LABOUR LEFT

Briefing

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Behind Brown's spin

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Crunch time for Putin?

LABOUR LEFT Briefing

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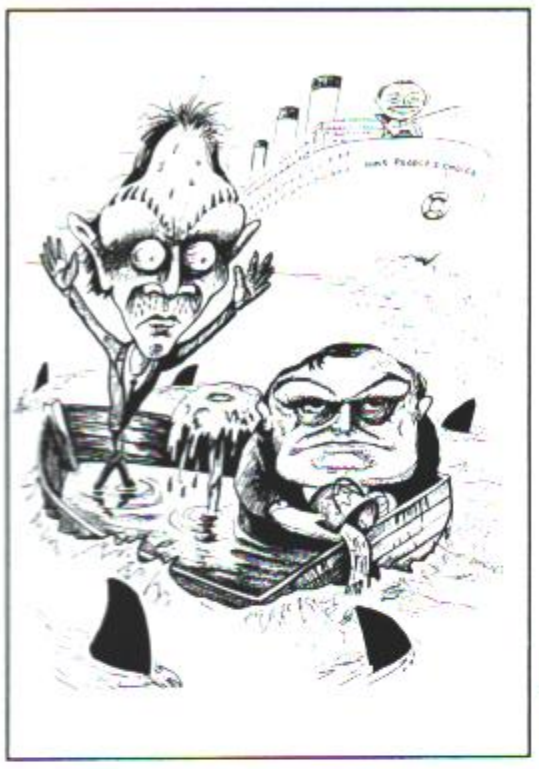
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EDITORIAL

A failure of deeds, not words

After the disaster comes the panic. New Labour's dreadful local election results in May have been followed by a spate of misguided posturing from the Government. This is all the more bizarre for an administration that prides itself on "joined up thinking" and "agenda-setting".

First came the ministerial speeches railing against Oxbridge elitism – odd for a leadership that has declared the class war to be over. If Cabinet ministers thought they could outflank Hague by borrowing his desperate populist rhetoric, they made a serious miscalculation. Such misinformed and misdirected tilting against inequalities in higher education carries little resonance coming from those who imposed student tuition fees, abolished student grants, stuck to Tory education spending limits for two years and who refuse to consider removing the charitable status of elite fee-paying schools. They have also done nothing for the millions whose education or training relies on an underfunded and semi-privatised FE sector.

But it's not just the doyens of Oxbridge. New Labour strategists have apparently compiled a list of soft targets – lawyers, fat cats, the usual suspects – on whom ministers can vent their self-righteous outrage. While this may be a welcome alternative to verbal attacks on asylum seekers, people on benefit and anyone else who fails to fit into Millbank's vision of an entrepreneurial Britain, it is unlikely to cut much ice with a public already tired of excuses and scapegoating.

The public relations fiasco at the Women's Institute Conference symbolised precisely the growing discontent with a Government that patronises and boasts but has done little to tackle the most pressing social problems that led to its election in the first place. Commentators were jubilant at the failure of New Labour's spin machine and Polly Toynbee in *The Guardian* drew the characteristically shallow conclusion that politicians should stop making rotten speeches. She missed the more important point, however, that they should stop concocting rotten policies.

The barracking of Tony Blair as he talked about the health service underlines the fact that, as Labour enters its fourth year of government, it is above all a failure of deeds rather than words that has brought it crashing to earth. Too many of the policies wanted by millions in 1997 have simply not been on the agenda, such as the investment in public services, expansion of the health service, improvements in transport, protection of the environment, provision of affordable housing, extension of benefits and above all the creation of secure, well-paid jobs. Instead a continuation of Conservative priorities has been the main feature of Government economic and social policy – low corporation tax, benefit cuts for lone parents and disabled people, further privatisation, and a dogmatic commitment to the free market even in the face of a collapsing car industry, a chronic housing shortage and an unsafe, run-down transport infrastructure.

A sure sign of the Government's failure is the fact that it has allowed the Tory opposition – pathetic, ragged and extreme though it is – to set the agenda. Nowhere is this clearer than on civil liberties: the abolition of trial by jury, a mockery of a Freedom of Information Bill, the ever-increasing restrictions on and stigmatising of asylum seekers.

As a result our leaders have alienated tens of thousands of grassroots Labour activists. And if the activists aren't engaged, then millions of potential Labour voters will stay at home – they proved this in May's local elections. Unthinkable though it seemed just a year ago, on current voting trends Labour is facing possible defeat at the next general election.

For the spindoctors and ex-SDP political advisers this might be the opportunity they need to do something useful with their lives. But for the vast majority of people in Britain, it would be a calamity. It would usher in one of the most right-wing Tory governments ever seen to wage all-out war on workers, ethnic minorities, the public sector and the poor.

What can prevent this nightmare scenario? Not spin. Only a return to the true values of our movement – full employment, properly funded public services, real social equality, public ownership, redistributive taxation, civil liberties and internationalism – can turn things around.

We must also seek to heal the divisions in our Party by calling for the readmission of Ken Livingstone and Dennis Canavan, as well as for the removal of those officials whose Millbank factionalism has jeopardised our electoral prospects. We should demand a new integrity in the conduct of our leaders – an end to negative spin, repeat announcements of "good news" and empty soundbites. The prospect of a lower profile for Alastair Campbell, while welcome, will hardly suffice as a signal of a change in strategy.

The left has a duty to lead the demands for a fundamental change in course that puts the needs of our Party's core supporters first. Otherwise we may all lose.

Crisis? What crisis?

The real story about asylum seekers is about why so few manage to get here and how the Government treats those who do, concludes Anna Monks.

In a country surrounded by water it takes some effort to frighten people into believing that they are about to be overwhelmed by unarmed, powerless foreigners. But people can be frightened as well as persuaded into voting for certain parties, and Conservative councillors, MPs and irresponsible newspaper editors have been busy inventing a spurious news story about what is a normal situation, creating the illusion that there is a new crisis. And too often Labour ministers have colluded.

Refugees have been coming to this country for centuries. The significant increases in the 1990s are related to the wars which keep so many British people in work. This year the number of Europeans claiming asylum was greater than non-Europeans for the first time since the 1960s. This does not mean that all the other refugees have disappeared. There is a huge backlog of cases resulting from the Conservative Government's reluctance to enable the Home Office to deal with applications properly and from the computer system being installed by private contractors who completely messed up.

If the recent recruitment of extra staff at the Immigration department at Croydon does reduce the backlog, it will be easier to see what the real effect of hostile legislation and policy will be. The commonest method of entry to Britain was by plane until legislation made the carriers liable for the legal status of their passengers. While some have journeyed by other means from distant places, the carriers' responsibility law significantly reduced the numbers of people who could reach Britain. The proposed broadening of the list of countries deemed not to be oppressive is an arrogant refusal to look at individual circumstances which is quite ironic when you consider that Northern Irish citizens of the UK have been awarded asylum by overseas courts.

The new Home Office agency, National Asylum Support Service (NASS), is now responsible for asylum seekers and will replace many local government functions. The fuss made by Kent County Council led to it being relieved of its responsibilities first. The agency will start dealing with London applicants in August and the rest of the country in October. Appeals against decisions will be treated as new applications and appellants will then be supported by the NASS.

The most obvious effect of NASS is the dispersal programme, which aims to stop new arrivals congregating in the immediate area of entry and to move them to areas where more housing is available (not least because high unemployment has encouraged internal "economic migration"). Heads of families may include wives, disabled dependents and children under 18 in their application, but NASS officers are not obliged to consider other relationships. Children over 18, adult siblings and gay partners can be dispersed to different destinations – a policy which may last no longer than the first legal challenge after the European human rights legislation comes into force in October. Until then, dispersal will deprive many refugees of legal support, prejudice their applications and appeals, and result in more deportations.

Cash-strapped local authorities have already been tempted to use dispersal to offload costly problems without regard to individual circumstances. It has been reported that a man suffering from TB was recently put on a long bus journey to a new authority. It is degrading to keep explaining personal details to new strangers, especially when there are language difficulties, which there will be

Romas fight for refugee status

Jack Straw's recent call for the 1951 Refugee Convention to be rewritten, restricting the countries from which asylum claims would be accepted, ignores the widespread Neo-Nazi violence and systematic persecution that the Roma minority face in Central and Eastern Europe.

In response to this and the Home Office's refusal to so far grant a single Roma refugee status on arrival in the UK, 'Europe Roma' is circulating the attached petition.

Please type out and sign the petition, add your name and address and return it to Europe-Roma, PO Box 14874, London NW1 OWF. Any donations by cheque should be made payable to "Asylum Education and Legal Fund". Write in for supplies of the petition or telephone 0207-267 8198.

We, the undersigned, note that:

The Roma people are the subject of long-standing racial persecution, discrimination and social segregation throughout Eastern Europe, which has escalated in recent years.

This persecution – which has been documented by numerous human rights organisations and international bodies – includes neo-Nazi violence and extends to clear human rights abuses by local authorities, the judiciary, police and other state bodies.

Amongst the Roma seeking asylum in the United Kingdom are survivors of burnings, rapes, police beatings and relatives of those murdered. Yet not a single Roma asylum seeker has been granted refugee status on arrival by the Home Office.

We therefore call on the United Kingdom Government to end denial of refugee status to the Roma people and accord them their established international rights.

everywhere outside London where the range of interpreters is inadequate, and even worse alongside the trauma of dispersal.

To take one example: currently asylum seekers in Derby are either the responsibility of Social Services or Kent County Council (!) or of NASS, depending on where they landed and where they came from. Local voluntary groups have made contact and at least Derby has legal practices with the relevant specialists, unlike many provincial cities. Nonetheless, one penniless Kurdish family was only able to contact their lawyer after the Home Office rejected their application because a college tutor personally drove them to London.

Refugee experts are deeply concerned about the nature of the housing which is being found for new arrivals. A worker from Derby reports that some 150 Kurds, housed in Derby by Kent County Council, were sent to unregistered houses in multiple occupation, to landlords who had recently been prosecuted for failing to maintain safe gas appliances, and, in one case, a family was given a room which was also the route to the toilet for everyone else in the house.

Derby has not had a Kurdish or Turkish-speaking community before, and Kent's creation of one for them only came to the authorities' attention when alert staff at an FE College questioned the numbers of Kurds seeking English language courses!

The NASS is now drawing up contracts with providers to house 60% of applicants directly, which private landlords who have been removed from local authority lists, are bound to see as a new way to get their hands on taxpayers' money. The worst example to date came when the London Asylum Seekers Consortium lost the use of properties owned by Glasgow City Council who let them to NASS at higher rents. In better cases, some NASS inspectors have ordered landlords to improve sub-standard properties, and some refugees are enjoying living outside London.

Any money which applicants bring into the country is monitored and they are only allowed to buy "essential" goods. Under regulation 9(4) sub para (e) of Statutory Instrument 704/2000, toys and other recreational items are deemed non-essential. But children need toys to develop skills in their first language which they transfer more easily when learning additional languages. There is now a mass campaign to get this regulation altered. People are sending toys to NASS, asking they be passed to an asylum seeker and telling them how disgusted they are at a system that denies toys to children. Write to Quest House, Cross Road, Croydon, Surrey CR9 6EL.



Photo: Molly Cooper

A collage on display at a recent campaign event for Roma Refugees illustrates the side of the story which the mainstream press covers up.

Over the years, many councils have developed co-ordinated services to help asylum seekers. For example in London, Merton has become a centre for Tamil refugees, having established an excellent Refugees in School Bulletin, a good record of employing classroom support teachers, and an Ethnic Minority Achievement Service to provide bilingual support in schools. Merton Asylum Welcome, a voluntary organisation, helps all asylum seekers arriving in the borough. The experience provides cost-effective support which the new legislation wants to trash in favour of a worse service at greater expense, in both financial and human terms.

The evidence shows that there are still plenty of British people who are keen to organise decent services and welcome refugees in need. The Government seems to perceive this basic duty as a problem to be eliminated and acts accordingly. However the Government, unlike the country, is not an island. While civil rights lawyers work on individual cases and attack the law clause by clause, a concerted effort from the labour movement can yet make the Government change course.

●Additional reporting on this page by Paul Field, Ian Malcolm-Walker, John Stewart.

The real facts

•More people are now being locked up in detention centres and prisons than ever before. At 30th April, 1,017 were recorded as being in detention solely under Immigration Act powers.

The figures exclude those held in police stations and in "reception centres", the Home Office's new name for detention centres such as Oakington in Cambridge, where up to 400 families can be detained while awaiting the outcome of their claim.

Most detainees were held at the big holding centres such as Campsfield (183), Haslar (154), Tinsley House (145) and Harmondsworth (80) but there were also 188 detained in Rochester Prison. It is estimated that over 10,000 people are detained for at least one night every year under Immigration Act powers.

This is the first time the Home office has admitted that over 1,000 people are being detained at one time. None of those held has committed any crime: their only offence is to be caught up in the horror of the UK's immigration and asylum regime.

•The latest enforcement statistics from the Home Office show that between January and the end of April 2000, 15,120 human beings were deported or removed from the UK – a 29.7% increase over the same period in 1999. In its relentless drive towards European standards of immigration control enforcement, the New Labour Government has deported over 109,000 people from the UK since its election in May 1997.

•Only 5% of the world's refugees are in Europe and, of these, the UK takes less as a proportion of population than most other EU states. Most refugees and displaced people remain in the poorer countries of the South such as Iran (1.9 million), Jordan (1.4 million) and Pakistan (1.2 million). The UK receives less than 1% of the world's refugees.

Women go on the march

Leonora Lloyd spoke to Ann-Marie Guttridge about the World March of Women.

On 17th October, United Nations Day for the Elimination of Poverty, women will be marching to the UN building as the culmination of a World March of Women. The idea originated after the success of the Bread and Roses march against poverty in Quebec in 1995, initiated by the Quebec Federation of Women. 15,000 people greeted 850 women who had marched for ten days to win nine demands for economic justice, for which the whole of Canada's women's movement mobilised.

A conference in Montreal in 1998 decided to organise a world-wide mobilisation around the related issues of women's poverty and violence against women. A petition and a postcard campaign were launched on this year's International Women's Day. There will be a march to the World Bank and IMF in Washington on 15th October, followed by the march to the UN, where a delegation will present demands to Koffi Annan.

In the lead-up to these actions, many countries are organising a variety of events. In Paris, for example, French women will be marching on 17th June to publicise and build for the European-wide event when women march to the EC headquarters in Brussels, culminating on 14th October. There will be a three day feeder march starting in Ostend.

Around the world many countries, where poverty is a real and present experience for vast numbers of women, have found resources to organise something, and some are even funding women to join the international events. But in Britain little is being done, mainly because there is no longer a recognised, organised women's movement here. Members of the National Assembly of Women were involved in the Montreal conference and the NAW have put out a leaflet to inform people in this country, but have decided they do not have the resources to co-ordinate further activity.



Photo: Phil Maxwell

Don't let women grow up in poverty

As a result, a few women have got together to let other women know what is happening and to organise a number of initiatives. They want to raise funding to enable some British women to join the Ostend-Brussels march, and to get organisations to fund women. They also hope to organise a London march on 23rd September, and to encourage women nationally to organise local events on the same day.

This is a one-off series of events to raise awareness of the fact that the major sufferers of poverty throughout the world are women. It is not intended to be an annual event, which makes it disgraceful that the co-ordinating committee is finding it very difficult to raise funds and get support for what it is trying to do. The TUC distributed a leaflet at its Women's Conference, and MSF agreed to be a post-office for the card campaign – these can be sent to New York up to 10th October, but little else has been done.

●For information, phone 0207-639 5302 or 01923-674 662 (details of cards from the latter number); web site: www.ffq.qc.ca/marche2000

WTO threatens biosafety

Mike Phipps reports: In January this year, campaigners celebrated when 130 countries adopted the Biosafety Protocol which controls how biotechnology companies operate in poorer countries. Now the companies, with the backing of the US government, are insisting that World Trade Organisation rules on free trade should override the Protocol.

Corporate attempts to use the WTO to get round international agreements and even the sovereign laws of states are not new. In 1993 the US baby food giant Gerber (motto, "Babies are our business") pressurised the WTO to penalise Guatemala for its law banning the misleading packaging of baby food products. The law was passed in 1983 in line with a World Health Organisation Code that recognised the alarming fact that one and a half million babies died every year because they were fed on artificial milk. Just the threat of a WTO challenge was enough to ensure the compliance of Guatemala, which lacked the financial and technical resources to fight a lawsuit with the WTO.

If government restrictions on the importation of genetically modified organisms are open to similar WTO challenges, then the Biosafety Protocol will be worthless.

A former Nestle employee has provided documentary evidence of the company's aggressive marketing in Pakistan, including bribing doctors with cash and gifts. Nestle is fighting Pakistani legislation to implement the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes.

Meanwhile the Nestle 16, arrested on charges of conspiracy to burgle for protesting against the WTO last November, are now suing the police for wrongful arrest, false imprisonment and malicious prosecution. All charges against them have been dropped and the Crown Prosecution Service has complained of "trumped up charges".

Uncovering the real debt crisis

Bethan Brookes, Campaigns Officer at the World Development Movement, uncovers the truth behind the debt relief spin.

So the debt crisis is over. Gordon Brown promised to relieve 100% of the debt of some of the poorest countries on earth and Clare Short is making sure they spend it on poverty reduction. That's it then: pack up those 'Drop the Debt' banners with the satisfaction of a job well done.

This would be fine if it weren't for the small fact that not one country has had its debt completely cancelled and only five countries, out of 32 in the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC), have had any debt relief at all.

Where is the $100bn new debt relief bonanza announced at the G8 summit in Cologne and what happened to Gordon Brown's much trumpeted millennium pledge of 100% debt relief? Both had spin doctors' fingerprints all over them. 70% of the "new" money on offer was in fact money that had been already promised (some from as long ago as 1978) and the 100% relief only applies to money owed to the UK by the HIPC governments. This amounts to a relatively small £2bn. Since these announcements the whole process has practically ground to a halt. The details of what has been promised, by whom, and when it will be delivered are complicated. But during the summer Drop the Debt campaigns, fronted by Jubilee 2000, will push hard to secure maximum debt relief for all the HIPC countries.

Though it is important to fight hard to ensure the G7 nations keep their existing promises, two key issues must not be forgotten: what is on offer isn't enough and the conditions imposed on poor countries to get it are unacceptable.

Debt relief was conditional on HIPC governments completing six years of IMF structural adjustment programmes (SAP). The aim of these programmes was to enable countries to repay their debts through generation of hard currency and economic growth. HIPC countries had to put in place packages of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation. These often included the introduction of fees for basic health and education, massive layoffs from state run industries, public sector pay freezes and redundancies, promotion of cash crops rather than food and removal of price controls on basic foodstuffs and fuels. The human cost of these programmes was predictable: increases in child mortality rates, rising school drop-out rates, huge price rises, increased inequality and poverty.

'Where is the $100bn new debt relief bonanza announced at the G8 summit in Cologne and what happened to Gordon Brown's much trumpeted Millennium pledge of 100% debt relief?'

Even by the IMF's own terms these programmes were a disaster. Countries implementing SAPs showed lower rates of economic growth than other non-adjusting poor countries.

As a result of growing resistance to SAPs the IMF has given them a full makeover. They have been rebranded and renamed. Structural Adjustment Programmes have become Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and sold to activists and poor nations on the grounds that they would involve civil society and HIPC governments in drawing up programmes for growth and poverty reduction. But the compulsion is still there. No PRSP, no debt relief. And PRSPs have to be approved by the IMF.

It is now *de rigueur* among IMF officials to proclaim commitment to poverty reduction: a laudable aim until you discover that their idea of poverty reduction policies consists of increased marketisation and the trickle down theory – the same policies as under the old SAPs.

As Ghanaian economist Charles Abugre said recently, "The IMF's free-market fundamentalism has too often hurt developing countries. Unless the IMF can show that it's open to rethinking, the PRSP process offers little new hope to poor countries."

The entire debt relief programme, achingly slow that it is, only includes about half of the countries that activists consider should be eligible. Some of the world's most impoverished nations are excluded: Bangladesh owes £10bn to rich nations and spends more on debt servicing than on health, yet it is judged to have a "sustainable" level of debt. Haiti's economy is judged by the IMF too successful to qualify for debt relief. Haiti is the poorest country in the Latin American and Caribbean region. It pays £37.7 million in debt repayments a year. Massive human misery caused by intolerable debt payments is not, in the IMF's eyes, reason enough to qualify for debt relief.

The IMF, aided by the G7 nations, is using the debt crisis to force ultra free-market economic policies on the developing world. In many countries these programmes hurt so much that the population take to the streets. In Nigeria the government has been forced by the IMF's adjustment programme to remove subsidies from petrol. The cost of domestic cooking fuel rose by 50% and several people have been killed in the resulting riots. Around the world IMF programmes force poor governments to impose policies that result in unrest and uncertainty. Not bad for an institution whose core aims are to promote stability and economic growth.

Green Paper: act now!

Eddie Tucker calls for urgent labour movement action on housing.

After 18 years of Tory rule and three of New Labour, the Government's action on housing so far has been... a Green Paper. A consultation document. Consultation documents were fine a couple of years before the last General Election, when Labour was planning ahead for taking office, but they're not what you want in the year leading up to the next General Election.

New Labour has not grasped the importance of housing as a social issue which the Government has to deal with. The latest figures on homelessness, which has doubled under New Labour's term of office so far, show that this has been a neglected issue. The central theme of the Green Paper is that if we can find a way of transferring council housing over to Housing Associations and/or private companies and put a cosmetic veneer on of a bit of tenant and councillor representation, the housing crisis will look after itself. The issue will be outside the public sector and out of mind. This blinkered attitude overlooks all the evidence that the main issues which need tackling at the moment are homelessness and inadequate housing (ie, overcrowding and disrepair). The private sector will not make social housing need a priority.

Unfortunately, the Green Paper did not come out of thin air. Its main themes were foreshadowed in Labour's second year policy document on the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The glib phrases of the Labour Party's second-year consultation and those of the Green Paper are often interchangeable – "sustainable homeownership", "quality of social housing", and the inevitable "partnership". Most invidious of all is the harping on about giving council tenants a choice. Usually this takes the form of "stay with the council and have no repairs or refurbishment, or go for sell-off and get refurbished". Under New Labour, that's supposed to be choice. But still the silly tenants sometimes don't vote the right way, and literally millions have to be spent on consultants and PR to make them exercise the right choice.

Next time you read this drivel in a Policy Forum document, don't just assume it's Millbank ensuring their policies are unamendable – remember that this is sometimes an accurate reflection of what they intend to do. We have one last chance to force a rethink: send your responses in before 31st July, details below.

•Keep and develop the role of councils as the only social landlord managed by all-elected bodies; increase funding and change the rules to allow councils to borrow money.

•Improve conditions for private tenants, with more secure tenancies and restrictions against profiteering rents.

•Stop the sell-off of 2 million council homes over 10 years: save the millions spent to buy tenants votes for sell-off in sham "tenants choice" campaigns; use the PR money to fund councils properly so that tenants have a real choice.

Neil O'Connor,
Housing Policy, Renewal & Ownership Division
DETR
Room 2/J10
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

NHS: keep fighting

Eddie Tucker reports: "Don't forget mental health" is the message from health watchdog London Health Emergency (LHE) to Alan Milburn during his massive public consultation on the future of the NHS.

LHE is responding to the questions about priorities by calling for:
•an expansion in the number of beds;
•better pay and conditions to recruit and retain staff;
•major investment in the emergency ambulance service.

LHE's John Lister told *LLB*, "London has lost twice as many beds as the rest of the country over the last ten years, so that is a particularly important issue in the capital, and the only way to cut waiting lists. But mental health acute beds are also running over capacity in London and massive investment is needed in twenty-four hour nursed accommodation for long term patients who are currently languishing in hospital wards."

But just because the Government's consultation was over in a week and a half, doesn't mean that the labour movement needs to stop campaigning. The sound-bite Government consultation has resulted in three priorities which the Government will either ignore or use to motivate its attempts to contract out much of health services to the private sector.

Labour Party members in London constituencies have decided to campaign for the following three priorities:
•an end to inequities in treatment or medication, by geography, race, sex, class, income or budgetary considerations;
•all pay increases to be funded in full;
•the new priority for the NHS to be treating illness and promoting health, free of charge to the user, at the point of need.

These points can be put in resolutions by trade union and Labour Party branches across the country and at least provide a political framework within which to discuss what we want from the NHS.

The last Tally Ho?

Eddie Tucker welcomes the chance to ban foxhunting – but is it also a cynical move by New Labour?

At last, the Labour Government is to take action on the hunting issue. Pressed by increasingly restless campaigners and backbench Labour MPs, not to mention over 70% of the public, the Government has for once gone further than its manifesto commitment and announced a Government Bill in Government time.

The Bill will be multiple choice, probably with the option of certain types of hunting remaining in certain areas, and even an option of hunting continuing under regulations. But it was this Parliament that saw 411 MPs of all parties back Mike Foster's Private Member's Bill in 1997 and there is no doubt the "outright ban" option will win in the House of Commons – however Robin Cook votes. The Bill needs to go through the Commons before the General Election, and while it is certain to be blocked in the Lords by an alliance of hereditary peers and New Labour luvvies, uniquely, the Government can implement the Parliament Act to force it through after the election, one year after it first went through the Commons.

So unless we see a radical change in the political make-up of the Commons, this really is the last Tally Ho.

Why is New Labour making such a big deal of the issue now? It goes back to the Eddisbury by-election in rural Cheshire last year where the Labour literature was full of Blair's promise to ban hunting and the election day leaflet spelt it out – "Vote Labour – or the fox gets it". The Labour vote held up against all expectation and Labour had an issue that mobilised its "core support", Party members and rural voters.

Some bright spark at No. 10 or Millbank realised that making it a General Election issue would motivate Labour voters to come out on election day. But with a Home Secretary clearly not in favour of giving up Home Office time for a Government bill, Labour stalled to stop the issue being settled in this Parliament. But by getting it as far as the Lords people will have to vote Labour again to finish the job after the General Election. You can be sure it will feature prominently in Labour's General Election manifesto.

The Countryside Alliance will mobilise a huge London demonstration and lobby rural Labour MPs throughout the campaign – but it will have zero affect on shifting votes. The Lords will be demonised for blocking the democratic will of the Commons and the people of "New Britain" – the unelectable in full pursuit of the uneatable. Tony will step forward as the friend of the fox, compassionate and caring in a modern society.



Photo: Molly Cooper

Protesters block the road outside Parliament on 31st May, as they demand an outright ban on hunting.

Vauxhall Labour MP Kate Tally-Hoey has pledged to oppose a ban and despite it continuing to be a "free vote" this could spell the end of her ministerial career – the icing on the cake of an issue first brought to the Labour Party by the Agricultural Workers' union in 1957.

Register for ICANN now

Organisations that set technical standards for the Internet have a profound effect on our freedom and privacy. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is working with Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) to campaign for the setting of Internet standards to become open and democratic processes that includes a wide range of voices from civil society. GreenNet, the APC member in Britain, strongly supports this campaign.

One standards organisation whose decisions have very far reaching effects is ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). This body, whose present 10 members have all been appointed by corporate and technical councils, threatens to become the WTO of cyberspace.

In September this year, five new members will be elected to ICANN by a global "at large membership". At the moment, any Internet user can sign up to become such a member and have the right to vote in the elections. However, registration is likely to close at the end of June or early July.

To register simply go to http://members.icann.org/join_now.htm and just sign up. It will only take you a few minutes.

Chris Bailey, GreenNet Internet Rights

Government spins its jobs record

Christine Shawcroft looks at the Government's economic record, which prompted her to put a resolution to the last meeting of the National Executive Committee calling for interest rates to come down.

New Labour is proud of its record on the economy. It is true that many of the economic indicators are very good, not least because Labour took office at a favourable point in the economic cycle. But figures for the economy as a whole disguise a very patchy performance: the UK is running a two-speed economy.

The Economic Policy document boasts about the number of jobs that the Government has created: in the first two and a half years the number of jobs in the economy has increased by 680,000. However, there was an increase of 870,000 jobs in the two and a half years before the last General Election: it's wise to see one's boasts in context.

Within the overall increase in the number of jobs is hidden a decline of jobs in the manufacturing sector of 200,000, and things can only get worse. High profile cases such as Rover and Fords make the news, but there has been a steady loss of jobs through all manufacturing sectors, not least in textiles and clothing, with their predominantly female and/or ethnic minority workforce.

Losses are especially concentrated in export-oriented sectors. As the Ford unions noted in their case against closure at Dagenham, with the pound "overvalued by some 37% against the basket of European currencies... Ford can maximise its profit by supplying a dealer from its Cologne plant rather than from Dagenham."

Exchange rates should notionally reflect real comparative values, but in the real world they don't. With $1.5 trillion dollars traded daily on the foreign exchange markets, currency speculators effectively determine exchange rates where governments abdicate responsibility. The pound has been substantially overvalued against the currencies of its principal trading partners in Europe for a prolonged period. Its current price reflects the will of the currency markets rather than economic fundamentals.

The high pound is propped up by the high real interest rates in the UK. Despite some recent narrowing of the gap, UK interest rates have been around 2 percentage points higher than euro rates, attracting capital flows, which have kept the level of sterling artificially high.

Setting interest rates should be taken back into government hands rather than being contracted out to a quango: a task clearly not on Gordon Brown's list of things to do tomorrow. While we're waiting, we can argue for a widening of the objective criteria for the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC). This body meets once a month to set interest rates, but operates on very narrow criteria, concerned solely with keeping inflation low. Thus, as the Governor of the Bank of England has admitted, if the consequence of their chosen interest rate is job losses in Newcastle, that is no concern of theirs. If house prices in London and the south east are rising, the interest rate goes up. The manufacturing sector suffers a double whammy of an uncompetitive exchange rate and high investment costs.

Because manufacturing industry is concentrated in certain parts of the country, so are the adverse consequences of this policy. While the Government tries to deny the north south divide exists, it is not only very real but also widening. Parts of the economy in the south east are overheating, yet much of the north suffers a chronic lack of demand. In the south east, more than 80% of people of working age are in employment: in the north east the figure is less than 70%. Male unemployment is 10% in the north east, and 3.6% in the south east.



Photo: Paul Mattsson

Who deals with the consequences of government neglect of manufacturing? Urban decay around Fords, Dagenham.

Some who have been complaining of the effects of the high pound have used this to make the case for joining the euro. But entry to the euro requires a single interest rate and a fixed currency. In the same way interest rates are currently set to meet the needs of the south east economy, so in Euroland they will be fixed to meet the needs of the strongest parts of the euro economy – and everywhere else will have to suffer the consequences. A separate currency means exchange rates can adjust to reflect differences in productivity. In the absence of that mechanism it is jobs that will "adjust".

The Government has to come up with a real strategy for manufacturing industry in the UK before it is too late, and we find ourselves having to deal with the consequences of their delay.

Labour Students stitch up

Gavin Hayes, Kent University Labour Club Secretary, reports on the Labour students elections.

This year's elections for the Labour Student National Committee were a disaster in terms of internal Party democracy. Millbank hacks were determined to see Brendan Cox elected as National Chair. An NEC investigation, called to look at claims of membership number rigging by the Cox Campaign team at his own University Labour Club (LSE), resulted in this year's elections at National Conference being cancelled. The other candidate, Joe Goldberg, was then disqualified on the basis of a minor technicality.

It is disturbing to see allegations that LSE were creating members (such as "Derek Hatton") to increase their delegate entitlement at conference. The final insult, however, was the discovery that the election wasn't even secret, as ballot papers were numbered (courtesy of the Youth and Student Officer, who is responsible for administering Labour Students ballots).

This prompted Kent University Labour Club to initiate a Re-Open-Nominations campaign in the election for National Chair, in a last ditch attempt at preserving some autonomy for Labour Students. A leaflet ("Democratic Labour Students": email democraticnols@vmail.virgin.com) has been produced calling for "Kicking Out the Millbank Dinousaurs." It adds: "Labour Students should be an organisation run by students (who are labour) for students (who are labour) not run by a group of dalek-like control freaks."

The conduct of these elections seriously threatens to alienate even more grass roots activists. We urge delegates to stand up for democracy and vote to re-open nominations.

The stranglehold that Millbank has over internal elections has to be loosened, whether this is in Labour Students, in Wales, or in London. As the leaflet put it: "we can sit back and let those dinosaurs eat up our Party's democracy or we can send a clear message that their time is up."

Students march against tuition fees

Matt Heaney reports on student action in Berlin.

Around 12,000 students marched on Wednesday 7th June against tuition fees, in three regional demonstrations organised by the German Action Alliance Aganist Tuition Fees (ABS).

6,500 marched in Berlin, 3,000 in Cologne and around 2,500 in Stuttgart. The organisers of the demos were clear that the potential was far larger than the turnout – last term a petition organised by the ABS collected more than 120,000 signatures. The secretary of the ABS Olaf Bartz made the point in his speech at the Berlin demo that "a demonstration in favour of fees wouldn't even fill a back yard."

The Berlin demo began with a solidarity greeting from the Campaign for Free Education. It pointed out the possibility of an "ivy league" system being introduced in the UK after the next election, and that once fees are introduced they can be increased a great deal over a very short space of time. The executive of the IG Metall industrial workers' union also sent a message of support. In Cologne, two students spoke who took part in the nine-month strike against fees at Mexico City's UNAM University.

The German government's conference of regional education ministers recently rejected fees for students doing their first degree – assuming they complete their degree within the time set down by the government. However most students cannot do this as only 7% receive the grant-loan combination from the state, and more then 70% of students in Germany have to work part-time to finance their courses. The rules mean that, at the Berlin Humboldt-University, around 50% of all students would have to pay the proposed fee of 1,000 Deutschmarks per semester (around £650 per year).

The German higher education system is in crisis – universities are underfunded and lecture theatres overfull. But the introduction of fees will change nothing as the money will not go to the universities but instead will be used to reduce the regional governments' debts. The only way to improve the situation at the universities and polytechnics is to fight for adequate funding for the education system by taking the money from those who have it – not the students themselves, but the rich!

●Contact ABS:
http://www.studis.de/abs or
http://www.gegen-studiengebuehren.de

Who's setting the agenda?

Matthew Willgress, co-Youth Officer of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups reports: **As the next General Election approaches it is time for ordinary Party members to try to make their voices heard, putting forward policies that can win Labour a second term and saying what we would like from a future government .**

The Labour women in London who produced a *Women's Agenda* for the London Mayor and Assembly elections made a good start to this process. Now, inspired by their example, a number of young Labour supporters are hoping to follow their lead, by producing a Young People's Agenda in the run up to the General Election. We plan to draw in people's different experiences in various fields of life such as student and anti-racist struggles to produce a wide-ranging document. The voices and views of young people must be positively expressed and it is time to start a much-needed discussion about how to bring these views and more young people into the labour movement.

We are having a meeting in London (provisionally July 16th) to discuss these and other issues, and are hoping to invite one of the authors of the *Women's Agenda* as a speaker. Any help would be greatly appreciated.

●For more information contact yljylf@hotmail.com or write to 182 Park Road, Peterborough, PE1 2UF.

Take the battle into

Pete Firmin an officer of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups (in personal capacity) argues that there is life yet for the left in the Labour Party.

Socialists face a dilemma. Blair and his Government pile on the anti-working class policies and cement their links with the bosses, while believing the problem of discontent in the "heartlands" can be solved by presentation. The Government has even managed the near-impossible in enabling the Tories to increase their standing in polls and elections, even if this is as much due to abstentionism as vote-switching.

Within the Labour Party, things are dire. Democracy has been reduced to a token, with Conference essentially replaced by a rigged National Policy Forum (recognised, by default, by those one-third of CLPs which have not elected delegates to this year's Conference). Many CLPs have already closed up shop in favour of an AGM which elects an executive and occasional, non-voting, policy forums. Although the Grassroots Alliance has won and retained places on the NEC and National Policy Forum, the impact of this is extremely limited.

So how and where do we organise against the Government's policies? Many good socialists have left the Labour Party in despair, and a few of those have found their way to formations like the London Socialist Alliance, which offers the opportunity of organising around socialist policies with like-minded people.

Yet even the most optimistic view of the LSA's results in the London elections doesn't address the very real pressing problems of the workers' movement. Active resistance to the policies of the Government, to the cuts of the councils and to the bosses is still at an all-time low. Our union leaders give every assistance to the Government, both in refusing to mobilise their members against attacks on their jobs and living standards and in smoothing the way for Blair in internal Labour Party "debate". The occasional critical comment may hit the headlines and make them feel good, but without action (such as voting against Blair within the Party structures) it amounts to no more than letting off steam in an attempt to placate the members, and Blair knows it. Yet walking away, however radical the formation one joins, leaves the control of the Blairites even more complete, and lets the union leaders off the hook.

The LSA may have won support from a few union branches, but it currently has not a hope of changing the fact that half of the unions are affiliated to the Labour Party (including all the biggest ones). The non-affiliated ones tend to be even worse in their refusal to challenge the Government. Leaving the Labour Party means even less likelihood of challenging the bureaucrats in their refusal to pursue union policy in the Labour Party.

But other forms of passivity also currently exist. Many on the Labour left believe either that "the tide will turn" in the left's favour, or that all we need to do is step up our activity within the individual member structures in order to turn things around. Severe problems face such optimism. Even if it can be argued that in the past the Labour Party has swung alternately left and right (an assertion which can only be justified when seen over long periods) this has usually been interspersed with a lengthy period of Tory government. Surely nobody wants to inflict William Hague on us just so Labour can revert back to its left face (in opposition).

More importantly, Blair's changes to Labour's structures, eg *Partnership in Power* have been made precisely in order to stop such a "swings and roundabouts" scenario. Even before prospective changes such as those envisaged in the *21st century party* document, before breaking the link with the unions, before a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the Blairites have erected sufficient firewalls to make them pretty safe from internal party revolt. For instance, even if the left were somehow to succeed in winning a majority of seats on the NEC, effective policy-making powers would still reside with the Joint Policy Committee, which has a built-in Cabinet majority.

In fact the left has never succeeded in winning the upper hand in the Party purely by such means. In theory the union

UNISON delegates to last year's TUC Congress protest as Steve Byers speaks: Party and trade union members can campaign together against Government policies.



PHOTO: Paul Mattsson

the unions!

leaderships, in conjunction with the left among the individual members, could even now overturn *Partnership in Power*, the change in Clause IV and the disastrous policies of the Government. It won't happen. Union leaderships are as protective of their positions and privileges as any Cabinet minister. Despite occasional socialist rhetoric, they are loathe to challenge the status quo, preferring comfortable negotiation (often ignoring their union's policies) to confrontation. Nothing scares them more than their members engaging in self-activity, taking action in pursuit of their own interests. Their horizons stretch no further than winning crumbs from the capitalists' table and a Labour Government (any Labour Government) is seen as the zenith of achievement.

It is for these reasons that we have to organise within the unions to challenge these (mis)leaders with alternative policies, alternative leaders accountable to strong organisation of the membership, and if necessary (and possible) the organisation of industrial action, regardless of their constant attempts to put the brakes on.

The last time the pendulum swung left in the Labour Party, the most significant momentum did not come from individual members, but from the revolt among trade unionists against the policies of the 1974-79 Labour Government, primarily the Social Contract and its pay policies. This revolt, both in strike action and the union structures, boiled over into the Labour Party and linked up with the Labour left. Without that revolt union leaderships would never have supported the changes they did, and the Labour left would have achieved little at a time when the unions had 90% of the votes at Labour Party Conference.

Unless we take opposition to the Government's policies outside the safe (for Blair) confines of the Party structures, it will come to nought. We may continue to win a few places on the NEC and National Policy Forum, but this will not stop the haemorrhaging of active socialists from the Party. Moral invective will not persuade them to stay if they see no chance of winning anything.

This is not to argue that standing for (and hopefully winning) such positions has no value. On the contrary used imaginatively, such positions (and the fight to win them) can be used to encourage members to organise. The conservatism currently pervading the Labour left is illustrated by the fact that nearly all the component parts of the Centre Left Grassroots Alliance have rejected the idea of calling a national meeting of supporters. Members are generally viewed as people to be wheeled out once a year to vote CLGA candidates on to the NEC (pretty much the same way Blair views the electorate).

To have an impact, and any chance of defeating this Government's post-Thatcherite policies, there are several interdependent elements in a socialist strategy:

•where possible, take opposition (and a positive alternative) to the Government's policies through the structures of the Party at every level and organise Party members in Campaign Groups (or other appropriate local bodies) to do so;

•organise within our unions for action against attacks from the Government, councils and employers and challenge the subservience of our union leaders to the Government, including demanding the accountability of NEC members, and standing for election to Policy Forums and delegations to Party conferences; taking union issues into the Party at every level;

•forge links between the organisations of the left in the Party and the unions (too often they have each operated in ignorance of what the other is doing, weakening both);

•involve ourselves in organising campaigns publicly and openly against aspects of Government policy, whether it be privatisation of services, the demonisation of asylum seekers, or whatever (yes, even with those involved in Socialist Alliances), drawing Party and union activists (and, where possible, official bodies) and new activists into such campaigns.

It is only through such a strategy that we have a hope not only of keeping activists in the Labour Party and winning new ones, but far more importantly, of forcing the Government to change course.

Reinstate Ken now!

Matthew Willgress reports: The majority of Labour Party and trade union members wanted Ken Livingstone to be a Labour Mayor of London. We still do. Now that the London electorate has endorsed our choice, it's time for us all to campaign for Ken's reinstatement into the Labour Party.

At a meeting on 15th June called by London Labour Left, *Tribune* and the London Region of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), Party members discussed how to campaign in the run-up to Annual (and London) Party Conference.

Although the six platform speakers had disagreed on whether Ken Livingstone should have stood as an independent, they all agreed that, in the words of Cllr Tom Davidson, this campaign is "a litmus test for Party democracy" and that, as Diane Abbott MP put it, "Ken is a Labour man through and through."

Mick Shaw outlined how London Region FBU had "consistently supported Ken Livingstone" because he "has consistently supported us." London Region FBU has committed the national union to put a contemporary resolution to Labour Party Conference calling for Ken's readmission. Mick Shaw urged Party and union members to campaign tirelessly "until Ken is back where he belongs."

Party and trade union activists will be organising to get the London Regional Conference to call for Ken's reinstatement. London Conference is scheduled for November (and may be cancelled to protect Dobson cheerleader Jim Fitzpatrick from losing the Chair) and there may not be another Annual Conference before the General Election.

CLPs should send in contemporary resolutions backing the FBU call and union activists must get their unions to support it too. We need the broadest possible support at Conference, so that Labour is united in the run up to the General Election.

NEC results: down but not out

Dorothy Macedo reflects on the 2000 NEC campaign.

The results of the NEC elections were obviously disappointing. From our high point in 1998, when four Centre Left Grassroots Alliance (CLGA) candidates were elected out of the six constituency section places, we dropped to three in 1999 and two this year.

But analysis shows the results are not as bleak for the left as might at first appear. This year the election period was ridiculously short and coincided with local elections. Many CLPs were not meeting, making grassroots campaigning difficult.

Turnout was down (Margaret McDonagh told the NEC that 25% of forms were returned), though we don't know how many ballot papers were issued (presumably because it would show how membership has plummeted).

Many members did not receive ballot papers, and several people have lodged complaints about this. Other people were unaware that they had received the ballot paper, as it was hidden inside the Party magazine *Inside Labour*. As Ian Aitken pointed out in *The Guardian*, this magazine is so dire that most recipients don't even open it, let alone read it. (The issue containing the ballot paper had a particularly grisly photo of Gordon Brown looking coy on the cover.)

Millbank has learned its lesson from 1998 when high profile attacks on CLGA candidate Liz Davies undoubtedly helped the CLGA vote. They now keep the elections as quiet as possible, while conducting massive efforts behind the scenes on behalf of the Millbank Tendency (MT) slate. For example MEP Michael Cashman sent a personal letter urging support for the MT candidates to all Party members in the West Midlands.

The CLGA slate was also hit by two major blows: the decision of Liz Davies not to stand again deprived us of a well known and widely respected candidate, and the barring of Raghib Ahsan meant the CLGA was fielding a slate of five for six places.

The left must also take responsibility for failing to mount as strong a campaign as in previous years. We were diverted by events such as the mayor campaign and short of resources – nothing new there. So send in your money and let's start planning next year's NEC campaign now.

Will they listen to women?

Dorothy Macedo works out why New Labour wants to keep women in their place.

Once upon a time the National Conference of Labour Women (NCLW) was a lively affair. Up to 1,000 women attended as delegates: constituencies sent delegates from the women's section, or from the GC where the CLP had no women's section; trade unions sent large delegations.

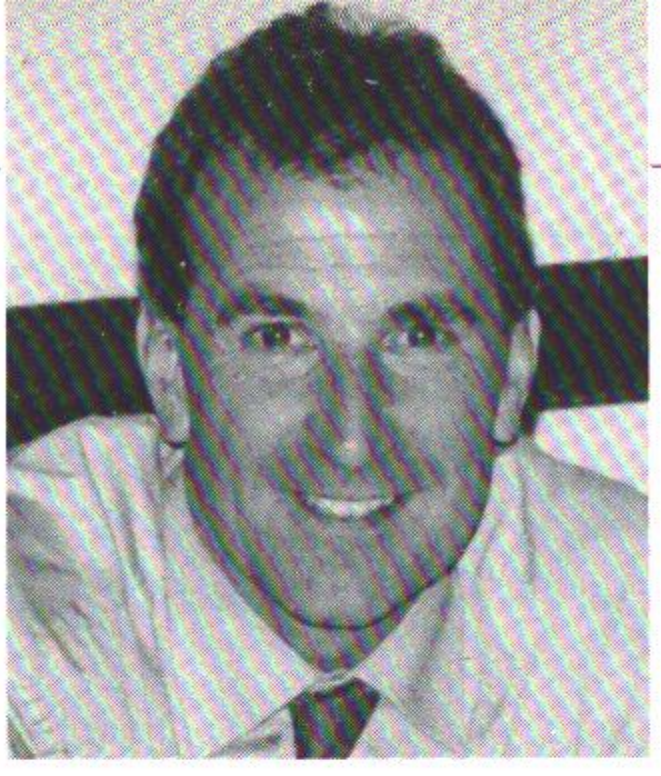
Resolutions and amendments were composited, debated and amended. The agenda was drawn up by a Standing Orders Committee that we had elected. Debates were lively but sisterly – though I do remember tempers getting a bit frayed during a debate on abortion in 1985.

Women's Conference consistently led the way in the Party both on policies and on structures. The NCLW pushed for the Parliamentary Labour Party to stop treating abortion as a matter of conscience and demanded that all Labour MPs support Party policy. It campaigned for women's pension rights; for full-time rights for part-time workers; for proper funding for crèches and refuges and for an end to strip-searching in Northern Ireland.

We wanted to end the gender gap that cost Labour power in election after election. We suggested all-women shortlists as a way to get more women MPs and make Labour more woman-friendly. We wanted the right to elect the women's representatives on the NEC and for the women's organisation to be properly funded and supported at all levels. When the leadership was nervous we negotiated an electoral college for Women's Conference so that the trade union women had half the votes. We said "listen to women!"

No wonder it could not be allowed to carry on! Now we are not delegates, just individuals. We don't make policy – we listen to front bench spokespeople (frequently men) telling us how wonderful the Government is and how our job is to tell women why they should vote Labour. In the workshops our polite criticisms are noted and then ignored.

The Women's Section of the NEC has gone. We are told that quotas have ended the need for accountable representation for women. Some of us still believe that quotas are the answer to a completely different question. Quotas give women an equal chance to represent both men and women. But until women achieve equality in society as a whole, we will still need a separate voice to speak up for women's interests. We could call it a women's conference...



THE **ALAN SIMPSON** COLUMN

Unembarrassed by their recent successes with the Women's Institute, London's mayoral contest and the heartland turn out in local elections, New Labour's apparatchiks have come up with another sure-fire winner. They have sensed the warmth of a divine wind blowing in favour of the European Single Currency. It is the moment of opportunity for ministers and some prominent trade union leaders in a siren chorus to steer a compliant party and public towards a more robust enthusiasm for the euro.

It is a strange issue to pull out of the bag to salvage Labour's tarnished record and political prospects. The left may welcome moves towards a more genuine and open debate about the Single Currency, but anyone suggesting that there is electoral advantage from leading a charge into the "yes" camp is heading for a rude awakening. We don't even need to draw the Tories into this. Labour will become impaled upon its own contradictory positions and ministers' shallow grasp of them.

I make no bones about opposing the euro, on the grounds that there is neither the political nor economic will to make it operate for working class interests across Europe. But there is a case to be made and John Edmonds makes it better than most. He argues a GMB case for a federal Europe, with a single currency, a substantial European budget and clear mechanisms for redistributing wealth from rich regions to poorer ones. It is the most laudable, internationalist case to make for the euro... but none of Labour's most enthusiastic pro-Europeans want to join in the call.

'this presents Labour with a real opportunity for putting issues of capital and class back into an otherwise apolitical agenda'

Ask any of those pushing for early entry into the Single Currency if they also want the extra Euro-taxation (an increase of between fivefold and tenfold would be needed) and just look for the dust. Some may express affection for a federal-based pooled sovereignty, but none can show any of the lines of democratic accountability which would prevent it becoming the plaything of an unelected European elite.

Even Cabinet enthusiasts are likely to be divided between the market-driven enthusiasms of Number 10 – arms' length government, targeted welfare and light touch regulation – and the more interventionist enthusiasms of the GMB which would look for employment stability, enhanced welfare programmes and government investment strategies. Sadly for the GMB, free marketers know that it is the Maastricht convergence obligations which make the euro merely a stepping stone and a "beggar your neighbour" race into welfare cuts.

Lift the lid on this and ministers will slam it down. They hide instead behind the scurrilous and the superficial: Britain will lose influence if we remain outside the euro; it is the only way of bringing the value of the pound down and stopping the haemorrhage of manufacturing jobs; Britain would be left exposed to attack from currency speculators.

We kid ourselves about influence. Britain has influence when it has something progressive to say. So far, the European leaders who aligned themselves with New Labour's 'Third Way' market liberalisation have all suffered for their pains. It was a bad call for Schroeder in Germany and a disaster for Prodi in Italy. French socialists took one sniff and left it on the pavement. It is a bizarre European success story when the only ones left to beat the drum with us are Jose-Maria Aznar's rightwing government in Spain.

There are lots of ways of bringing the value of the pound down. Labour could raise taxes, issue bonds to finance direct public investment (rather than offering business inducements and subsidies) or lead the calls for a European restriction on speculative capital movements. But don't wait for today's ministers to lead any of these charges either.

Nor can they be expected to admit that the fundamental problem isn't the currency itself. If Britain were in the euro now we would still be without a strategy for manufacturing, engineering, textiles, motor vehicles, telecommunications or anything else. You can't blame a currency for the absence of a policy. And that's what the euro debate will open up.

Ironically, this presents Labour with a real opportunity for putting issues of capital and class back into an otherwise apolitical agenda. I doubt that New Labour's gurus understand just what they have unleashed. If only someone had explained that, in Japanese, 'divine wind' translates as kamikaze. Come back Women's Institute, you weren't so rough after all.

Chechen conflict continues

Russian wo

Six months into his presidency, Putin is preparing a draconian new Labour Code against workers in Russia. Meanwhile the Chechen conflict simmers on. Lisa Taylor and Steve Myers of International Solidarity with Workers in Russia (ISWoR) report.

The Chechen war, launched by Putin to head off potential social revolt at home, was supposed to wind up in a few weeks. Months later, despite the fall of Grozny, the Russian state still scrambles to hide news of continuing damage inflicted on its forces by Chechen guerrillas. The demoralised Russian conscript army is undergoing one of the fiercest waves of rebel attack to date, including numerous attacks on federal installations in Grozny itself.

Sadly the anti-war demonstrations in Russia (of which the biggest mobilised just 500 people) have been largely cut-off from the working class movement. This has opened the way for US-backed economic ultra-liberals (including "human rights organisations" funded by Reaganite think-tanks) to rally the crowd around the Thatcherite Yavlinsky. The largest opposition party, Zyuganov's Communists, outdid Putin in urging the nation on to greater aggression. By contrast Oleg Shein and militants working with him have declared their opposition to the Chechen war. Sadly, the tiny circles who oppose both the war and the free market lack the resources to launch a mass offensive against the brainwashing of the Government's media and the nationalist opposition.

The only force that can intervene to stop the carnage in Chechnya and any of a dozen or so other flashpoints is the Russian working people. They could refuse to support fratricidal wars against fellow workers and the poor, just as American youth did in Vietnam.

Anti-war militants with a base in the workers movement will accomplish far more than backing the so-called independent media controlled by tycoon Gusinsky, whose attacks on Putin represent nothing more than rivalry within the ruling elites.

President Putin's proposed new Labour Code would make third-world working conditions enforceable by law. If implemented, it would be far worse than all Thatcher's anti-union laws put together. In those days the British government had the resources to pick off one union or one struggle at a time. Russia's rulers today have neither the money, resources, unity, nor the time to do the same – and so face considerable risks.

For Russian workers, privatisation has been a nightmare from the beginning with living conditions plummeting and life expectancy dropping rapidly from Western levels to just 56. Now the emergent and still weak Russian ruling class must quick-march labour into globally competitive production, or face economic domination by the West with further territorial break-up, especially in the fight over Caspian energy.

Putin's new laws will abolish collective bargaining as every worker will have to sign an individual short-term contract which management then decides whether to extend or not. The new laws will make the 56-hour week and 12-hour day standard, will require unlimited overtime without higher rates, will halve maternity rights and force pregnant women to work night-shifts. Bosses will have the right to pry into workers' private lives and implement blacklists – no doubt in conjunction with Putin's newly re-unified and strengthened secret service, the FSB.

Employers will be able to decide changes in working conditions, including hours, salary, holidays and breaks, without notification. They will be allowed to dock pay from workers for any loss of profit due to strikes and even accidental damage to company property. They can refuse to recognise any union at all, or create their own union and appoint union leaders who may sack elected union representatives. Workers will be defenceless in law and the existing trade unions will be toothless. Unfortunately the new Duma is more united under Putin than under Yeltsin and the laws could easily be passed – although implementation is more uncertain.

Against this, a new generation of labour leaders has launched an "All-Russia Campaign in Defence of the Present Labour Code", involving wide layers of the working class in united action. The success of the 17th May all-Russia protests with 300,000 workers in action helped to stall passage of the new Code. Newly elected Deputy to the Duma and militant trade union leader Oleg Shein is the main co-ordinator of these actions. He is undertaking a speaking tour across Europe in July, starting in Britain on Tuesday 11th.

When tycoon Berezovsky announced "Opposition [to Putin] will doubtless appear and it will do so from the left," his fears stemmed from the events on 17th May. Trade union activists across Russia spoke not just about the Code, but denounced the President and called for a new October.

The 17th May actions ranged from stoppages of work to demonstrations and pickets. In Kaliningrad, 150,000 members of Russia's largest trade union confederation, the FNPR, mobilised in defiance of the national leadership. In Astrakhan, years of work building up the local Zaschita union by Oleg Shein paid off, with a turnout of 10,000. There were also large turnouts in Novosibirsk, Nizhegorod, Samara, Moscow area Omsk and the Republic of Komi (including 1,000 at a rally at Europe's largest mine). Certain groups of workers distinguished themselves, for example the 15,000 dockers who participated. At Yasnogorsk machine plant, whose workers became famous when their long militant occupation won unprecedented gains, 3,500

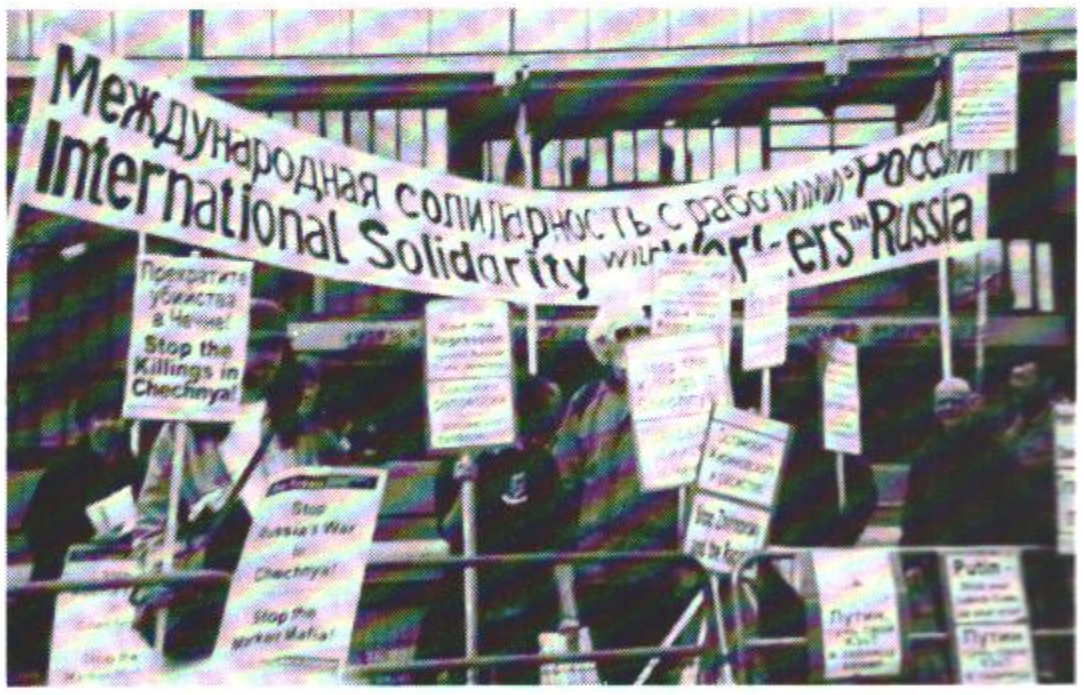
rkers fight back

workers took part in a stoppage. In Kursk and Vladivostok demonstrations were held despite a local ban.

After pressure from grassroots activists, the leadership of the FNPR put its name to a document condemning the new Labour Code. But they instructed their membership not to participate in the day of action, although many did turn out. The FNPR secretary Andrei Isayev, who last year joined forces with millionaire Moscow Mayor Luzhkov's FAR party, presented an alternative draft Labour Code to the one already submitted by Oleg Shein. Isayev's draft was written in collaboration with a representative from the Thatcherite Union of Right Forces.

The mass Communist Party of Zyuganov (CPRF) was generally noted for its absence from the struggle. This is not surprising considering that, despite its rhetoric, the Party leadership has approved every government budget for years and has declared itself in favour of defending "honest" entrepreneurs. In fact the anti-union Code was originally drawn up under ex-premier Primakov, who was supported by the CPRF.

It was activists on the ground who made the day, especially members of the militant and growing trade union Zaschita (co-chaired by Shein) with the help of veterans of recent workers' struggles such as at Yasnogorsk and Vyborg, and activists of the Movement for a Workers Party. Well over 100 additional organisations and trade unions sent faxes in to protest against the new Labour Code – including prominent unions in France and Italy.



ISWoR protest against the Labour Code. Bilingual banners suggest Putin "stick the Labour Code up his arse".

In April ISWoR held protests in London at the visit of Putin and outside the business Expo "Russia -2000" drawing attention to the barbaric new Code.

Despite the widespread participation in the day of action, many workers felt that the battle against the new Labour Code was not relevant to them as so many have long endured the conditions to which the new Code gives an official stamp of approval. With the collapse of nearly 50% of Russian industry since the imposition of privatisation, unemployment and non-payment of wages for up to 18 months or more is so common that many people are ready to tolerate any conditions and hours just for the promise of a little cash.

With top businessmen like the head of Alfa Bank calling on Putin to introduce a Pinochet-style regime, the increase in repression against active workers, especially those of the Zaschita union, has already begun. The Western multinationals have devastated the lives of Russian workers with their privatisation programme. The IMF has enthusiastically approved Putin's new Code. As a result, ultra-nationalism and a hatred of the West, as well as racism against minority groups, have appeared.

The US, quietly acknowledging the emergence of a new anti-Americanism, not just in public opinion but also among a significant section of the Russian ultra-rich, is pressing ahead with a National Missile Defense programme whose targets include Russia.

Following this mass protest in Russia, trade unionists and workers around the world must now show practical solidarity with Russian workers. We must give support to the fightback of internationalist, anti-racist and democratic workers organisations.

●Contact International Solidarity with Workers in Russia at Box R, 46 Denmark Hill, London, SE5 8RZ, England; 0171-733 9622; ISWoR@aol.com;

●Oleg Shein is touring Europe in July. For details of meetings in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and Hull, contact ISWoR.

Say no to Star Wars II

With the world's powers lusting after the energy wealth of the Caspian, it is clear that local peoples are set for continued suffering in bitter proxy wars. Out of Russia have come threats to bomb Afghanistan, while the US accelerates its attempts to destroy Russia as a regional power by pulling Ukraine, Baltic, Caucasian and Central Asian states under its wing.

The US government's proposed National Missile Defence (NMD), officially designed to counter the threat from "rogue states" (a threat considered non-existent by many leading military analysts), is widely recognised by the Russians and Chinese as being targeted against them. At a June summit in Moscow, Putin humoured Clinton over the NMD, asserting his eagerness to co-operate, and even coming up with a Russian alternative missile defence scheme. Immediately afterwards he embarked on a diplomatic round which included not only "rogue state" North Korea but significantly Europe, attacking the US plans with the aim of presenting Russia as Europe's key ally in the simmering rivalry between the US and the EU states.

Scientists from within the US establishment are warning that the NMD could provoke a new arms race and destroy the relative stability built up by treaties over the past 30 years. We must oppose any attempt to lure us into Star Wars II, a nightmare scenario of inter-imperialist rivalry.



Photo: Sass Tuffin

Orangemen march past the end of Garvaghy Road to Dumcree Church, July 1999.

A change in the old order

Brian Campbell
Sinn Fein

Not so long ago the Orange Order was the most powerful organisation in this part of the world. Behind the public faces of marching men with flutes, drums, bowler hats and Orange sashes was an efficient dispenser of patronage and influence.

The Orange Order's power reached into all major institutions of the state: the law courts, the civil service, the police force – and into the Unionist Party which ruled the state. It was the glue which held the Protestant/Unionist community together and which protected the institutions of state from its disloyal nationalist subjects. Its influence also extended into other aspects of life, most notably in securing employment for Protestants. Throughout the history of the state, the rate of Catholic emigration was always many times higher than that of Protestants.

The legacy of the Orange Order's influence is continuing discrimination and lack of resources in nationalist areas. The latest Labour Force Survey reports that Catholic men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as their Protestant counterparts. Significantly higher numbers of Catholics are long-term unemployed. Inward investment, infrastructure, third level education facilities and government buildings are concentrated in Unionist areas.

But change is in the air, a feeling that the Good Friday Agreement will bring such a powerful equality agenda that real change is inevitable – and will happen soon. As a result the Orange Order is in disarray. Its elderly leadership is, as one commentator recently put it, "refusing to accept change, denying there has been change and engaged in a futile attempt to assert that there never will be change."

This inherently reactionary organisation does not know how to hold back the tide, refusing to accept that demographic shifts are changing the face of politics forever. In the 1960s the nationalist vote was around 34%. Today it is above 45%. The percentage of children under 16 attending Catholic schools is over 50%. This demographic trend has been gathering pace for over 150 years. Villages and parts of towns which were Unionist are now overwhelmingly nationalist, yet the Orange Order continues to insist on marching through these areas.

In my home town the Orange lodge is faced with a similar situation. Their march is through a nationalist area and residents would be confined to their homes for its duration. This has naturally created resentment. To reach an accommodation, a meeting was organised between local Orangemen and nationalist residents. But, the night before the meeting, the Grand Lodge of Ireland ordered the local Orangemen to stick by Orange Order policy and not meet residents. It is an attitude of "this is our state and we'll walk where we like". By talking, the Orange Order would be conceding that local residents are equal citizens who deserve respect. The meeting was cancelled and residents are likely to protest as the parade passes.

Some Orangemen realise they must adapt to change, but not the majority. They grew up with supremacist views but the tide of equality will wash them away. Their views will become an anachronism and they will cease to have a role in the modern world. Their power will be gone when they have no patronage or influence to wield, when jobs and economic benefits are shared equally. Some can see that unless they change their demise is inevitable. But it may be too late. And it would be no bad thing.

Day-Mer Cultural and Arts Festival

The Turkish and Kurdish communities are facing increased unemployment, with textile industries moving overseas and racism stoked by anti-asylum seeker proganda and the aftermath of the Galatasaray/Leeds match. The eleventh summer festival aims to promote friendship between different cultures.

•Sunday 9th July: Edip Akbayram and his group (concert)

•Saturday 15th July: "Altogether against racism and unemployment" (panel discussion)

•Sunday 16th July: Open air festival, Clissold Park, Hackney

•Saturday 22nd July: "Working Class Movement from yesterday to tomorrow and socialism" (seminar)

Details from Day-Mer: 020-7275 8440; humanrights@daymer.org; http://www.Daymer.org/ie/serv/humanr

Death of the Syrian fox

Tony Greenstein reflects on the political legacy of Syria's President Assad.

The death of Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad ends an era of the old Arab regimes which used pan-Arabist rhetoric to legitimise themselves.

Like Nasser in Egypt and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Ba'athist regime in Syria came to power with the overthrow of the old feudal regime. Although it nominally had a radical programme of land reform and social change, the Syrian regime was viciously anti-Communist and increasingly corrupt, tolerating no dissent. Assad, who was originally Defence Minister, became President in 1970 and ruled for the next 30 years.

Until the fall of the Soviet Union, Syria had been the main client regime of the Soviets in the Middle East after the defection of Egypt's Anwar Sadat to the US in the early 1970s. In 1973, together with Egypt, a pre-emptive attack was launched (the Yom Kippur War) in order to regain the lands captured by Israel in 1967. Although initially successful, the Israelis, with massive support from the United States, rolled back both advances.

But whereas Sadat made his peace with the Israeli state via the Camp David Accords in 1977, such an option was never open to Assad. On the contrary, the Camp David Accords (which led to the return of the Sinai Peninsula) opened the way to the master plan of Begin and Sharon – the creation of a Lebanese Phalangist state under their control, coupled with the annexation of the south of Lebanon up to the Litani River.

The main success of Assad's regime was in the gradual frustration of the Israeli plan through Syria exerting domination over Lebanese politics. In 1976 at the height of the Lebanese Civil War, when the secular Lebanese National Movement was on the brink of victory, Assad sent his troops into Lebanon on the side of the Maronite forces. Bitter fighting ensued before the Palestinian and leftist forces were forced to retreat, with Beirut effectively partitioned. One massacre which stands out in particular from that time was the siege of the refugee camp of Tel al Zataar, when thousands of Palestinians were butchered by the Phalangists.

Assad's support for the Phalange in the civil war was aimed at creating two opposing and balancing blocks which the Syrian regime would exploit in order to maintain power in Lebanon. The LNM had wanted to destroy the confessional nature of the Lebanese state which the French had bequeathed.

The Syrians simply rejigged it and used it for their purposes. Israel, which had already invaded Lebanon once in 1977 to attack the Palestinian forces (and which created a precursor of its security statelet under a renegade Lebanese Major Said Hadaad), launched a full-scale invasion in 1982 in which it laid siege to Beirut, and captured it, installing a Phalange Prime Minister - Bashir Gemayel. It was Gemayels' assasination, almost certainly by Syrian forces, which directly led, under the protective shield of the Israeli forces, to the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps. From then on the Syrians dominated Lebanese politics, installing Bashir's more pliant brother Pierre Gemayel as President.

With few cards to play Assad played an astute game in Lebanon, balancing off first the Maronite/Phalangist forces against each other and then the different components of first the Lebanese National Movement, and then the different Palestinian groups, the Druze and Shi'ite movements. Syria didn't hesitate to attack the Palestinian forces under Arafat in the northern port of Tripoli and try to engineer a split in the main Fatah movement. It is a tribute to Assad's skill in using the few cards at his disposal that, unlike Saddam Hussein's disastrous adventures in Iraq, the Israelis were forced into a humiliating unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon recently. Hizbollah forces (themselves a creation of the Zionist invasions) were skilfully used as adjuncts by the Syrians.

Assad's regime was brutal and corrupt but it was not blessed with oil wealth, and had to make the best use it could of Syria's key strategic location. Dependent on subsidies from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regimes, Assad's forces joined with the US in the Gulf War. In the last year, with the construction of a new dam with British and World Bank funding, and the operations of the PKK on the border, Syria has come under threat of invasion by Turkey.

It remains to be seen how stable a regime under Assad's youngest son will be, though the signs are that it may prove to be an interim regime. What seems increasingly doubtful is whether an agreement will be reached with the Israelis over the Golan Heights.

Neocolonialism in Africa: a support campaign and the pan-Africanist movement

Monthly discussion organised by the African Liberation Support Campaign (London)

Sunday 25th June and every last Sunday of the month, 3pm-6pm, Islington African Project, 7A Elthorne Road, off Holloway Road, Archway, London N19. Nearest tube Archway on the Northern Line.

Contact 020-8749 7179 or 020-8761 6174

International Tribunal on IMF and World Bank Atrocities in Africa.

Tuesday 27th June 7.30pm

House of Commons, Committee Room 5, (nearest tube Westminster).

Speakers: Martha Osamor, member of the jury of the International Tribunal; Jeremy Corbyn MP.

Chair Explo Nani-Kofi, African Liberation Support Campaign.

Contact 020-7219 3545 or 020-8749 7179.

No blank cheque to Millbank

Maria Exall reports on CWU Conference.

Delegates to this year's conference voted to leave the Labour Party if it privatises the Post Office and not to increase the political levy paid by members to cover the extra cost of the next General Election.

The significance of these decisions lies in the fact that the leadership were defeated on both motions and that in both debates grassroots trade unionists revealed their anger, disappointment and cynicism about the current Labour Government's policies and direction.

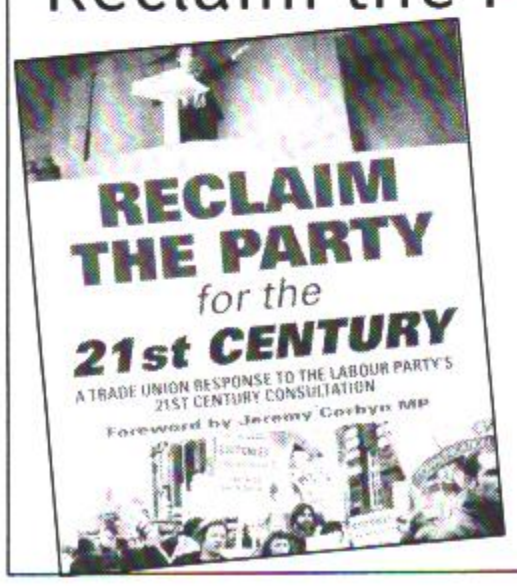
The defeat of the motion to increase the political levy is a blow to those who believe that the bad feeling in the relationship between trade unionists and the Party is an inevitable consequence of office. It is not. Trade union activists are disciplined. If a collective expression of frustration and fear of betrayal is made (as in the debate on the possible privatisation of the Post Office) that means something. And if such an expression is made within canvassing distance of a General Election that means something worrying for the Party. Trade union activists are also acutely aware of what members will or will not be prepared to take. A blank cheque to Millbank with the Government committed to New Labour policies on privatisation, pensions and union laws would be a promise too far.

The debate on leaving the Labour Party if it privatises the Post Office saw much "old labour" sentiment being expressed. Many delegates talked in terms of this being the final death knell to their hope in the Party. Labour councillors promised to be the first to leave.

However there were left voices raised in this debate: first to ask how such a motion enhanced the union's strategy to fight privatisation within the Labour Party; and then to point out we were missing out on alliances with the vast majority of Party members who also were against privatisation. Much was made of the contradiction between the CWU leadership's position of campaigning against Post Office privatisation but its failure to support the rail unions at 1998 Labour Party Conference in their campaign to stop the privatisation of the London Underground.

The votes at CWU Conference should give a complacent trade union leadership, happy to go along with New Labour at the expense of their own members, food for thought. There is a danger in all of this. If the working class and its organisations, the trade unions, are rejecting Labour because it does not represent them or their aspirations, where will we get representation? Without a voice we are not empowered. There is a danger that trade unionism which needs to be more political (not just accept the politics of the current new Labour leadership) will become less political. That really would be a setback. The challenge for left trade unionists is to make the union leadership stand up to New Labour within the Party – and for trade unionists to fight for their interests against privatisation, for welfare spending and for decent union rights.

Reclaim the Party for the 21st Century



A trade union response to the Labour Party's 21st century consultation

Foreword by Jeremy Corbyn MP
Published by Central London Engineering branch, CWU

Copies available from: CWU, Central London Engineering branch, Kelvin House, Post Point G18/20, 123 Judd Street, London WC1H 9NP; 020-7492 9955; secretary@cwucle.co.uk

Reclaim the Party!

Matthew Willgress reviews *Reclaim the Party for the 21st Century*, published by CWU Central London Engineering Branch.

This trade union response to the *21st century party* consultation, the proposals of which will be debated at Annual Conference this year, is bursting full of helpful facts and ideas for trade union and Labour Party activists who want to develop an alternative strategy for the Party in the 21st Century "that builds upon its roots in the working class movement."

Ths is no academic debate: the Party has to learn from the electoral support given to those, such as Dennis Canavan and Ken Livingstone, whom the Party bureaucracy tried to exclude against the wishes of the members.

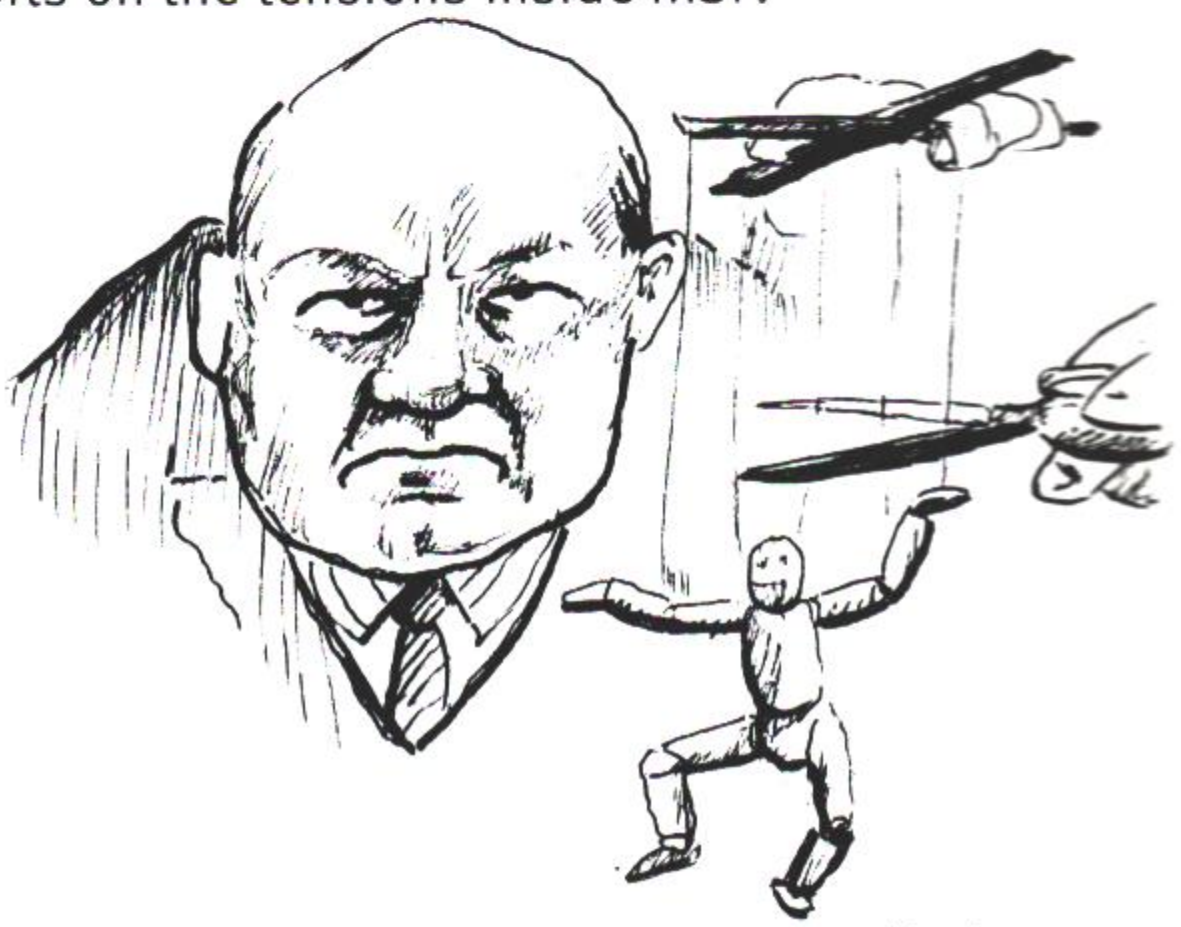
This can be done by strengthening the union link and grassroots democracy, not by pursuing the "old trick of the public relations industry to call something the exact opposite of what it really is." In fact, "many of the suggestions on active campaigning in the *21st century party* document can be achieved with the current CLP structure." The abolition of GCs is an attempt to lessen the influence of activists and the trade unions, not reactivate the Party.

To conclude, "We are a mass membership party whose backbone is the trade unions. The Party members include thousands of committed socialists. We need a structure where everyone can participate and where the Party's policy and priorities reflect the membership base." We can start by doing all we can to get the unions to fight for policies capable of winning a second term – this can only be done by defending representative democracy.

As Jeremy Corbyn puts it in the foreword "act for democracy now" and distribute this pamphlet as widely as possible in the labour movement.

Lyons pursues his prey

Hugh MacGrillen, former MSF London Regional Council secretary, reports on the tensions inside MSF.



Political tension has risen in the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union (MSF) after a special NEC meeting in early June decided to conduct a "membership poll" on a proposed merger with the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), the maverick right-wing engineering union, to be followed by a recalled Annual Conference.

These manoeuvres follow May's MSF Conference, which stipulated terms that the MSF leadership must obtain before a membership ballot on the merger can take place. But the terms are unacceptable to the AEEU leadership – they would result in a reduction of their centralised control of the union and this they cannot swallow.

The MSF leadership has now embarked on a desperate tactic to overcome this obstacle to their plans. The unprecedented "membership poll" has no constitutional force. General Secretary Roger Lyons and his associates hope to achieve a large majority for merger in the "poll" and use this to bully Conference delegates into agreeing terms they were unprepared to accept in May.

No timetable has been set for the "poll"/recalled Conference and exactly what questions will be put to the members has still to be decided. But it is certain, given the approach to the merger issue so far, that the "poll" will be conducted with every form of misinformation, distortion and censorship.

The stage is set for a confrontation between two incompatible types of trade unionism. One, supported by MSF and AEEU leaderships, is characterised by class collaboration, subordination to employers, and suppression of internal democracy. The other, based on the democratic tradition in MSF, supports workers in struggle, independence from the employers, and dispersal of power throughout the union's structure. The outcome will affect the political direction of trade unions well beyond MSF and the AEEU.

A burst of national newspaper publicity recently revealed many details of Lyons' financial behaviour. Much of the information was old, but shocked many members hitherto kept in the dark. What the newspapers failed to probe was the cover-up of dubious habits at the top of the union. Employment Tribunal cases brought by two sacked MSF employees are due to be heard soon: unless there is a settlement (which seems unlikely), much more murky information is going to become public.

Roger Lyons has suffered a couple of other legal knock-backs in the last month or two. After a ban on a member holding office was overturned in the High Court in London in May, he suffered another setback in Belfast in June. A long running attempt to victimise a fulltime official was thwarted by a reference to the Fair Employment Tribunal, resulting in a large out of court settlement. In the past year, the union has had to shell out about half a million pounds to pay for actions by the leadership.

The equally long running bid to victimise six MSF London Regional Council officers, arising out of a court case against the Labour Party over the exclusion of the Region from the electoral college which chose the mayoral candidate, is moving towards a climax. Disciplinary hearings will allege that the six breached union rules, including misappropriation of funds, allegations that will be totally rejected. It is likely that severe penalties, expulsions or long bans will be inflicted on at least some of the officers in the near future. This will be the prelude to a major campaign within the union, possible court proceedings and huge political embarrassment for the leadership.

The sleazy and reckless MSF leadership has generated a huge crisis in the union. This has opened up possibilities for the left that we have not had for a decade or more. In the next few months, with open, vigorous and democratic campaigning, we can secure a complete turnaround in MSF.

Official trade union action over Fords

DEMONSTRATION

10.00 am, Thursday 22nd June
Ford HQ, Moscow Rd.,
Bayswater, London W2

Demonstration to support the presentation of the unions' formal response to Fords' plan to end manufacturing in Dagenham. All are welcome. Bring banners.

LOBBY OF PARLIAMENT

2.00 – 4.30 pm, Wednesday 28th June
Committee Room 14,
House of Commons, London SW1

Contact your MP and demand that manufacturing continues in Dagenham. The Ford unions are planning to move towards an industrial action ballot later this year.

ERA: too little, quite late

As the Government introduces new trade union rights, Joe Kenny asks if change should be faster and more far-reaching.



Photo: Mike Gibbons

Unions have been campaigning for recognition in the offshore oil industry for 20 years...

On its election, the Labour Government promised to implement new trade union rights under its *Fairness at Work* agenda. Three years on trade unionists are still waiting for the implementation of some of the promised rights.

The Employment Relations Act became law at the end of July 1999, but key sections could only come into force when the appropriate statutes were introduced to Parliament. A fundamental proposal in the Act is the right of a worker to be accompanied by a union official to grievance and disciplinary hearings. This will only become law on 4th September 2000.

On 6th June, unions gained the right to apply for statutory recognition. This new legal procedure is for situations where anti-union employers continue to refuse to recognise a union despite overwhelming support among the workforce. Meanwhile, the section of the Act outlawing the unfair dismissal of employees during the first eight weeks of legal industrial action became law on 24th April.

Frustration among trade unionists at the slow passage of these measures onto the statute book is entirely understandable. But despite the unnecessary delays this legislation is an important step forward and creates new opportunities for trade unions. These new rights have assisted in creating opportunities to expand recruitment, to break into non-unionised areas and to force anti-union employers to recognise the unions. Under the Tories the unions experienced 20 years of decline. In 1979 trade union membership stood at over 13 million but had fallen to below eight million by the end of the Tories' term in office .

The decline in the strength of the unions was not just restricted to overall membership levels. In 1979, 75% of the workforce were covered by collective agreements. By 1997 this had fallen to 40%, but in 1998 this decline was halted, as nearly half of the unions in Britain recorded a rise in membership. They were now recruiting significant numbers among groups traditionally under-represented in the unions, eg women and part-timers.

New recognition deals are being struck, as many employers acknowledge the fact that the legal framework is changing and are entering into voluntary agreements before bids for statutory recognition are made. The unions have been campaigning for recognition in the North Sea oil industry for 20 years.

Earlier this year the employers signed up to recognition and consultation agreements with a number of unions. TGWU members gained recognition at Pricecheck supermarkets in London after a long and bitter campaign. These are just two examples of numerous new recognition agreements.

The reversal of the fortunes of the trade unions has not been exclusively due to the Government's *Fairness at Work* agenda. The fall in unemployment levels, and increased union resources being directed to recruitment have contributed to the success in reversing the decline in union membership and organisation.

There are good reasons for the unions to be positive about the new rights won under Labour. But serious weaknesses still remain. The new recognition procedure is extremely cumbersome and still provides anti-union employers with plenty of opportunities to block union bids for recognition.

To gain automatic recognition a union will have to show that over 50% of the workforce are in membership, and it will need to show that at least 10% of the workforce are union members in order to trigger a recognition ballot. In this ballot the union will not only have to win a majority but will have to get at least 40% of all those eligible to vote voting positively for recognition. The 10% membership requirement to trigger a ballot should be reduced to a more reasonable percentage. In any ballot a simple majority should be sufficient.

There are other weaknesses in the new rights. Why are strikers only protected against unfair dismissal for the first eight weeks of the dispute? Why are workers involved in unofficial action excluded from such protection? The new *Fairness at Work* rights have provided important opportunities for the unions to start their revival, but the rights have been implemented too slowly and do not go far enough.

Workers deserve a better deal from a Labour Government.

TRADE UNION NOTEBOOK

●Twenty GMB members in Huntingdon have been on strike since the middle of May in a pay dispute with Foframe, manufacturers of picture frames for major retailers such as Boots. The company is a signatory to the British Furniture Manufacturing Industry Agreement, which specifies a (princely!) minimum pay rate of £4.79 per hour, but Foframe can't bring themselves to shell out more than £4.24. Political and financial support is needed. Contact GMB, Ground Floor, 396/398 Dunstable Road, Luton LU4 8JT (cheques payable to the Huntingdon Strike Fund).

●At London Underground, unions are waiting for an improved pay offer. Two pay offers have been rejected at Railtrack, and 4,000 RMT members are balloting for industrial action, with the result due out at the end of June. RMT members at GTRM (a train operating company) are also balloting in June, in a dispute about pensions.

●In Ealing, west London, where the New Labour council has tried to impose a new pay and grading structure and to change working hours, over 1,000 UNISON members have returned a 70% vote for strike action. As we go to press, a mass meeting on 21st June – the date of the first one-day strike – will decide what action to take next.

●Rolls-Royce (the aero-engine manufacturer not the posh car firm) is cutting around 2,000 jobs despite substantial profits, a massive order book and big payouts to shareholders. Most of the job losses are at Derby, Bristol and Hillington near Glasgow.

Two months ago workers at Derby rejected the cuts at a mass meeting. During talks at a national level involving company bosses and union full-timers the company tried to buy the consent of the workforce by offering an extra £1,500 to anyone who left by 31st July. That offer got a massive thumbs-down from both salaried staff and shop floor workers in Derby and around the country. Subsequent national talks broke down in 25 minutes.

In Derby, 550 jobs have gone on a voluntary basis in recent months and the company wants a further 300 to go including the turbine grinding plant (12 shop). The company has now postponed the closure of 12 shop (150 jobs) for six months in an effort to influence the ballots.

●No one can say Doug McAvoy doesn't support minority causes. NUT conference voted in April to ballot for strike action over performance related pay. The NEC has backed McAvoy's wishes and vetoed the strike ballot – in case parents are antagonised. At least McAvoy's Blairite friends won't be antagonised, anway.

●The Government's own *Labour Market Trends* publication reveals that 1999 saw the second lowest number of strikes (205) and the second lowest total of strike days (242,000) since records began in 1891. Transport and manufacturing led the way, with 25 stoppages totalling 23% of the working days; followed by 91 strikes in transport, storage and communications involving 21% of working days: then 20 strikes covering 20% of the working days in construction. Most strikes were over pay, covering 69% of the working days and 53% of strikes lasted not more than one working day.

Although the report does not identify individual strikes, the Skychefs dispute is clearly identifiable as the only one in hotels and restaurants involving 5,000 or more working days. The same publication shows that in 1998 the UK had the eighth lowest strike rate of any OECD country: nine working days per 1,000 employees. Winners that year were Denmark with 3,185 days (which did include a general strike) and the average was 104 days.

●The Annual Report of the Certification Officer is not generally available at airport bookstalls, but trade unionists will find some parts of the report very interesting. Union finances are fairly healthy, with a combined surplus in 1998 of £32 million and total funds of over £747 million. Under "salary and benefits of trade union chief executives" we find that whilst Gordon Taylor's £283,537 plus £133,233 in benefits as Chief Executive of the Professional Footballers Association is miniscule in comparison with some of his members earnings, and the BMA's £105,613 plus £21,172 benefits may seem quite mundane to some doctors (although probably not to junior hospital doctors), some of the more mainstream union figures have widely varying salaries. In 1998 UNISON paid £68,699 plus £21,179 to Rodney Bickerstaffe. Many smaller unions paid their general secretaries rather more: the NUT, for example, where the £74,664 salary and £8,307 in benefits perhaps helps to explain why Doug McAvoy thinks he's better than conference delegates (or at least richer!).

UNISON supports campaign against deportation

A packed meeting at UNISON conference, organised by Tower Hamlets UNISON, heard the former President of Liverpool UNISON describe his eight year fight against deportation to Nigeria. Bayo Omoyiola, a former housing worker in Liverpool, was joined on the platform by Rodney Bickerstaff, Toro Onibiyo and Clifton McGowan.

Bayo explained that this was his sixth time at UNISON conference seeking support from fellow trade unionists. As a former democracy activist in Nigeria he had come to the UK in 1991 and had been caught up in the nightmare of uncertainty created by the Home Office refusal to allow him refugee status. He and his supporters in Liverpool UNISON had written, marched, campaigned and lobbied to get a positive decision from the Home Office but, so far, with little effect. Bayo outlined the important role that unions can play in organising the defence of their members threatened by Britain's racist immigration laws.

Rodney Bickerstaff spoke about UNISON's history of supporting those threatened with deportation and criticised the persecution by the right-wing media of those who come to the UK seeking asylum. Toro Onibiyo, whose father Abdul and brother Ade were deported while she was preparing for her GCSE exams, spoke about how her family had eventually won their campaign and the important role of Lambeth UNISON in supporting them. Clifton McGowan told the meeting how his brother Errol and nephew Jason had died in suspicious circumstances and how the West Mercia police had refused to take the case seriously and open a murder investigation.

Overall the importance of labour movement support for campaigns against racism and injustice was the message to come out of this meeting.

●Contact the Bayo Omoyiola anti-deportation campaign c/o Liverpool UNISON on 0151-236 1944.

"United!"

Tuesday's fringe meeting, called by a number of UNISON branches under the title "United", attracted some 350 delegates – fresh from a battle in conference over the rights of branches to campaign. Roger Bannister outlined the gains made by the left in national executive elections.

Liz Davies described her experiences on Labour's NEC and National Policy Forum, and the shameful sight of delegates from all the trade unions voting against the amendments put forward by the Grassroots Alliance to go to Conference as "minority positions" – especially the one to restore the link between pensions and earnings.

Geoff Martin talked about New Labour's disgraceful campaign in the London elections – and how the national executive tried to prevent London UNISON from campaigning for public services in that election. Yunus Baksh attacked the leadership's failure to campaign for public services and New Labour's dogmatic privatisation schemes.

Many UNISON activists and members are beginning to question the point of UNISON's blank cheque approach to Labour Party affiliation. The UNISON leadership claims it raises trade union policy with the Government – a claim discredited by Liz's account of NEC and NPF votes. As in other trade unions, there is a growing sense among the membership that New Labour is taking their money, but delivering nothing in return.

The sense of unity in the meeting was extremely positive. Neither the platform speakers nor contributors from the floor attacked members of different political parties. Everybody concentrated on the issues uniting the left: the fight for a living wage, for trade union and employment rights, against privatisation and against the victimisation of asylum-seekers. There was a real sense of optimism about – a sense that a united left can achieve far more than the sum of its parts.

Marking time in UNISON

Jon Rogers reports on UNISON's National Delegate conference and on attempts by the NEC to face two ways at the same time.

Conference met in Bournemouth, in the absence of General Secretary-elect Dave Prentis, who was unwell. While delegates of all political persuasions were united in wishing him a speedy recovery, there were divided opinions on the policies and approach of the National Executive Council.

The NEC was trying to face in two directions. On the one hand, some NEC members are trying to present themselves as "critical friends" of Labour in government; but at the same time other members of the NEC took every opportunity to denounce the left in general, and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in particular.

The left didn't rise to this sporadic red-baiting and it didn't have the negative impact on debate that it has in the past. As the week progressed, NEC speeches generally became more conciliatory, culminating in the final speech of the retiring General Secretary, Rodney Bickerstaffe, who defended the rights of members of all parties (including the Labour Party) on the basis that we should all put the Union first, ahead of the Party – a position shared by many left activists!

The publication of a pamphlet extolling the virtues of New Labour in government provided an opportunity for delegates to express sharp criticism of Government policies and of the UNISON intervention in the Party.

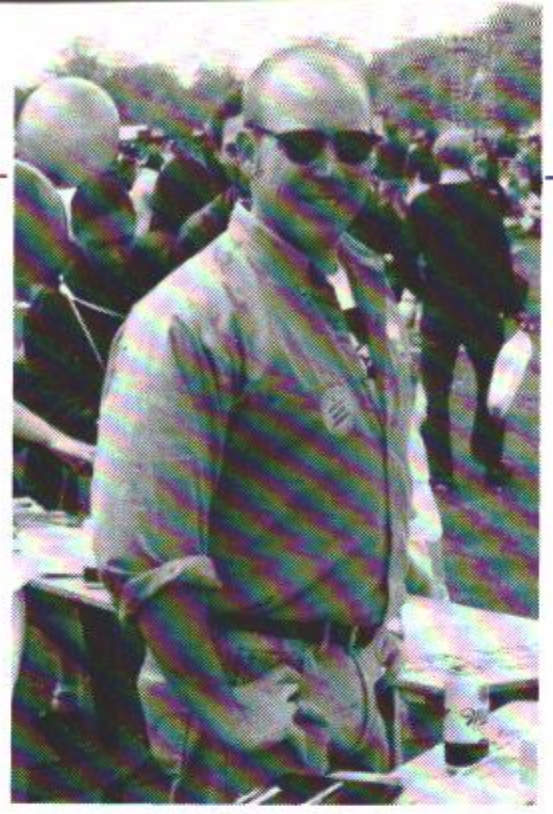
With important exceptions, attempts by the left to push NEC policies further forward were not generally succesful. However the victories for the platform on policy questions partly reflected a leftward shift in NEC policies themselves. The Local Government Conference at the start of the week agreed outright opposition to the Best Value initiative (simply a vehicle for privatisation) and affiliated to the Defend Council Housing Campaign in opposition to New Labour plans for the break up of public sector housing provision.

Conference agreed that UNISON should draw up its own manifesto for public services in the run up to the General Election, which could open up the debate about the political funds. A motion calling for a review of the two funds, strongly supported by Labour leftwingers in the Union, was defeated. However NEC speaker Dave Anderson assured conference that the "strategic review" of structures will now encompass the political funds – which is either a device to bury the debate about the inadequacy of the Union's political work, or could be developed by activists as a vehicle to debate and intensify political pressure on the Labour Party.

There were references throughout Conference to the disciplinary witch hunt against members of the SWP and others. A motion which sought to roll back these attacks was voted down, but there were some indications of a more conciliatory approach from the NEC.

The third year of what seems an obscure debate on disciplinary rules produced yet another stalemate, with neither the NEC nor the left able to command the two thirds majority needed to alter the rules. Only a dialogue which includes the left can produce the consensus required for change and the necessary development of the Union. Activists should watch out for discussions in branches and regions over the coming months.

The Conference saw further steps towards the unity on the left which is so vital if UNISON is to be developed into the powerful force which it ought to be to stand up against New Labour.



THE GEOFF MARTIN COLUMN

●I see that my old pal Tom Sawyer has been sticking the boot in to the Government. Have these old lefties got no sense of the damage that all this boat-rocking could do this close to a general election? Frankly, I am appalled.

Lord Saw Saw reckons that New Labour is out of touch with the voters who put them into office. This is the political equivalent of Frankenstein whinging about the colour of his monster's underpants. What next? Baroness Jay calling for the nationalisation of the top 200 monopolies?

Mind you, I don't believe all those cynics who reckon that Lord Tom has got the arse because he hasn't been given a front line job in the Government. As one of the main architects of New Labour he has had to watch as inferior specimens and johnny-come-latelys like Lord Falconer, Lord Sainsbury and Baroness Posh have shoved past him on the way up the greasy pole. The truth is, Tom, you still sound too working class. What do you think this is? A bleeding meritocracy?

●On the subject of meritocracies, I read somewhere that every single member of the Cabinet has been to university. Now that's really representative of the broad mass of voters.

I don't want to get too workerist about all of this, but I'm sick to death of hearing about how Oxbridge discriminates in favour of kids from private schools. Of course they do, that's what they're there for. Saying that the Oxford entrance exam is loaded in favour of the privileged few is the biggest statement of the obvious since Lord Falconer revealed to the world that he likes claret and sticky puddings. It's hardly a contender for Surprise, Surprise.

The galling thing for me about this whole debate is the inference that you have to go to University in order to make your mark in this world. Really?

Nearly all of my peers, with one or two exceptions who did "A"-levels, left school at 16. None of us feels disadvantaged for not going into higher education and kids today shouldn't feel pressured into staying on at school if they'd rather get out and experience a taste of the real world in the university of life.

Anyone who wants to go into further education, at any time in their life, should have that opportunity but it isn't going to pan out like that when the system is so clearly geared towards an elite. Conversely, any kid who wants to take up an engineering or hairdressing apprenticeship should also have that choice and should not be made to feel that their contribution is any less valid to society than that of the kid who chooses to spend three years punting on the river, drinking Pimms and falling over at the May Ball.

●I have to confess right here that I am myself Oxbridge educated. Back in the early 80s, when I was leading the red porters at the Marsden to a succession of stunning victories over the forces of oppression, I was sponsored by the print unions to go on a one week course at Ruskin College.

'...Oxbridge discriminates in favour of kids from private schools. Of course they do, that's what they're there for'

All that I remember of the experience is some monster drinking sessions with some of the wiliest old foxes who ever walked the length of Fleet Street. That's the kind of education that money and privilege just cannot buy.

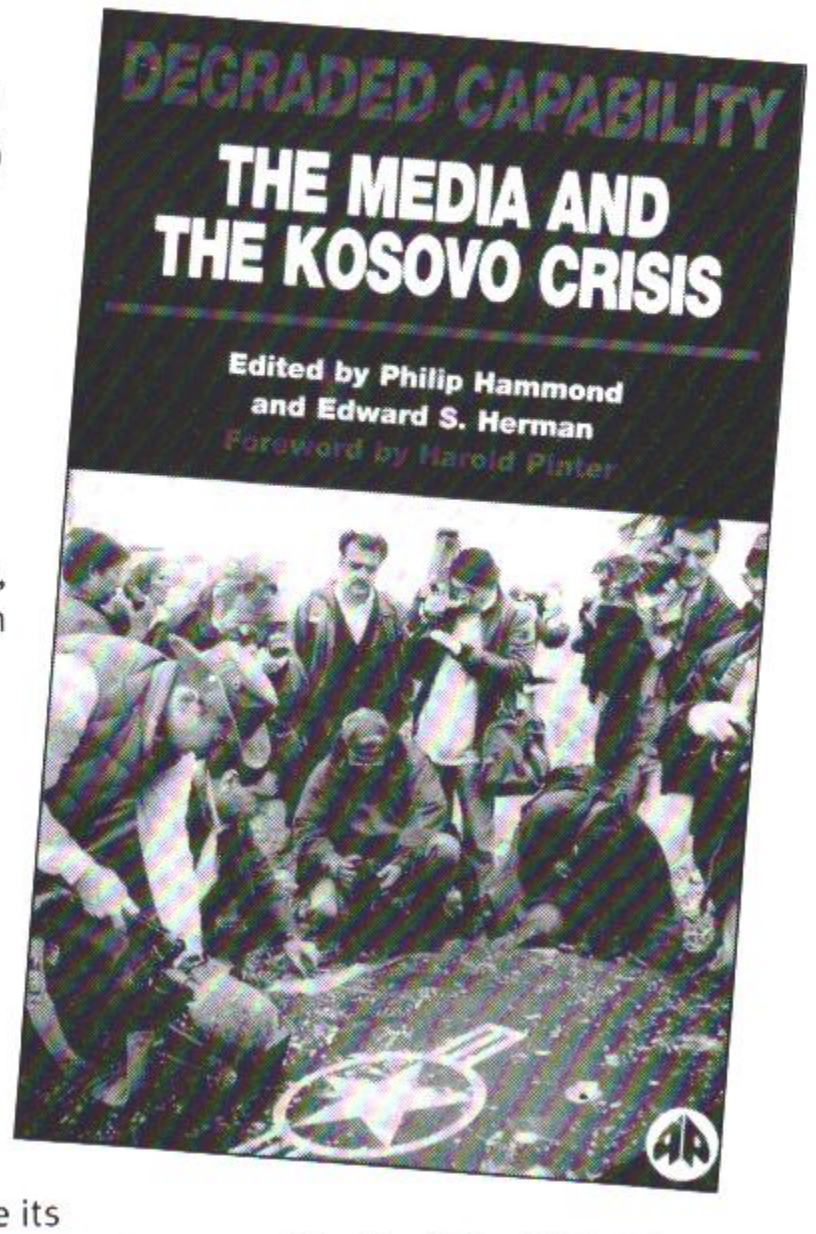
Mind you, I do recall that the journey up to the land of the dreaming spires was particularly hairy. Millwall were away at Oxford United and trashed the train almost as soon as it pulled out of Paddington. I was convinced that they were going to suss out that I was Chelsea and give me a good kicking until the British Transport Police piled on en masse and kept things under control for the rest of the journey. Just thought I'd share that recollection with you.

●What the hell was going on with that Blair speech to the Women's Institute? Did the intelligence services not warn him that a trap was being laid by the radical wing of the movement, Provisional WI? Never mind the walkout, the slow hand-clapping and the heckling, it's just lucky that they never got a chance to detonate the half-ton of strawberry jam that had been primed under the stage.

Anyway, the leader announced to the WI that the class war is officially over. I can only assume that what he means is that the big City bonus boys have won and the single parent living on the tenth floor of a crumbling tower block in Newham has lost. With every survey showing that the gap between rich and poor is still getting wider, you can only announce an end to hostilities if you accept that the wealthy, powerful and privileged are the victors.

I recently represented a UNISON member who had been threatened with the sack for allegedly stealing a piece of toast from the ward breakfast trolley. Meanwhile, big business is milking the NHS for tens of millions through PFI schemes which must leave the Russian Mafia green with envy. That's the class war. As Vinnie Jones would say, "Do you want me to draw you a picture?"

Media atrocities in Kosova



Mike Phipps reviews *Degraded Capability: the media and the Kosovo crisis*, edited by Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman, published by Pluto, price £14.99 pbk.

To distort reality, first distort language. In media rhetoric, NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia was a "humanitarian war", fought by "peacekeepers" in which any civilian bombing (in reality deliberately aimed to terrorise the population) became "collateral damage".

As Diana Johnstone points out in one of the essays here, truth was stood on its head in this conflict. Officially Kosova had a problem and NATO provided the solution. In reality, NATO had a problem – its search for an expanded role in the post-Cold War era – and Kosova provided the solution. So the longstanding ethnic divisions in Kosova, hardly unique in southeast Europe, had to be resolved immediately and by force, justifying and feeding US arms budget increases.

The Kosova conflict allowed the US to accelerate its offensive on three fronts: economic (the pursuit of globalisation and the roll-back of state provision); military; and ideological, whereby "US entertainments and media industries interpret reality and popularise attitudes favourable to the hegemony of US capitalism." As *New York Times* analyst Thomas Friedman observed: "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist – McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15."

The fruits of the policy are far-reaching: a re-assertion of US hegemony in Europe, the rehabilitation of war as a morally acceptable means of pursuing political goals, the establishment of a new relevance for NATO and the successful placing of US – and British – military action above international law.

Key to this was the role of the media. In a survey of 1,000 UN officials with experience of Yugoslavia, three out of four believed the media had influenced the course of the war. This was another success for US military planning: ever since the myth took root that journalists "lost" the Vietnam War, the generals have been courting the media. One military figure commented: "If our policies fail to reflect a human face or envision no compelling stories of human values, then public support will be questionable at best."

In fact, the media were only too compliant. The *New York Times* called for "every water-pipe, bridge and road to be targeted" and talked of the "culpability of the Serbs as a whole". US TV ran false off-the-record NATO claims that the Serbs were shelling their own villages to make NATO bombing look worse. Here the *Mirror* talked of "Auschwitz-style furnaces" for massacring Kosovans.

This is a useful book, but some of the analysis is flawed, to put it mildly. Richard Keeble suggests, for example, that it was the USSR's failure to crush Poland's independent trade unions in 1981 that signalled to the West its military impotence – not much class analysis there, sadly. Nor is the book's argument strengthened by the inclusion of a piece by the discredited *LM* magazine editor Mick Hume.

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Face up to the new world order

Matthew Willgress reviews *Disarming the New World Disorder*, edited by Ken Coates, paperback, £5 – Spokesman Books.

This collection of essays deals with two parts of the "New World Order" that was so confidently declared after the fall of the USSR – the economic process of globalisation and the extension of NATO along with an increasing global instability as expressed by the bombing of Yugoslavia. It is clear, argue the various authors, that both of these inter-linked trends have led to an attack on ordinary people's rights and conditions throughout the world. The various essays ask a number of questions for the left to tackle in order to grasp the significance of these processes.

Michel Chossudovsky's piece on "Seattle and Beyond" describes what happened at Seattle and what future course that movement should take. He argues that the "struggle must be broad-based and democratic... People must be united across sectors, 'single issue' groups must join hands in a common and collective understanding of how this economic system destroys and impoverishes." He correctly argues that our ultimate aim is "disarming the economic system and dismantling its institutions."

Chossudovsky is absolutely right that it is the job of socialists to work for the broadest possible mobilisations while attempting to arm them with an "understanding of how this economic system destroys and impoverishes." In this spirit, he is able to describe many of the potential problems that China will face if/when it joins the WTO. But what Chossudovsky should have then gone on to do is warn of the dangers to the "spirit of Seattle" that the campaigning on this issue poses.

Through this issue a number of "reds under the beds" and "yellow peril" types have attached themselves and it can be argued that the anti-China campaign is an attempt to derail the movement from facing up to its real enemies. Advocating that the US block China's entry to the WTO is completely wrong, and reinforces US unilateralism (as expressed for example, by the bombings of Sudan and Afghanistan) in international affairs. To give left cover helps the enemies of the "solidarity and internationalism unprecedented in world history" that Chossudovsky advocates.

Perhaps Chossudovsky's best point in this regard is that "war physically destroys what has not been dismantled through deregulation, privatisation and the imposition of "free market" reforms." The economic process of globalisation and the increased international aggression by the US and their NATO allies are inter-linked and therefore the "citizens' campaign against the WTO must be integrated with the anti-war movement."

From this viewpoint the essays by various authors about the consequences of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia become more important. As the Hungarian anti-war campaigner Rezso Banyasz says "the level of mistrust [between the powers of the East and West] is higher than ever in the last 10 years." After the bombing of Yugoslavia and the Chinese Embassy others in Eastern Europe and Asia are worried that they may be next.

The reproduction of Putin's new "National Security Concept" is chilling reading and shows the increased perceived threat to Russia which has led to Putin making an aggressive switch on Russia's nuclear weapon policy. In his introduction Ken Coates says the consequence of this is that " nuclear explosions become more, not less, likely."

It is our job to express the maximum international solidarity with all those campaigning against the devastating effects of the increased economic and military aggression that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Ken Coates puts it "When Gorbachev fell... the Americans regarded the end of the Cold War as a 'victory.' That victory was pushed to the limit, and we met that limit in Yugoslavia." If the international links are forged between anti-war and WTO campaigns in the West and those left forces that have emerged in Eastern Europe opposing both NATO and the selling-off of their economies then we can stop the military, economic and environmental catastrophe that the post-1991 international capital offensive has already shown itself capable of.

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DEBATE ...

Bernie Moss makes some important points about the relationship between Marxism and Labour politics, but seems unclear what his logic is. He is right to criticize those who see "Marxism" as meaning setting up or joining yet another inward looking "revolutionary" sect worshipping icons and shibboleths. As Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties... They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."

On the other hand he also seems to imagine that the long line of sectlets from the CPGB to *Workers Power* represent "real" Marxism, when they have neither developed theory and practice relevant to the modern world or broken out of the small group mentality. It is most likely true that Labour does "owe more to Methodism than Marxism" – more's the pity. There was some real basis for this in the early traditions of the labour movement – eg union branches called "chapels". However it has led to the left being perceived as miserable killjoys who want everyone to suffer at someone else's expense. The best of the Labour left has always seen socialism as being intimately tied to practical reforms increasing the power, well being and morale of working folk – this to me makes them more "Marxist", not less.

It is something of a slander to suggest either Marx or most Marxists have ever been in favour of violent conflict for the hell of it: the line has been that, as in Chile, radical reforms are likely to be met by violent resistance from our opponents unless the organs of the state can be won over or neutralized in some way. Hardly implausible! When comrade Moss talks about the scenario of catastrophic breakdown and wholesale impoverishment, he should remember that this stems from Marx's earlier analysis which he revised in his mature work of the 1850s and '60s, shifting stress from "absolute" to "relative" surplus value in capital accumulation – ie from simple wage cutting to mechanization and technology.

It's also unfair to blame "Marxism" for the 1914 collapse. After all, virtually the whole of international labour capitulated to war fever. In Germany it was the case that Bernstein, Kautsky and Luxemburg all opposed the conflict in different ways, and all of them came from a Marxist tradition. Since 1956 there has ben a gradual re-awakening of critical, rational Marxist trends which go beyond chanting litanies and ritual denunciations of capitalism – comrades such as Thompson, Williams and Miliband produced valuable work but failed to present adequate practical ways of developing a reborn socialist movement. Of course there are plenty of non Marxian socialists who contribute more than the dogmatists, but what is remarkable is the complete absence after 120 years of any serious alternative to Marx's core analysis.

Martin Cook
Bermondsey

Colin Hall has totally misread the outcome of the May elections. The numbers voting Tory hardly increased, but their racism and right wing popularism motivated their supporters and members. It was Labour supporters across the country, aghast at the ever more right wing policies of Labour councils and the Government, who stayed at home – Labour Party members virtually going on strike.

Where credible campaigns to defend services developed and socialist arguments were put forward, respectable votes were gained. In Hull, Sunderland, Newcastle, Coventry, Birmingham and Leeds hundreds of votes were cast for those who had broken from Labour. In Walsall, the Democratic Labour Party gained on average more than 7% of the votes, beating the Labour Party in one ward and chasing it hard in others. In Kiddermister, health campaigners took control of the council. In Stoke, community campaigners gained every working class seat they stood in. An independent socialist on Chorley council – Andrew Holder – now holds the balance of power. The LSA, despite its workerist programme and being dominated by the revolutionary left and having little to say about the environment gained a credible 3% in the "first past the post" seats.

In the 1997 general election socialists stood in 103 constituencies. At the next General Election this number is likely to double with hundreds of thousands of votes cast for socialism. The Socialist Alliance, and its component parties are leading this struggle. The Scottish Socialist Party is showing what can be achieved when the left unites, rejects sectarianism and democratic centralism and is an inspiration to the English left. The visit to Scotland by the leadership of the SWP and their long discussions with Tommy Sheridan are hopefully the fruit of the SWP's embrace of the Socialist Alliance project.

It is socialists sheltering within the cosy comforts of the Labour Party, standing aside from community campaigns to defend services and from the struggle to build a new mass socialist party, who are remaining neutral and keeping their heads down. Socialists remaining within the Labour Party have chosen to retain their membership cards while the working class are losing their services.

The collapse in the Labour Party membership, the refusal of many CLPs to send delegates to Conference, formerly left wing CLPs falling to the right, the further swing to the right and low vote in the NEC elections, coupled with the dismal turnout for the recent Campaign Group conference suggests it's time for socialists in the Labour Party to break out and work with those who are seeking to build a socialist alternative to Labour. The election of independent socialists, like Dennis Canavan and Ken Livingstone, shows that principled socialists, when they break from the Labour Party, will be supported by working people. With the election perhaps less than a year away the time is running out for the Labour left. Socialists should have no qualms against standing against any Labour Party candidate and seeking to build a socialist alternative.

Nick Long
Lewisham

PERISCOPE FOOTNOTE

UNISON bade an emotional farewell to General Secretary **Rodney Bickerstaffe** at its annual conference in Bournemouth in June.

The ubiquitous Tony (Baldrick) Robinson surprised Bic with a "This is your (Socialist) Life" video containing tributes from friends and colleagues. The message from John Prescott alluded to Bic's resemblance to Buddy Holly. He said he realised Rodney couldn't help looking like Buddy Holly – but why did he want to sing like him? Unfortunately the conference sub titles system rendered "to sing" as "tossing".

A tearful Bic confessed he was very emotional. "I hear poetry – and I weep. I hear music – and I weep. I hear **Jon Rogers** – and I weep".

We've heard that one before, Bic.

APOLOGY

In June's *LLB* we reported on this year's Pride March. Where our reporter told us "a section of this year's Pride demo will be hosted by the TUC" we unfortunately edited this to "this year's Pride demo will be hosted by the TUC". It was a small but significant error. We apologise for any embarrassment caused.

After reading Mike Marqusee's description of Ken Livingstone (June *LLB*), where Mike can't bring himself to be positive about Livingstone in the entire piece, one wonders – if Ken has said or done nothing he agrees with – why the LSA supported him.

Could it perhaps have been an opportunistic attempt to catch votes – not so dissimilar to the opportunism Mike pins on Ken? The zig-zags of many of the LSA's component parts on this issue could certainly suggest so.

The appointments of Lee Jasper, Kumar Murshid (two prominent campaigners on the asylum issue Mike mentions) and John McDonnell (Chair of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs) certainly don't fit in with Mike's analysis. Nor does Livingstone stating his support for any future action taken by Dagenham workers to protect jobs.

I have no problem with socialists criticising Ken Livingstone – I myself disagreed strongly with his recent speech on the euro – but some positive as well as negative words are surely necessary. The left should unite with Livingstone on the correct things he says and does, while campaigning for his reinstatement to the Labour Party, even when some of us have disagreements with him. Ken Livingstone's election can be seen the first victory of any sort for the left for some years (it was described by the *Financial Times* as a "seismic event" in British politics) and can help the re-emergence of a left alternative to New Labour.

To adopt an entirely negative one-sided attitude on Ken would isolate ourselves from many who backed Livingstone, just as opportunities could be arising.

Those who won't support campaigning for Ken's reinstatement into the Labour Party and seem to agree with Tony Blair that he is a "disaster" for London, are doing none of us any favours.

Matthew Willgress
Peterborough

The left after the third way

Andrew Coates looks to France for some lessons for the left.

"Lots of us in France are very happy about Ken Livingstone's victory and the electoral slap in the face that Tony Blair has just received in the local elections." Thierry, a French Gauche Socialiste (Socialist Left) activist, voices a reaction widely shared on the European left.

In Berlin on 3rd June, the world's left-of-centre modernisers (from US Democrats to socialists and social democrats) met to charter a new "progressive project". The British Prime Minister's absence was more than fortuitous: the summit produced a document that did not mention his political doctrine. Instead of the benefits of globalisation, flexibility and authoritarian morality, the assembled leaders appealed to "solidarity, social justice, equality" and "redistribution of wealth and opportunity".

Despite the social democratic sentiments expressed in Berlin, most mainstream left parties offer no clear alternative. In France, giant mergers, proposals to introduce private pension funds, privatisations, and a freeze on public sector employment mirror other countries' concessions to globalisation. The 35 hour week is bogged down in technical detail and disputes. While unemployment is now below 10% and growth is up, inequality is rising – and the employers organisation is planning a British-style Job Seekers' contract for the unemployed.

Yet new lefts inside the mass social democratic parties have not gone to sleep. One of the most organised, the Gauche Socialiste, is a recognised current in the Socialist Party, and now has one minister, Jean-Luc Melechon, and the socialist candidate for Mayor of Toulouse. The Gauche Socialiste has a strategy to build a Europe-wide "socialist republic" based on detailed counterproposals on social and industrial policy and support for mass action.

Inside the French "plurielle" coalition of socialists, communists, Greens and republican socialists, many are dissatisfied with Prime Minister Jospin's concessions to economic liberalism and are organising joint action against it. In other European countries, notably Germany, public sector workers are campaigning against financial austerity.

There appears to be a space opening up independent of social democracy. In 1998, 20 Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle, LO) regional councillors were elected, and in 1999 five MEPs from the joint LO-LCR (League Communiste Révolutionnaire) list were elected. Whether the co-operation will continue, organising pent-up frustration into an anti-capitalist strategy that will gain a wide hearing, is being debated.

Alliances of small left-wing parties outside government can play a role in making these criticisms explicit. But as the French case illustrates, it is not always simple. As the emergence of the Gauche Socialiste shows, the political conditions for a left alternative also exist inside large social democratic organisations.

A key factor in their influence is the way opinion can be expressed democratically inside the Socialist Party, where currents are represented at all levels. It is the lack of similar pluralist mechanisms which impedes the Labour left from advancing in Britain. Rather than concentrating on an uncertain future with the (in many respects worthwhile) Socialist Alliance electoral slates, it is time to put forward a programme to shake up the Party with this bottom-to-top democracy.

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Please keep your letters short and send them to *Labour Left Briefing*, PO Box 2378, London E5 9QU.

So Gordon Brown thinks it a scandalous indictment of Oxbridge selection procedures, that Oxbridge takes 50% of its intake from private-sector schools (which teach 7% of its nation's children.)

It would be interesting to know his views on:

•If Oxbridge selectors did their job properly, what percentage of its intake would Oxbridge then take from private sector schools?

•If Oxbridge selectors did their job properly, how many applicants would Oxbridge accept from the comprehensive school in Tony Blair's area (per hundred pupils in that school), and likewise from the school to which Tony Blair sent his children?

•Is it important that ali the best talent should study at Oxbridge rather than in other UK universities?

Alan Leadbetter
Stoke-on-Trent

What should be the response the left of the party to the current dominance of Millbank in our internal democracy? This is an important and urgent question since this dominance is used to push ideas that provide no answer to the problems facing working people and their families. Such ideas could lose us the next election!

I do not disagree with Anna Monk's description of how our internal elections have been corrupted and manipulated. However, I cannot endorse Anna's view that nominations should be individual or that OMOV should be extended.

I do not deny that Millbank have been "fixing" elections and denying members choice. But personal nomination and OMOV with everything is a diet of despair that abandons our ancestry in our centenary year.

Our party has a fine tradition of accountability. This has – in recent years – become more observed in the breach. Nonetheless everyone at a GC is a delegate from some other organ be it a party branch, a Women's Forum, a trade union or a Socialist Society. They ought to report back on the meetings – I do to my union and I expect my local branch's delegates to do the same. They ought to reflect the policy of that organ and can be removed or replaced if they do not. Similarly at Local Government Committee the views of the various CLPs in a council area come together and differences should be resolved. If we all insist on the accountability of delegates then every member having their say at branch meetings and at meetings of their union branch provides a check on abuses of power.

I can understand where Anna is coming from. But if there is not a single ward or trade union willing to nominate someone for constituency office then they are unlikely to command much support. I would certainly agree that the mandatory requirement to have your own CLP nominate you for national office leaves the way open to the sort of wrecking tactics we have seen in recent years.

One Member One Vote is on the face of it better than Only Millbank Ought Vote. But taking power from Millbank and giving it to the editor of some tabloid or the local rag is not the answer. 'Members not Millbank' requires a fight for our traditional democracy not an SDP Mark II way of doing things.

Ian Malcolm-Walker
Derby

I read with interest Andy Parr's article (June edition) regarding Sue May, who has been in prison for 8 years, convicted for a murder she did not not commit. The evidence in her case is full of inaccuracies that point to her innocence. Sue, like Frank Johnson, is awaiting a date to be set for an overdue appeal.

Frank Johnson has been refused parole since 1976, because he will not admit to guilt in a crime which he did not commit. Add to the list many others including The M25 3, Eddie Guilfoyle and Martin O'Halloran who suffered in silence till his case came to light in a recent TV documentary.

Miscarriage of justice is how we refer to such cases, almost as if they were an accident of nature. I prefer to call such a frame up a conspiracy of justice. They all follow a similar pattern: undisclosed evidence, or false evidence, statements missing, insufficient forensic evidence, extracted statements, eye witnesses for the defence not being called or words being twisted as in the infamous Bentley case, "let him have it Chris!"

In such cases the police pick on people with weaknesses such as dyslexia, illiteracy, drug withdrawal, low IQ, or loss of sequence of events through drugs and alcohol. In the Bridgewater Four case having a police record was enough for the judicial process to come to the wrong verdict. In other cases such as Tottenham or Birmingham being black or Irish at the wrong time can lead to such frame ups.

Seen in this light we can link miscarriage of justice cases to those fighting for justice for Robert Hamill who was kicked to death while the RUC looked on, and the delay into police inquiries into Ricky Reel's death and that of Stephen Lawrence.

But we must take encouragement from Frank Johnson who is determined as he says that "truth will out in the end," and the heading on letters sent from Sue May in prison – "Inside and Innocent." Let's turn that into freedom and justice by campaigning for all those denied justice. Keep up the good work *Labour Left Briefing* and awaken the labour movement to all who seek justice.

Mick Gilgunn
Islington North CLP

It was with great sadness that I read the letter from Cari Mitchell of the English Collective of Prostitutes (*LLB*, June 2000). Ms Mitchell argues that *LLB*'s report of the International Women's day events in Soho (*LLB*, April 2000) was misleading since, according to her, the carnival that took off in the evening was not part of the Soho prostitutes' strike.

Our aim in organising the carnival was to support the strike, as well as to establish respect for sex workers and campaign for their rights. Nevertheless, Ms Mitchell is partly right since there was not close co-operation between the International Union of Sex Workers, who organised the carnival (aided by the Sexual Freedom Coalition and the University of East London Samba Band), and The English Collective of Prostitutes, who called the Soho and women's strike.

We hope to rectify this in future. We hope that all our organisations and many more will form a broad coalition so that next International Women's Day's will see a great Pride Demo for all sex workers. Our cause will benefit from unity in action, not from sectarianism — and certainly not from accusing one another of 'pimping'! Sex workers of the world unite!

For a copy of *RESPECT*, the Bulletin of the International Union of Sex Workers, email international_union_respect@hotmail.com

Ana Lopes
International Union of Sex Workers

PERISCOPE

Watch my lips

As Parliamentary selections for the General Election get under way, it is worth making a note of what the prospective candidates say. The following signed up to the call for a "socialist Labour government" where "extra-parliamentary action must play a major role" and that the Labour movement should mobilise against the abuse of power by "multinational companies, the city, the media and others". Step forward **John Denham**, **Peter Hain**, **Harriet Harman**, **Kate Hoey** and **Kelvin Hopkins**. Sadly, the first four have done little to promote their obviously strongly-held principles since they signed the statement in the run-up to the 1983 General Election and through their subsequent terms of office as Labour ministers. The last, Kelvin Hopkins, continues to battle for his beliefs and was rewarded in 1997 with election as a Luton MP.

For fox sake

Seven months and squillions of quid later, the Government's **Burns Inquiry** into hunting tells us, "There is a lack of firm scientific evidence about the effect on the welfare of a fox being closely pursued, caught and killed above ground by hounds. We are satisfied, nevertheless, that this experience seriously compromises the welfare of the fox." Getting ripped apart does usually compromise your welfare.

SEMAntics

Privatising the Labour Party's membership system has proved a disaster, with it being unable to cope with members not on direct debit, and membership cards going out up to five months late this year. Could the private company, SEMA, be the same one making a hash of assessing people on incapacity benefit? And still **John Prescott** insists, "I have never said public good, private bad..."

Monarchist mania

You may expect royalist sychophants like **Tony Blair** to endorse the monarchy at every opportunity – such as his belief at Prime Minister's Questions in Parliament that "everyone would like to see a televised broadcast of the Queen Mother's celebration because everyone wishes her well." But Labour MPs have even signed an Early Day Motion calling on the BBC to cover it (**Tony Colman**, **Harry Barnes**, **Gerry Bermingham**) and congratulating the *Daily Mail* for its campaign to get ITV to cover it (**Helen Brinton**). Ex-Glasgow Labour chief **Pat Lally** is quoted in *Scottish Socialist Voice*, "I have always been an unashamed supporter of the royal family; I believe they do a marvellous job for the country and to be their representative in Glasgow was a considerable honour..."

God squad

MPs finances continue to cause embarrassment in the Mother of Parliaments. Latest to be found taking money for research staff from dodgy groups are minister **Stephen Timms**, **Andy King** and **David Stewart**. The body concerned is Care, a Christian pressure group that supported **Brian Souter**'s section 28 campaign in Scotland. The minister hadn't even declared it in the Register of Interests. Both the Charity Commision and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards are now investigating.

Odd one out

Perhaps one of the oddest votes (and voters) in the mayoral election was **Lord Beaumont of Whitley**, the only Green Party peer. You may have expected him to cast his vote for his Party's candidate, but no – "having maintained for months that I was going to vote for Ken, I in fact voted for Susan Kramer," he reported.

Gratuitous swipe at Kinnock

Neil Kinnock must be turning in his grave – or at least his gravy train. Former Labour MP **Dave Nellist**'s Socialist Party have won a third seat on Coventry City Council, becoming the third largest party overall. 46% of the vote was gained in St Michael's Ward, where the Socialists now hold all three seats.

Thank Evans!

Our congratulations to Labour Party Assistant General Secretary **David Evans** on his marriage to Aline Delawa in June.

Some Chester City fans have already been celebrating his departure as a club director. His year on the board saw them drop out of the League, after which he was denounced as an "untrustworthy, smarmy slimeball" at an Independent Supporters Club meeting which demanded his resignation. He obliged, declaring that it "gives me the opportunity to state my views ... that hitherto would have been inappropriate for me to express publicly." Perhaps Party activists should demand a similar resignation statement at Conference. He could then speak freely about the mess at Millbank, and spend more time with his family.

Gordon Brown's uni days

Hearing **Gordon Brown** rail against the elitism of Oxbridge brings to mind the good old days, when they knew how to deal with a Secretary of State for Education – and an incident at Gordon's own alma mater, Edinburgh. After Oxford and Cambridge, the next four oldest universities in Britain are all in Scotland: St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh itself – the youngest, at just 400 years old.

Hot on the heels of the major university spending cuts of the early 80s, **Keith Joseph** visited Edinburgh. As he walked across the Old Quad to where the Principal was waiting to meet him, he was liberally pelted with eggs and tomatoes.

On the steps of the Uni, whilst removing the worst effects of some good shots, Joseph observed to the Principal that he did not believe that all the protesters were students. The Principal bade him wait, poked his head round the corner, and surveyed the angry mob. "You're quite right!" he told Joseph after summing up the situation. "They're not all students. Quite a few of them are lecturers."

Who was the President of the Student Union at the time? Gordon Brown. Didn't learn much, did he?

Can't cope

Heir apparent to the General Secretaryship of the CWU **John Keggie** did himself no favours at this year's union conference. In a debate on staffing arrangements and substitution for officers, Keggie uttered the dinosaur comment that women couldn't cope with some of the more difficult union meetings he had to attend. Within seconds, conference was in uproar, with delegates (men and women alike) raising some Really Difficult Points of Order. Amid a generalised revolt, the motion Keggie had been opposing was swiftly carried. Keggie had been seen as a more modern face for the CWU after **Derek "Bodger" Hodgson** goes. Now CWU members are not so sure...

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

"Modernisers in the Labour Party are being forced on the defensive for the first time since Tony Blair was elected leader."

Labour Renewal Network (the modernisers' own voice) Spring 2000 newsletter. And this was before the mayoral result.



THE LIZ DAVIES COLUMN

At the last National Executive Committee we discussed the May election results. Millbank's paper bore little relation to reality. It claimed that Ken Livingstone had no mandate from the people of London as only 15% of the electorate had voted for him – ignoring the dismal 4% that turned out for Frank Dobson. The paper boasted of the "success" of the Romsey by-election (won by the Liberal Democrats) and put the losses in the local elections down to local factors.

Despite the flannel from Millbank, the view expressed by most NEC members was that the results posed big problems for the Party. Speaker after speaker bemoaned the desertion of the activists. The 75p per week pension rise was described as "unsellable on the doorstep". Only those most closely associated with the Government – Ian McCartney, John Prescott and Clive Soley – defended the Government's policy on pensions.

So the problem was acknowledged by many, but there was no indication on the part of Millbank or the Government that they were prepared to change course. The Grassroots Alliance representatives called for Ken Livingstone to be re-admitted to the Party; for the democratically expressed views of Party members to be respected, particularly in selection contests; for the link between pensions and earnings to be restored; and for the £22 billion windfall from mobile phone licences to be spent on public services rather than repayment of debt. We also criticised Dobson's campaign for failing to challenge the Tories on asylum-seekers and being punitive on crime.

John Prescott (standing in for Tony Blair) acknowledged that the election results showed the need for some honesty and humility, but failed to say how the Government was going to square the circle between its big business agenda and Labour's need to convince working class voters that it has made a positive difference to their lives.

'Only those most closely associated with the Government defended the Government's policy on pensions.'

●The results of the NEC constituency section elections are disappointing for the Grassroots Alliance, which lost one of the three seats it won last year. At the NEC we were told that the turnout was 25%, but not the actual number of voters.

There are a number of reasons for this setback. Millbank did its best to keep the elections a secret and the privatised IT system managed to lose some 3,000 ballot papers. We probably suffered from the increasing number of socialists leaving the Party, from the mass abstention of activists from election activity (and hence from any direct involvement in the Party) and from our own success in exposing the NEC as a rubber-stamp for the Government. But we also failed to campaign, to get out a message. Very few leaflets were distributed and (to the best of my knowledge) no public meetings were held. Next year, we must ensure that our campaign – and our challenge to Millbank – is carried out publicly and vigorously.

●On 7th-9th July, the National Policy Forum will be meeting in Exeter. This is the only NPF meeting with any real purpose, as it decides what will be put to Conference. Six policy papers are up for discussion, covering everything from culture to agriculture, "citizenship" to "the regions".

The Grassroots Alliance has submitted a raft of amendments. If they are not agreed by a majority of the Forum (which is unlikely), we hope they will be supported by at least 35 delegates, which would mean they must be voted on at Conference. Our amendments include: rejection of PFI, restoration of the link between pensions and earnings (or, as a fallback, an increase in pensions), scrapping Trident, restrictions on the arms trade, for legislation to outlaw age and/or sexuality discrimination, for a lowering of interest rates and a strategy to promote manufacturing, and against performance related pay for teachers. Most importantly, we have called for the Government to accept that its asylum seekers policy is wrong and that the legislation introducing vouchers and dispersal should be repealed.

This year, we have had to jump through even more hoops than in the past. We are required to produce amendments derived from submissions to the Policy Forum, but we are not circulated with copies of these submissions. While we are aware of many of the submissions from local policy forums (since we attend a fair few between us), we have no idea what the unions are submitting. Trade union activists should press their NPF delegates to promote their union's policy and not, as last year, engage in stitch-ups to prevent minority amendments going to Conference.

At the request of the *LLB* Editorial Board, this will be my last column, as I depart the NEC in October. Be assured, though, that I do not intend to leave politics. I will continue to campaign in defence of asylum-seekers – scapegoated by both the Tories and New Labour, and in need of our support more than ever – and to work in the anti-racist and peace movements.

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