in September 1970, with more than a little help from his Israeli friends. It was an example that President Assad of Syria followed in 1976 in Lebanon. Hussein's talents lay in his cunning and ability to change direction under pressure from his people. It is an act his successor, Abdullah, will find difficult to follow.

The eulogies of the world leaders at King Hussein's passing express their worry at the possible collapse of the existing order in the Middle East. Falling oil prices are bringing instability to the heart of Arabia and the Gulf. The lack of any clear policy over Iraq is nowhere more evident that in the pointless and futile bombing raids and the sanctions whose only effect is on the people themselves. The Kurds are trapped in a half-way house between a state of their own, which the West opposes, Saddam Hussein and NATO's lynchpin in Turkey. The Israeli state is incapable of reaching a peace agreement with the Syrians and therefore Lebanon, while at the same time its agreement with the PLO is floundering on the rock of settler intransigence and Zionist realpolitik (and economics).

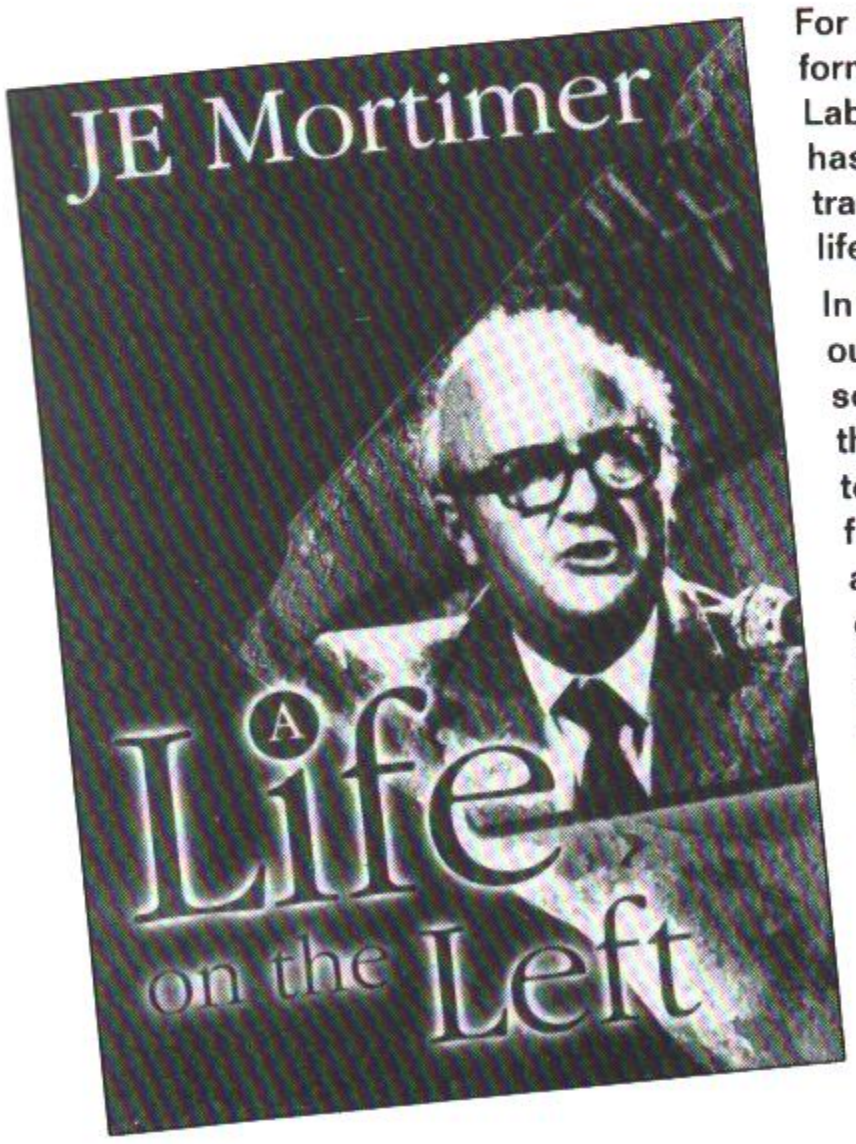
There is in essence a stalemate in the Middle East as the regimes of Assad in Syria and Mubarak in Egypt ossify. The fear is that Hussein's passing may mean that the floodwaters are about to break as a weak regime finds itself incapable of continuing the balancing act between Israel, its people and the US incursions in Iraq. The key problem for the left is symbolised by what is termed Islamic fundamentalism, which confronts the problems of today by looking back to a mythical past. Pan-arabism is all but dead and secularism has collapsed in the corruption of regimes like Algeria.

The tragedy of the Middle East is that the vast mineral wealth represented by oil has been squandered by the West's client regimes in purchasing vast quantities of arms to silence their own peoples or else in the casinos of the West. Insofar as the key task of the Arab peoples is to overthrow those regimes, the passing of Hussein may be the first act in releasing the genie from his bottle.

A life on the left

by Jim Mortimer

Price £16.95



For more than 60 years Jim Mortimer, former General Secretary of the Labour Party and Chairman of ACAS, has been involved in the labour and trade union movement and public life.

In this political autobiography he outlines a lifelong commitment to socialism and reaffirms his belief in the principles that first brought him to the labour movement. He argues for the traditional aims of Labour and is critical of much that now describes itself as 'New Labour'. A life on the left is published by The Book Guild Limited, 25 High Street, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2LU

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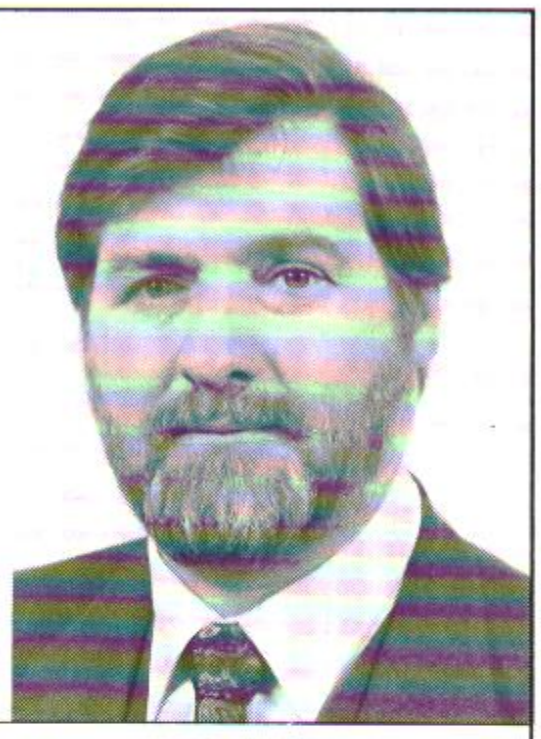
Libya 1986 – Iraq 1999
Saturday 17th April 1999

1pm: assemble Hyde Park Corner
3pm: rally in Trafalgar Square addressed by Ahmed Ben Bella, first President of Algeria, Tony Benn MP and others.

- Donations urgently needed: write cheques to "I.I.S." and post to: I.I.S., BM 2966, London WC1N 3XX
- To sponsor the march, to confirm details of the route, or for other information, phone 0171-436 4636.

the Michael Hindley column

Michael Hindley MEP gives a global perspective.



ON THE Wednesday of the February Plenary session the European Parliament was effectively sealed off, surrounded by demonstrating French farmers angry that their subsidies might be cut. The European Union is facing a larger than usual budgetary crisis that will have widespread consequences, not least forcing Tony Blair to take sides on Britain's position regarding the future of the EU. Even if the Commission faces down the French farming lobby, ably supported by Spain as Europe's biggest overall winner in the stakes to get Euro-subsidies, there is a looming crisis of spending.

The present arrangement to fund the EU runs out this year and a new regime must be introduced to last until 2006, during which time we should see the EU entrance of net gainers from the EU budget in central Europe (principally Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states).

Britain and other states will be faced with increased contributions and Blair's problem is that his mentor, Margaret Thatcher, set the agenda in 1984 by demanding and getting a rebate for the UK. The tabloids are already on full cry to keep the rebate, aided and abetted by Gordon Brown whose sabre-rattling on the issue has left him as isolated as any Tory Minister among his European counterparts. To further complicate matters, Blair — like Thatcher — is keen to extend the EU eastwards. But no more cash, means no more expansion.

To put things in a proper perspective, the amount of money involved is relatively small. Britain's net contribution is £1.33 billion, only a fraction of UK public spending of £340 billion. We are talking here about political principles, something which cannot ultimately be finessed. Blair and Brown will find it difficult to avoid the temptation to bluster about getting our money back, even if it may soon be converted into Euros.

So far the Germans have been prepared to bankroll the European Union as a way back to international respectability. But as the largest net contributor by far (£7.14 billion) Germany's patience is running thin. Besides, the Germany of 1999 is not the Germany of 1984 – the rebate year. It is a united country, but unification has brought massive disparities. The recently published league tables of the richest and poorest cities in the EU provided a clear indication of the modern German paradox, for whereas as usual more German cities appeared in the richest ten (all in the West), more German cities now appeared in the poorest ten (all in the East).

NATIONALLY and internationally, the redoubtable Oskar Lafontaine, as the German finance minister, is still prepared to argue for redistribution – unlike Stephen Byers. Being a committed European this logically leads Lafontaine to argue for European taxes to distribute the money from richer to poorer regions. However this cannot be done without massive transfers of political power to a centralised European state. Clearly, the German Social Democrats will pay what they regard as their share provided others do too.

But is the rebate fair? Fundamentally there is still an imbalance because of the over-subsidy of agriculture. The Common Agricultural Policy gobbles up around half the budget and has an abiding political value, not just for the right, particularly in the southern European countries.

The EU budget contributions are made up of a Byzantine formula of customs dues, a proportion of VAT returns and a proportion of the GDP. Other net contributors like Sweden and Austria argue that they pay over the British rate relative to their size. So there can be left of centre arguments for using the EU budget to redistribute from richer to poorer areas within Europe and this line appeals to the traditional social democrats, but it involves also a federal state to do it.

Here is Blair's dilemma, for like Major before him, he speaks about being at the heart of Europe without wanting to pay the seeming admission price. He is also set against any redistribution in Britain let alone Europe, so Lafontaine's grander design also has no appeal. In fact Blair's line on Europe is to use Britain's low tax and low wage base to attract investment, much to the annoyance of New Labour's sister parties. Brown, like Nigel Lawson, sees the attraction of a single currency as a simple means of squeezing inflation out of the economy and an always ready excuse to keep down public expenditure. Rather than New Labour we have a rehash of old Tory values on Europe.

In the run-up to the European elections in June, New Labour is casting round desperately to find areas of difference between us and the Tories. It is too late to start now. The Euro-elections will see a large rate of abstentions in our core vote, especially when it dawns that the system of PR adopted breaks the link between the MEPs and their constituency.

Labour CND and Scottish CND

Defence Policy Forum

Saturday 13th March
Conway Hall, Red Lion Square
London WC1

Sessions:

- Accessing Labour's new policy making structures
- Nuclear disarmament – CND's message
- War and peace: crucial aspects of Labour's policy
- Speakers include: Ann Black, National Policy Forum, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Neil Cruikshank, Scottish CND, Dave Knight, Chair CND, Pete Willsman, Labour Party NEC, Angie Zelter, Trident Ploughshares 2000

Plus Labour CND AGM

Details: Carol Turner, 29 Stodmarsh House, London, SW9 6HH, 0171-820 9709; email: 113744.171@compuserve.com

EU need to take CAP in hand

Greetings from Alex Smith MEP

South of Scotland



Alex Smith MEP
Damside, Ayre KA8 8ER
Tel: 01292-280 096 ● Fax: 01292-280 141

Parliamentary Group of the
Party of European Socialists

Time for a national civil rights movement

Suresh Grover of The Monitoring Group reports on a positive initiative that has followed from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.

A MEETING on 28th March will launch a sustained effort to build an effective and inclusive network that can provide support and solidarity to all those facing racial injustice.

The National Civil Rights Movement will be a network of individuals, families and communities dedicated to the struggle against the oppressive and discriminatory criminal justice system. The Movement will embrace everyone who wants to work in a non-sectarian manner to engender solidarity and build a grassroots movement that will help victims of racial violence and other injustices. It will fight for racial justice and human rights.

The campaign of the Lawrence family has caught the public's imagination. The campaign and the public inquiry has created an unprecedented awareness in the British public of the racism and incompetence that pervade the criminal justice system. A major historical opportunity has been created in the struggle to create a pluralistic and tolerant society, in which the formal legal rights of all are respected.

In the weeks leading up to the publication of the inquiry report, the police and authorities have embarked on a charm offensive. The Lawrence inquiry has unearthed a massive can of worms of police racism, corruption and incompetence.

Families who have suffered racial violence must be given centre stage to fight racism. Society as a whole must be jolted again and again to see racism as a priority issue. Racial violence attacks are likely to increase with refugees to Britain being the chief targets. Changes in immigration law, which replace benefits with vouchers and house refugees in accommodation across Britain, are set to aggravate racism.

It is not acceptable to us that any individual, family or community should be left to face racism in isolation. To be effective, the struggle against racial oppression and injustice must be shaped by the individuals, families and communities directly affected by it. The movement will aim to build a grassroots network capable of providing immediate, effective and sustained practical and political support to all victims of racial injustice.

The Movement will aim to:

- Establish support and campaign groups throughout the UK
- Help and sustain family led campaigns
- Launch a national race help-line and a national network newsletter
- Establish an independent strategic forum on the criminal justice system
- Organise millennium civil rights new year parties
- Prepare for a major demonstration to be held in the new year

- Initial supporters include: Mike Mansfield, Gareth Pierce, Louise Christian, John Wadham, Suresh Grover, Benjamin Zeppaniah, Newham Monitoring Project, The Monitoring Group, Misty in Roots, Michael Menson Family Campaign, Justice for Ricky Reel Campaign, Justice for Christopher Alder, Blair Peach 20th anniversary committee, *Searchlight*, CARF, and Hit Racism for Six.

Battle on to axe the Act

(Apologies to Lewis Carroll) "I'll be judge I'll be jury, said cunning old Jack, I'll make my own rules and send them all back." John O, National Coalition of Anti Deportation Campaigns, reports:

The Asylum and Immigration Bill received its second reading on 22nd February. The intention of this Bill is that from the moment anyone arrives in the UK and asks for asylum they will be punished. Not only they but anyone who advises them can also be punished. If passed, the Bill will:

- bar asylum seekers access to Social Security or National Assistance
- disperse them throughout the country to wherever the Home Office likes
- make them live in accommodation chosen by the Home Office – refusal will equal homelessness.
- If asylum is rejected and then appealed against, the Home Office may impose a fine on the asylum seeker and their representative(s), if the appeal is lost and it is deemed to be without merit.

In the wider field of immigration, there will be more controls and only one appeal against any Home Office decision to remove. Visitors to the UK may be required to make financial bonds (speculation on the amount is between £5,000 to £10,000) before they can obtain entry. Immigration officers will have the power to arrest without a warrant and to use force to detain anyone subject to immigration control (the police will not be required). Marriage registrars will be required to report those they suspect of being involved in a "sham" marriage and will have the power to refuse to marry them.

The Bill is littered with enabling clauses, which will allow the Home Secretary to make new rules. All in all the Asylum and Immigration Bill is "bad, sad and dangerous to human rights". NCADC will continue to support all those who campaign against the new Bill and previous Immigration acts.

- Contact NCADC at 22 Berners Street, Birmingham B19 2DR.

Meeting to build a national civil rights movement

Sunday, 28th March, 12-5pm
Camden Centre, Town Hall,
Judd Street, WC1
(Kings Cross or Euston stations)

Registration and music: 12-1pm
Refreshments available

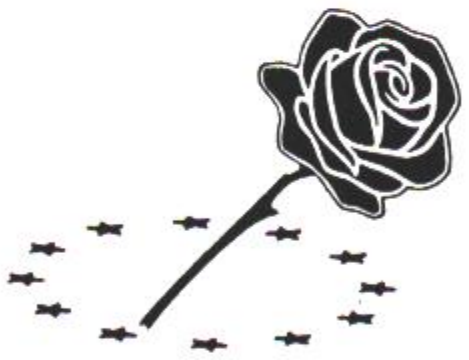
- Speakers include: Neville Lawrence, Mike Mansfield, US black activist and author Manning Marable, Suresh Grover and representatives of other families
- Participation in the final session of the conference and voting for the steering group will be open only to paid-up members of the National Civil Rights Movement.
- Further details: 0181-574 0818

Alf Lomas MEP

Still campaigning for socialism

Alf Lomas MEP
Ground Floor, Queensway House
275/285 High Street
Stratford E15 2TF
Tel: 0181-519 8114

Parliamentary Group of the Party of European Socialists



Abortion and disability

The pro-choice movement has pulled back from a potential split. Long-time activist Leonora Lloyd reports.

THE QUESTION of disability has always been a difficult issue within reproductive rights politics. The thalidomide tragedy was a major factor in getting the 1967 Act through Parliament and one of the grounds under which abortion is permitted is the likelihood of the baby suffering from a disability.

Since then, although abortions on that ground remain a tiny proportion of the total, the number of screening tests has grown hugely. Women not wanting them, whether on medical or other grounds, are put under great pressure. Advances in genetic knowledge increase that pressure: with all that monitoring and screening, how can anyone still give birth to a child with a disability, a less than perfect baby?

One organisation has few scruples in declaring that disability is something that should be avoided at all costs, that people with disabilities are somehow of less worth and certainly that they should not procreate if there is any chance of passing on their damaged genes. Women at risk of giving birth to a baby likely to be less than perfect should be aggressively counselled and advised to have an abortion. That organisation is the Revolutionary Communist Party, which now claims not to exist but which still somehow manages to produce a glossy magazine, *LM* (formerly *Living Marxism*), and maintain an extensive web site.

The views of such a small, unimportant grouplet would not normally matter. But unfortunately RCP members have managed to get into positions of considerable influence within the pro-choice movement.

Ann Furedi was Director of the Birth Control Trust for some years until recently, when she became a spokesperson for the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, one of Britain's two biggest charitable providers of abortion services. Most of the articles on reproductive rights in *LM* are written by Ann Bradley. Although I understand that Ann Furedi denies that she is Bradley, by a strange coincidence this was her name before she married Terry Furedi, brother of Frank Furedi (the RCP's founder and chief theoretician). While she was working at the BCT, Ellie Lee and other RCP supporters also worked there. Lee founded the RCP's front organisation, Pro-Choice Forum, while Women's Officer at Kent University in the 80s.

Ellie moved the Pro-Choice Forum to Oxford. In February she organised a "Medical Ethics Forum: Ethics and abortion for abnormality" at the Oxford Union. Ann Furedi, wearing her BPAS hat, was involved in a debate on Channel 5 at which she all but told a woman with disabilities that it would have been better if she had not been born.

In the pages of *LM* the group is even franker. It is, according to them, immoral to bring a child into the world that does not have the chance of what they believe is a normal life, and women should be given "directive counselling" to achieve this end. In an article in the October 1995 edition, Ann Bradley writes that "the world would be a better place without disabilities such as Down's syndrome and spina bifida.... I find it odd that this notion should be questioned, never mind condemned as immoral and offensive."

It is important to make it clear that Ann Furedi and Ellie Lee do not speak for the whole pro-choice movement and the National Abortion Campaign has put out a statement which puts its own position clearly. NAC has always argued that there must only be one ground for abortion – the woman's choice. While women are entitled to all the information and care they need during pregnancy, they should not be pressurised into having screenings they don't want or be given "directive counselling". No one should be given screening only on condition that they have an abortion if the result is positive, as happens in some hospitals now. Nor should women with disabilities be pressured not to continue with their pregnancies.

There are many activists in the disability movement, like Professor Tom Shakespeare and feminist Agnes Fletcher, who support women's choice, and that support could be lost if the movement was tarred with the eugenics stance of *LM*. Fortunately, at a recent meeting of the Pro-Choice Alliance, a statement produced by NAC was accepted by all but a small minority – Ann Furedi and her allies.



Left at Number Ten

TRIBUNE

Every week, TRIBUNE carries all the news and views from Labour and the Left. TRIBUNE is essential reading for all those keen to keep up with events inside the Labour Party and the New Labour Government and in touch with campaigns on key issues such as the Welfare State.

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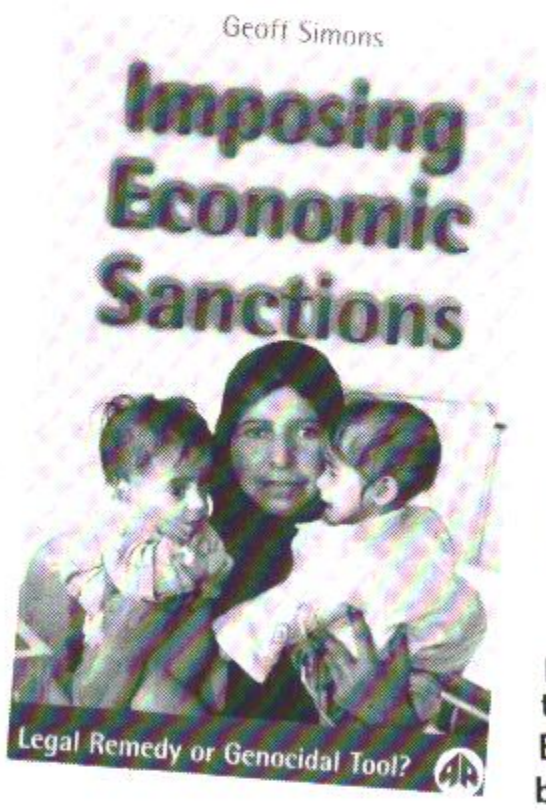
A crime against humanity

Mike Phipps reviews Imposing Economic Sanctions *by Geoff Simmons, published by Pluto, price £12.99 pbck.*

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS against political regimes have been around since the age of Pericles. An estimated two-thirds of the world's population is currently subject to some form of US sanctions alone. Do they work? Sanctions can be variously ineffectual, persuasive or devastating. They can antagonise and consolidate recalcitrant regimes, pushing them into repression, self-reliance and isolation. "They are seldom proposed with discriminate skill or ethically proportional impact," writes Geoff Simmons. "Too often they reflect the unjust shape of international power." In short, they work best when the US wants them to, and are always a blunt instrument.

Sanctions against Haiti's military regime in the early 1990s caused 1,000 child fatalities a month. The US has maintained sanctions against Cuba for 40 years, with a catastrophic effect on Cuban health. The Helms-Burton Act signed into law by Clinton threatens further sanctions against companies anywhere that trade with Cuba, with the political aim of toppling Castro.

Iraq is an even more glaring case. To send so much as a knitted gift for a baby, you must apply to the DTI's sanctions unit, wait several weeks for them to approve an application and pass it to the US-dominated UN Sanctions Committee in New York, whose deliberations are not open to the public or subject to appeal. Coming after the dropping of 88,000 US bombs, thousands of casualties and the huge destruction to housing and infrastructure, the impact of nine years of sanctions has been devastating. Over half of Iraq's children under the age of five have malnutrition; 5,600 are dying each month. Such sanctions are as dubious in international law as the resumption of US-UK bombing.



The Geneva Convention prohibits starvation or interference with the survival needs of civilians as a method of warfare. The US itself, in other circumstances, has condemned "all violations of humanitarian law, including the deliberate impeding of food and medical supplies to the civilian population" and defines as international terrorism "acts intended to coerce a civilian population or to influence the policy of government by intimidation or coercion". If the Clinton-Blair campaign against Iraq is to be halted, the message of this timely book must be propagated far and wide.

Labour pains

Mike Phipps reviews Work, *an anthology edited by Dinah Livingstone, published by Katabasis, price £12.95 pbck.*

This anthology of poems, essays and people's descriptions of their work has something for everybody. Francis McDonagh's essay on the shoe industry reveals a chilling tale of exploitation and intimidation. The growth of "outsourcing" has allowed companies to reap huge profits by switching production to China, for example, where the average wage is 6p per hour. Globalisation is taken up in documents from the Zapatista-inspired 1997 international gathering for humanity against neo-liberalism.

In taped accounts, people describing their jobs emphasise the human cost of speed-up and flexibility. Stress and insecurity appear common across nursing, labouring, teaching, farming and even growth areas such as dole office workers and call centre operators.

The poems here are a mixed bunch. Like some of the essays, many tend to romanticise work as a dignified, meaningful activity. It may have this potential but under late capitalism it is all too often pointless, wasteful and socially and ecologically destructive. It will require a new mode of production to restore work's liberating capacity and allow humanity positively to transform its relationship to its environment.

The history of an activist

Liz Davies reviews
A life on the left
by Jim Mortimer, published by The Book Guild, price £16.95.

Jim Mortimer joined the Labour League of Youth at 14, in Portsmouth. He trained as a shipfitter and joined the Amalgamated Engineering Union.

When war broke out, he moved to London working first for the GLC and then for a aircraft manufacturer and he was active in the Young Communist League. In 1944, he rejoined Labour after the Party started campaigning for public ownership, social security, and full employment. After the war, he worked in the TUC and studied part-time at the LSE.

In 1949, his support for the British China Friendship Society led to ten years of exclusion from the Labour Party. Years later, when he was applying for a visa to visit the US, he was refused on the grounds of his links with the British China Friendship Society, but told that he could apply for "defector" status if over five years he displayed active opposition to communism.

In 1974 he became the first chair of ACAS, dealing amongst other disputes with Grunwicks, where the employer simply refused to conciliate. Jim was General Secretary of the Party between 1982 and 1985. He oversaw four dramatic events: the 1983 general election, the Bermondsey by-election, the expulsion of Militant and the miners' strike. He toured the country supporting the miners and was responsible for drafting NEC policy which backed the miners. He has been given honorary membership of the NUM in recognition of this. Now, he says, "it is no longer possible to describe the Labour Party as a socialist party, except that socialist consciousness still motivates many of its active rank and file members and there are numerous socialists among its Members of Parliament."

Jim continues to be active in London MSF, with his partner Pat.

The book is a fascinating account of the life of an active trade unionist and Labour Party member, who stuck close to his socialism as he rose from the rank and file to General Secretary of the Party. Well worth reading for anyone interested in trade union or Labour Party history.

CORRESPONDENCE

We welcome feedback, however letters over 250 words will not be considered. Those via email (or PC disk) are particularly welcome.



**PO Box 2378,
London, E5 9QU.
llb@labournet.org.uk**

It is heartening to see a principled response from within the British Labour Party to the brutality of the Clinton-Blair war against the people of Iraq.

The official response from the Australian Labor Party has been unreserved support for the slaughter.

Sanctions continue to starve the Iraqi people with the support both of our Liberal government and the parliamentary Labor Party. However, many of us to the left of the party refuse to support this immoral policy and will oppose any such attack on civilian populations, whether instigated by "enemies" or "allies". I would like to thank all those in the British Labour Party who have kept up the pressure on Blair to back down, and find a peaceful and reasonable solution to the conflict.

Josh Milthorpe,
Canberra,
Australia

In New Zealand, many of the reforms that Blair promotes, were put in place by a Labour government, and built upon by a National (Tory) one. New Zealand was subjected to reforms, by a Labour government, that even Thatcher couldn't implement – workfare, total financial deregulation, state asset sales and student loans/fees. We were told that the government was acting in accordance with traditional Labour principles and beliefs.

The result was a massive split in the Labour Party, and wounds that have not healed even now. We have to ask why the welfare state, and more importantly why socialist parties, were created. Blair and Brown would appear to want a liberal party, rather than a Labour one. Don't let them lead you down the path that we took.

Quentin Findlay,
New Zealand

I am currently writing an MA thesis on aspects of the welfare state and the British Labour Party; and as a former member of the New Zealand Labour Party, I am extremely hostile to the New Labour proposals.

The reforms place all the impetus on those collecting welfare, as opposed to the hard question of how to reduce unemployment. This would involve Keynesian reforms, something that Brown and Blair have difficulties with.

My father is a teacher as is my brother. My father teaches kids with behavioural difficulties. In such an environment, it is hard to have performance indicators. These kids do learn but are not under any exam room restrictions. Meanwhile I'm still angry that people are going into vast amounts of debt to gain an education.

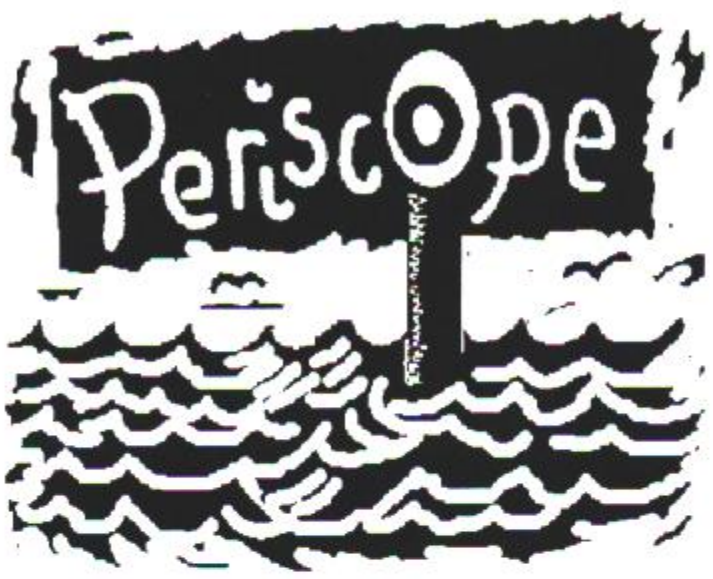
It's unfair and nothing to do with socialism.

Sean ni Scannaill,
Glasgow

So Philip Gould helped Labour lose the 1992 election (The ramblings of a mediocrity, *LLB*, February). Eddie Tucker charges him with hiding opinion poll results from the NEC. What was he supposed to do: announce that Neil Kinnock was unpopular and should be replaced by Wedgie-Benn?

When are you going to understand that Neil Kinnock could not win with the transitional programme that *Briefing* had saddled him with?

Vic Dean,
Hampstead



Lies about Sudan

A new question mark hangs over the **US bombing** of the factory in Al Shifa, Sudan. If it really was producing chemical weapons, why did the British Ambassador attend the official opening in July, 1997?

Millbankers

Don't you just love them? One is clearly spinning out of control and briefing the press against Baron **Tom Sawyer's** NEC candidature. Working for the most inappropriate winners of the Investors in People award and renowned appalling employers under Sawyer has obviously had an effect. The source is quoted as saying, "I reckon there are at least a hundred current or former Party staffers who will find it difficult to vote for Tom. The NEC is no rest home for the great and the good, you know." Meanwhile *LLB* hopes that Sawyer will intervene in the campaign in as effective a way as he did last year – securing thousands of votes for the centre-left with his ridiculous attacks on Liz Davies and the Grassroots Alliance.

Lib Dems

On the day one wing of **Millbank** issued a briefing on why "Labour's" agreement with the Lib Dems is so wonderful (they mean Tony Blair's cabinet cosying up), they also sent out a clip-art pack with a prominent logo for local parties to use. "Another Lib-Dem Let Down" the badge-shaped artwork stated.

Quite Barmby

Awarding **Alan Simpson MP** its Parliamentary Green Ribbon Award to the "best Member of the House of Commons", *Green Futures* magazine commented, "Simpson's decisiveness and courage mark him out as the Michael Owen of the green benches, cutting through the dull passing game that characterizes so much of Parliament's approach to environmental goals". True, but how does this go down with true blue Evertonian Simpo?

Entryism

A frightening development in the liberal **Democratic Left** (formerly the Communist Party). Members are instructed in a column of *New Times* to "enter the local community". Why? To organise rent strikes? Opposition to VAT on fuel? Stop road building? No, to "take part in boot sales". The thought of the local populace being infiltrated by soggy eurocommunists is quite alarming.

Welsh wizardry

Some people have been alleging unfair advantage to **Alun Michael**, using his position as Secretary of State for Wales to use public funds to go around Wales meeting people at the aptly named Meet the People meetings. It must have had a real influence in Barry, where he met a grand total of five people. In a parliamentary answer about these meetings, he claimed people were interested enough to turn out on "wet, winter evenings"; the meeting in Barry provided no such excuse – it was held on an extremely convenient Saturday morning. ❑

LLB page 27

the Liz Davies column



Labour Party NEC member Liz Davies provides a viewpoint from the grass roots.

NEC stifles any Iraq debate

THE LAST NEC meeting, held on 26th January, voted by 19-5 not even to discuss a motion from the four Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance members on the bombing of Iraq.

Our motion had been submitted in good time and was circulated with the official papers for the meeting. It regretted the bombing, noted that Britain and the US had acted in isolation from the international community and called on the Government to work with the United Nations to pursue peaceful and democratic solutions to the problems of the Middle East.

Robin Cook was present at the NEC, and it was agreed to take the motion while he was in attendance. To our amazement, as soon as the Chair moved to our motion as the next item of business, John Allen of the AEEU moved next business, claiming that Iraq had been discussed at our previous meeting.

In fact, the previous meeting had taken place before the bombing, and the discussion had consisted of Grassroots Alliance members asking Tony Blair questions about Iraq, to which he responded.

We protested against the move to next business. It was agreed to hear Robin Cook, who justified the Government's action at some length, adding nothing to what he had said on television and in the Commons. After he had finished speaking, the AEEU again moved next business and a vote was then taken on whether we would be permitted to put our motion. Only Anne Picking of UNISON joined the four of us in opposing this flagrant attempt to censor discussion.

While none of us expected our motion to be passed, we had assumed, naively as it turns out, that we would at least be allowed a chance to put our point of view and to register our dissent.

The refusal to allow us a vote on the substance of the issue mirrored the Government's manoeuvre in the House of Commons. What are they afraid of? If they can justify the bombing of Iraq, and the killing of civilians, then they should be prepared to do so at the Party's highest body.

Meanwhile, as I write, I hear that US bombers have struck again, and more civilians are dead. We will continue to try to raise our protests at the NEC, but it is obvious Blair and Cook will only respond to substantial public protest.

The rest of the NEC was more mundane. There are proposals to hand the Party's membership function to the private sector, euphemistically referred to as "outsourcing". The GMB representatives spoke against commissioning a feasibility study, but in the end there were only four votes against the formal proposal. No prizes for guessing who the four were.

Cathy Jamieson and I put a motion calling for a review of the Party's sponsors. It was claimed that such a review was already underway, and I accepted an invitation to participate in it. Despite repeated requests, nobody has been able to tell me the timetable or remit for this review. I shall argue for Party members to be consulted on criteria for the acceptance of donations and sponsorship, and for those criteria to reflect Labour values. That means an end to any links with arms dealers, anti-trade union employers, or human rights violators.

MEANWHILE, my fears that some of these sponsorship deals would result in bad publicity have been confirmed. The *Daily Mail*, no doubt delighted to find an issue on which it could attack Labour, denounced the Party and the Government for taking money from Novartis Pharmaceuticals Ltd, which is a leading producer of genetically-modified foods. Other newspapers have highlighted similar conflicts of interest. It is becoming a matter of urgency that the Party detaches itself from donors and sponsors with a vested interest in government decision-making. I have been criticised for raising this matter in public, but it is clear that it cannot be dealt with effectively behind closed doors.

I was elected to speak out for Party members, and I shall continue to do so. Next year is the centennial of the Labour Party. Let's hope the powers that be don't choose to celebrate it in the Millennium Dome.

Grassroots Alliance NEC slate

• Ann Black • Bill Butler • Liz Davies
• Mark Seddon • Christine Shawcroft • Pete Willsman

As many CLP nominations as possible are needed. The closing date is 9th April, which means decisions have to be made at March GCs.

Liz, Mark, Christine and Pete are asking CLPs who nominated one of them last time to nominate the same person this year.

• Call 0181-985 6597 for leaflets and speakers.

OFF MESSAGE

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