LABOUR LEFT

Briefing

MARCH 2000 •£1 WAGED •50P UNWAGED



The people's choice

GREG PALAST
Utilities Bill exposed

MAY DAY
Reclaim the Dome!

UNISON
Bannister challenge unites left

WALES
Welsh socialists speak out

LABOUR LEFT Briefing

Po Box 2378, London, E5 9QU
Telephone: 020 8985 6597
Fax: 020 8985 6785
Email: briefing@gn.apc.org
Web:www.llb.labournet.org.uk/

LLB is an independent voice and forum for socialist ideas in the Labour Party and trade unions. It is managed by an editorial board elected at its AGM. Both EBs and the AGM are open to all supporters. We are happy to offer a right of reply to all members of the labour movement and we welcome criticisms and contributions. All the articles in *LLB* reflect solely the opinions of the authors, writing in a personal capacity, unless otherwise stated.

Editorial Board
Graham Bash, Padma Bhatt, Ramen Bhattacharyya, Jaqui Brown, Graham Copp, Mike Cowley, Tony Dale, Liz Davies, Mark Donoghue, Jenny Fisher, Colin Hall, Simon Kennedy, Des Kirkland, Chris Knight, Liz Knight, Leonora Lloyd (Co-Chair), Sue Lukes, Dorothy Macedo (Co-Chair), Ian Malcom-Walker, Mike Marqusee, Lee Montgomery, Steve Myers, Mike Phipps, Bob Pitt, Jon Rogers, Christine Shawcroft, Dave Statham, John Stewart, Eddie Tucker, Steve Wilkinson, Matthew Willgress.

Production Team
Graham Bash, Gary Drostle, Jenny Fisher, Colin Hall, Louise Kawakami, Dave Lewney, Leonora Lloyd, Dorothy Macedo, Mike Phipps, David Pope.

***LLB* advertising**
£10 per column inch; £30 for 1/8 page; £55 for 1/4 page; £100 for 1/2 page; £175 for a page. 1/2 price for campaigns and strikers.

LLB Club prize draw winner:
David Beaumont – £12,
Graham Bash – £8

■ The copy deadline for the April issue is Monday 15th March.



March 2000

Photo: Paul Mattson

AGENDA

5 - 9 News & Views
Unionist veto reinstated; lesbian and gay rights; minimum wage; Pinochet update; Utilities Bill

10 - 11 Crisis of Representation debate
Leeds Left Alliance; Scottish Socialist Party

12 - 15 Labour Party
Wales, CLPD AGM, the Alan Simpson Column, NEC elections

16 - 17 Reclaim the Dome!

18 - 23 Trade Unions
Haringey victory, Roger Bannister, Public Trust Office sell-off, MSF, TU Notebook, the Geoff Martin Column

24 - 26 International
Austria, Colombia, Chechnya

27 - 32 Regulars
Labour Party history, Reviews, Periscope, Correspondence, the Liz Davies column

"*LLB* is a marvellous magazine. If you don't subscribe to it I hope you will." – Tony Benn

Annual subscription (10 issues): £14 ordinary, £20 supporting sub, £30 overseas.
Cheques payable to *Labour Left Briefing*.

Name _____

Address _____

_____ Tel/Fax/Email _____

Donation _____ Total _____

☐ I wish to pay by direct debit and receive three FREE copies
☐ I wish to take copies on a trial basis to sell

Return to *LLB*, PO Box 2378, London, E5 9QU

EDITORIAL

Who speaks for Labour?

Frank Dobson may have won the London mayoral selection, but what stands out is the overwhelming support for Ken Livingstone from Labour Party members and trade unionists. By any criterion, Dobson is not the candidate of the labour movement. As the Labour Party candidate for mayor, Dobson could yet hand the election to the Tories or Liberal Democrats – within minutes of the selection result, Liberal Democrat candidate Susan Kramer was pointing out that she was the only declared candidate opposed to privatisation of the tube.

After Alun Michael's humiliation and Peter Kilfoyle's resignation, the readiness of the London labour movement to defy Blair has inflicted serious damage on New Labour's credibility. Livingstone pointed out the fundamental weakness of New Labour's methodology some time back. Whereas the Militant Tendency attempted to take the Party over from the bottom up, he argued, the Millbank Tendency has tried to take it over from the top down. Not for them the patient, systematic work required to establish a broad base of ideological support among the rank and file. They imagined that they would be able to impose their political will on the Party simply by seizing its commanding heights. Opposition (which in any case the Blairites believed was restricted to a narrow layer of activists) was to be dealt with by undermining the democratic structures through which the Party as a whole exercised pressure on the leaders.

Before the 1997 general election, Blair could achieve his objectives through elementary blackmail. "Back me, or destroy the prospect of a Labour Government" was the threat that helped win him majority votes in the plebiscites over Clause IV and *The Road to the Manifesto*. Then, after May 1997, euphoria at the election of the first Labour Government in 18 years was cynically used to secure acceptance of the *Partnership in Power* reforms at the Party's annual conference.

For many, disillusionment with Blair was slow in coming. Labour members are loyal to their party and want to believe the best of their leaders. But the Government has repeatedly adopted policies which the majority of the Party opposes (abolishing single parent benefit, forcing tuition fees on students, framing racist asylum legislation, ducking the Macpherson recommendations, restricting the right to trial by jury, selling arms to dictators and attacking benefits for disabled people), and has systematically rejected policies which enjoy widespread support (taxing the rich to fund public services, restoring the link between pensions and earnings, setting the minimum wage at a liveable level and reversing the privatisation of the railways and water industry). Eventually, this could only produce deep resentment among the Party's ranks.

The leadership's assault on democracy – blatantly expressed in Blair's intervention in the London mayoral selection – has failed to neutralise this opposition. On the contrary, it has served to demonstrate to members that their party is run by an arrogant elite which is contemptuous not only of basic Labour values but also of anyone who has the nerve to express disagreement. The result has been to provoke hostility to the leadership extending far beyond the Labour left, incorporating sections of the traditional Labour right and even embittered former Blairites. Prominent among the latter is of course Kilfoyle, who has stated publicly that the Party's core voters regard New Labour as "a conspiracy to defraud them."

Supporters of the leadership point to the relative popularity which Blair enjoys among the broad electorate – 49% still say they would vote Labour in the next general election – but this is a reflection of the Tories' failure to provide a plausible alternative, rather than of any enthusiasm for the Government and its programme. Traditional Labour voters have in fact deserted the Party in droves. In England, Labour has lost Sheffield and Islington Councils and failed to regain Liverpool. In Scotland and Wales, Labour voters have defected to the SNP, Dennis Canavan and Plaid Cymru. However, the predominant means through which Labour supporters express their disaffection with Blairism is through abstention – they just don't bother to turn out and vote for a party run by people who they feel no longer represent them. Research carried out after Labour's debacle in last year's European elections showed that if 25% of Labour's voters stayed at home, Labour would lose its parliamentary majority. Stitch-ups like the mayoral campaign make this a distinct possibility.

It is the anti-Blairite forces within the Party, not the Millbank apparatus, who really represent Labour members and supporters. These are the forces which have the potential to defeat New Labour. A central obstacle remains the trade union apparatus, which at annual conference, on the NEC and in the National Policy Forum has so far operated in a bloc with the Blairites. The resistance among the trade union membership, evidenced by mass votes for Livingstone, has to be brought to bear on the union leaders in order to break that rotten alliance.

Our movement is at a watershed. The next few days and weeks will be filled with tactical discussions and difficult decisions. The outcome will decide whether the Labour Party can be reclaimed in time for the General Election to represent the interests of working people, or whether New Labour will go from stitch-up to witch-hunt, shedding loyalists and activists and jeopardising not only its principles but also a second term.

Statement from Ken Livingstone

I first want to thank everyone who has voted for me. The overwhelming majority of Labour Party members and trade unionists have voted for me, whereas Frank has secured the support of just over one third of London Labour Party members.

At a rough estimate, a total of 80,000 people have voted for me in all sections of the electoral college compared to 25,000 for Frank.

This huge democratic mandate is a ringing endorsement of the policies I have put to the London Labour Party. The support I have received from Party members, trade unionists and ordinary Londoners has been overwhelming. I am grateful to them for their encouragement throughout this campaign.

This result has been delivered by one trade union boss, one retired MEP, and one small Co-op branch which did not ballot its members. It is based on the theft of 8% of the electoral college votes by Sir Ken Jackson and the South London Co-op who refused to allow their members to cast their own votes and cast them instead for Frank Dobson.

I urge everybody to stay in the Labour Party and fight to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

There must now be a serious question mark over whether Frank can hope to beat Stephen Norris on 4th May when Londoners will widely perceive the Labour nomination to have been stolen. The lesson of Wales is that our voters will not be taken for granted. A Labour campaign that was dead in the water from day one would limp on to polling day and never allow us to get on to the real issues that matter to Londoners such as transport, unemployment and crime.

In the interests of uniting the Labour Party I hope Frank Dobson will consider his position over the next few days. He must decide whether he is willing to accept this tainted result or stand down in the interests of Labour and London. Over the last six months Londoners have had to listen to the politicians. Now it is time for the politicians to listen to Londoners.

As we go to press, the debate about the mayoral ballot goes on. Here are two initial contributions to the debate about the way forward. Further contributions are invited for our next issue.

A fix too far

Graham Bash, Hackney North & Stoke Newington CLP

Ken Livingstone's "defeat" is for many of us a political fix too far. He has won the overwhelming support of London Labour Party members and of London trade unionists. He is the people's choice.

How can Dobson legitimately claim to be Labour's choice in view of all the dirty tricks on his behalf?

* the refusal to allow one member one vote in selecting Labour's candidate.

* allowing one third of the electoral college to go to the payroll vote – the MPs, the MEPs and the GLA candidates.

* the exclusion of a number of pro-Livingstone unions from voting on the grounds of late payment of affiliation fees by a date which was set retrospectively.

* the failure to insist that affiliated organisations conduct a ballot of its members – unlike the requirement for the 1994 leadership election – leaving the AEEU and South London Co-op to cast their unaccountable and decisive votes for Dobson.

* the leaking of Party membership lists by General Secretary Margaret McDonagh to the Dobson campaign.

* the use of all-member Party meetings by Blair, Brown and others to attack Ken's candidature.

* the pressure from the Party machine to make pro-Livingstone MPs change their minds.

We all now have to make some difficult and uncomfortable choices. The first decision lies with Ken himself . To stand against Dobson as an independent is full of risks – but not to do so would leave the vast majority of the London labour movement disenfranchised. No doubt many activists would walk away.

We are not in the business of tearing up our Party cards in anger. All of us have an immense loyalty to our movement and Party. But what do we do when that movement is hijacked by a clique that has torn up the rule book and destroyed any semblance of democracy in the Party?

Most of us will regard Ken as Labour's legitimate candidate – and as the real voice of the London Labour Party. The lesson from Wales is that if a candidate is foisted on the Party and the people, Party activists will not tramp the streets for Dobson and the people will not vote for him.

If Ken bites the bullet it is very likely that a significant number of Party members will support him.

Don't tear up your Party cards!

By Matthew Willgress, Peterborough CLP

Not surprisingly many comrades will be angry at the fact that this fix-up has stopped Ken Livingstone winning the victory he deserves. It is inevitable that some will take this as proof that we should leave the Labour Party. However, I am against this idea.

In my opinion, Ken's campaign has in fact shown why we should stay in the Labour Party – the majority of members are against Blair and can even make such a stitch-up a close run thing. Secondly, this has shown that if socialists can split the cosy alliance between Blair and the union tops, this can mean real progress is possible. Thirdly, it is has been this campaign within the Labour Party that has really had Blair on the run. It was not the Socialist Alliance or any of the other left varieties outside Labour which had Blair scared, but a campaign in the Labour Party linked to a fight in the trade unions.

There are important battles ahead in which the future of the Blair project could well be decided. This was one such event, and in some ways we have lost, but in other ways we have shown how shaky the Blairites are. *21st century party* and a possible fight on the Jenkins consultation are coming up. Both of these are crucial and we need socialists fighting them to save the Labour Party. So please, don't tear up your Party cards!

New Labour: couldn't organise a peace-up in a monastery

Peter Mandelson has reinstated the Unionist veto, argues Brian Campbell of Sinn Fein.

Peter Mandelson's actions of the last few weeks have reminded republicans of the not-too-distant past when they regularly bemoaned the arrogance with which the British Government exercised power in Ireland. The examples are endless, though it is perhaps as well that Labour Party members are reminded of the name of Roy Mason, the Secretary of State in the late 1970s, who fell in love with the more extreme members of the British military machine in Ireland.

Mason presided over the cold brutality of Castlereagh and other interrogation centres as part of his efforts to "squeeze the terrorists like toothpaste from a tube". Unionists were delighted with his approach, particularly when he dismissed complaints from human rights bodies. Mason's style might have reeked of arrogance, but his central philosophy has never been far below the surface of British policy – the desire to defeat republicans in order to promote a "central ground" alliance, composed mainly of the SDLP and Ulster Unionists.

It was a policy which many thought had been dumped on the day of the Good Friday Agreement. Peter Mandelson's wonderful achievement is that he appears to have resurrected it.

On one level it is astonishing that Mandelson collapsed the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement at the behest of the Ulster Unionists. It was done against the wishes of most of the signatories to the Agreement, including the Dublin government, against the terms of the Agreement and without the slightest indication of how it was going to be reversed.

A decision like that had to be a very calculated move. Mandelson says it was done to save David Trimble's leadership and thus to preserve the Agreement (reminding me of the US military strategy in Vietnam where they said they were destroying villages in order to save them).

Mandelson also says he collapsed the institutions because the IRA had not decommissioned their weapons and thus the Unionists had lost confidence in those institutions. That argument doesn't bear scrutiny. It took five years after the IRA ceasefire for the institutions to be set up, and yet Mandelson and the Unionists are saying they expected decommissioning in eight weeks.

Under the Agreement, decommissioning was to be left to General de Chastelain's commission. And yet, both Mandelson and the Unionists have dismissed de Chastelain's latest report that he believes he can fulfil his mandate. In other words, Mandelson and the Unionists have now usurped the powers of the independent commission! Moreover, Mandelson knew, many hours before he signed the order to collapse the institutions, of a significant move by the IRA and that this would be reflected in the de Chastelain report. Mandelson was determined to act, come what may.



Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern congratulate themselves – Good Friday, 1998.

Why did he do it? The suspicion is that Mandelson is reverting to the old, failed policy. He may have calculated that by raising decommissioning to the central issue he could gain a strategic advantage over Sinn Féin. This has – surprise, surprise – been accompanied by intense media manipulation. Throughout January many newspapers carried well-briefed stories from British sources that the IRA was preparing to hand over weapons before the end of January. It was classic misinformation designed to raise expectations and to keep decommissioning central.

The Unionist preference is now to reform the institutions without Sinn Féin; or to re-negotiate the Agreement. Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson have both taken a hard line – no institutions until there is a firm commitment to surrender arms. It is unequivocal support for the Unionist veto; and it is outside the terms of the Agreement.

Where Mandelson and Blair may have miscalculated is in judging the public mood in Ireland. There is widespread support for decommissioning, but there is also understanding that it cannot be achieved in the way in which the British and Unionists are demanding. A thirty year war is not settled by unilateral demands for one side to surrender arms, as the Good Friday Agreement recognised.

Many people from beyond the republican constituency will not accept a return to the old agenda, while Sinn Féin will not take exclusion lying down. Indeed, no party is better equipped to mobilise support in their defence.

Roy Mason discovered that the British "securocrat" agenda does not work: nor does demonisation and exclusion, and nor does support for the Unionist veto. Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson must be persuaded that their agenda will not work – before the current political vacuum banishes all hope. The Good Friday Agreement was worked out on the basis of inclusivity and equality. All democrats must now raise their voices in its support. In the current political situation, it is the only firm ground on which to build. It must be implemented in full and in the way in which it was agreed.

NUS left forces Blairites to quit

Matthew Willgress hails the end of New Labour domination of the student movement: In 1998, Campaign For Free Education supporter Kate Buckle came within 15 votes of winning the NUS presidency. The left's challenge for the position has been strengthened further this year with the achievement of real left unity, including not only the Socialist Workers Party and the Campaign For Free Education but also the Student Broad Left, whose supporters include NUS executive member Sophie Bolt.

The unity and strength of the left has emerged from increasing anger of students in the various movements against tuition fees, which threatened to topple New Labour's control of the NUS. Miraculously, the Blairites then decided not to stand for the presidency! Current President Andrew Pakes claimed that this was because "Labour Students now want to be more forthright in campaigning for Labour values among a largely apolitical student movement." This no doubt comes as a surprise to many Labour members who have experienced the Millbank Tendency's attempts to keep Young Labour apolitical.

However, all is not as it seems! "Independent" candidate Owain James, who seems about as independent from New Labour as Frank Dobson, has attended Party Conference and has voted consistently with the Blairites on the NUS Executive.

The United Left candidate for the Presidency is Alison Angus, currently NUS Black Students' Officer. The left is standing under the slogan "United for Education – Free and Equal". In addition to calling for an end to tuition fees and supporting the re-introduction of student grants, the slate is opposing racism and supporting disabled, women's and gay and lesbian rights. *Labour Left Briefing* readers should organise for the largest possible Left representation on the executive and prepare to advance the struggle for free education in the year ahead.



Photo: Paul Mattsson

The first campaign against Section 28: Michael Cashman and Chris Smith MP lead the demonstration with Peter Tatchell, 30th August 1988.

Repeal is not enough

Maria Exall argues for a full programme of lesbian, gay and bisexual rights.

Yes, it is the silly season for homophobes again. While the liberal consensus has remained intact and the New Labour leadership has stuck by a principle (shock) there has been a narrowing of the debate from equality to tolerance. So far the Government has conceded some changes to the laws on the military, immigration and even criminal injuries compensation (after the Soho bomb). It has made the removal of the most blatant symbols of reactionary opinion – the unequal age of consent and Section 28 – its goal for this Parliament. But the outcry these measures have evoked may yet push the drive for far more significant steps towards full civil equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people further down the political agenda.

We do need to take the utterances of the bigots seriously. What really upsets them about repealing Section 28 is that having cast off the second class label at school and in local communities, this may open the way for uppity queers to claim their rights. The issue of equal partnership rights and consequentially financial and legal parity is waiting to be resolved. To see how successfully a reactionary campaign can be waged against this we only have to look to recent experiences in France and the US. But in Britain our aim should be comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation against inequality and homophobic prejudice.

This is the focus of a TUC campaign, launched last year with the aim of persuading the current Government to commit itself to such legislation (similar to legislation for sex, race and disability) in their manifesto for the next election. Affiliated trade unions have the chance to make their case through the Labour Party policy forum process. The Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights is a co-sponsor of the Campaign, which is also supported by LAGER, Stonewall, and the NUS LGB Campaign.

Current lesbian and gay activism is trapped in a liberal ghetto. The movement is fragmented. There is no lesbian and gay organisation that can legitimately claim to speak on behalf of any significant part of the community. None has the democratic organisation or mass support. While Outrage! and Stonewall do express some of the feelings of ordinary lesbians, gay men and bisexual people, the sad fact is that the strongest lobby within the "pink" communities are those who own the businesses that make money from the scene. But the emergence of groups and networks of lesbian gay and bisexual workers in trade unions, which have grown at a pace over the past decade, is our best hope of building a working class based movement that can express the aspiration for equality politically.

- For more information on the TUC Anti-discrimination Legislation Campaign, contact Lesbian and Gay Policy Officer, TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1 (020 7467 1271).

The Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights is at PO Box 306, London N5. You can join LCLGR if you are a trade union, Labour Party or NUS member.

Minimum wage – maximum rage

Steve Wilkinson, UNISON Regional Publicity Officer, gets on the inside track.

Despite Government efforts to calm the nerves of core voters by raising the floor on the minimum wage – albeit by a derisory 10p – the actual story of the increase is more in sync with cynical manoeuvring in the dark arts of politics.

Immediately following the announcement, a prominent member of the Low Pay Commission said they felt "bruised" at being undermined by the display of "political macho infighting" and the Government's side-stepping the Commission's role in making the decision a "proper academic exercise". Only he CBI were satisfied. According to our source, the matter was concluded most unceremoniously in a briefing by the Prime Minister to TUC leader, John Monks in a corridor of Number 10.

In contrast to the spin it's now being given, the Low Pay Commission and Stephen Byers played no part in the decision. The Prime Minister took matters directly into his own hands and, whatever you may read, Byers – now claiming the credit for persuading the Prime Minister – was well and truly excluded. Byers was actually forced to eat his words by the Prime Minister and make an announcement on the increase, flatly contradicting his earlier position refusing any increase. As the Commission's 1999 report was duly swept under the carpet George Bain, Chair of the Commission, who had threatened to resign over the issue, was probably the last person to find out.

The decision was the outcome of mounting pressure on all sides of the Government, particularly its efforts to avoid the embarrassment of getting a bloody nose from the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). MP Gordon Prentis had tabled a motion on the level of the minimum wage attracting some 90 signatures for the next meeting of the PLP. This was the first motion due for discussion at a PLP meeting in over three years and, if passed, would have deeply embarrassed the Government. The TUC also threw in its 10p worth, threatening to up the ante and campaign vigorously for a decent minimum wage. With the Government already weakened by last month's NHS debacle, it caved in.

An added factor for Number 10 was the unwanted intervention of new Shadow Chancellor Portillo. Portillo's acceptance of the minimum wage only goes to demonstrate Labour's flagship policy on the minimum wage is little more than a fig leaf over poverty pay. With Portillo embracing the minimum wage, how can it now be said there is any clear blue – let alone red – water between Tory and Labour economic policy?

The tussle that has taken place over uprating this time round leaves the door wide open to future battles over the level of the minimum wage and more importantly creates massive uncertainty among Britain's lowest paid workers. In the face of the miserly 10p increase many MPs and unions will continue to argue for a formula to increase the level on an annual basis. The greatest fear is that expressed by TGWU leader Bill Morris that the minimum wage will simply "wither on the vine" if it is not kept in line with general wage rises.

The headline campaign of most unions is for a minimum wage of £5.00 per hour regardless of age. Our source on the Commission felt that the political shenanigans of the past week "serve to prove that the union campaign is right".

•Minimum wage split into two bands:
£3.60 for 21–25 year olds
£3.20 for 18–20 year olds
•Under 18s not covered
•MPs received a 2.9% salary increase announced on the same day
•Unions are united in calling for £5.00 minimum wage for all workers regardless of age
•There is no mechanism for uprating the figure
•Proposed increase falls below inflation and will not fall on anniversary in April, but in June. Average increase in earnings running at between 4-5%
•The fact 85% of beneficiaries are non-union members demonstrates being in a union raises minimum pay levels and means better pay.
•Pizza Express forced to pay out £250,000 in 1999 for paying below the minimum wage.
•The shift demonstrates Labour can be forced to more on policy.
•Sensitivity to aspirations of core voters.
•Minimum wage has not caused job losses – unemployment has fallen since its inception.
•Portillo u-turn accepting concept of minimum wage demonstrates current rate is ineffective.

The trade union movement fought for a minimum wage – not a fig leaf.



Pinochet update

The four countries seeking to extradite former Chilean dictator General Pinochet were continuing with their legal submissions as *LLB* went to press. Meanwhile his medical reports, released by the Home Office to the Spanish Government, were leaked by the latter in a possible attempt to undermine the extradition process.

The reports raise concerns about the dictator's mental capacity to stand trial, but they should be treated with some caution. The reports were compiled by British specialists based partly on an examination of Pinochet himself and partly on information provided by his doctors. These doctors, it's worth noting, are members of the military, under military discipline, not subject to normal registration requirements, and who are part of a body who themselves carried out torture under the Pinochet regime and so have an interest in him not standing trial. As for concerns about Pinochet's apparent poor ability to express himself clearly, this has long been a recognised characteristic of this mediocre man, going back decades.

The Home Office has now admitted that before the original decision to allow extradition proceedings to begin they received 47,000 emails and letters. Many of these were organised by the Chile Committee for Justice, some coming from as far afield as Kazakhstan and Burkina Faso.

Even if Pinochet is allowed to walk free as a result of a stitch-up between the Spanish Government and Jack Straw, the publicising of these issues to a whole new generation of people will not have been wasted work.

● Chile Committee for Justice, c/o Praxis, 2 Pott Street, London E2 OEF.

Email: chilejustice@cwcom.net

No trumps in New Deal's hand



Photo: Paul Mattsson

School students speak out for proper education and training – not phoney schemes.

Simon Denning highlights the failings of New Labour's employment initiatives.

The New Deal has been hyped by the Millbank drones as the greatest thing since Roosevelt's original in the 1930s. Evidence suggests that this claim is as hollow as most of the rest of their bilge. While large numbers of unemployed people have been taken off the claimant count (and like most previous "job creation" measures this is the main purpose of the New Deal) the reality is that most of them do not enter permanent employment as a result. It was supposed to be a cure for long-term unemployment. Yet despite a supposed capitalist boom, it has signally failed to provide any miracle cure.

The Blairites are now so desperate to rescue the scheme from ignominious failure that they have doubled its length from six to twelve months. But there is no evidence this will make any real difference – perhaps they'll just keep extending it until they get through the next election?

A recent report in the government publication *Labour Market Trends* looked at the New Deal and ethnic minority participants. It showed that of the 380,000 people aged 18 to 24 who had participated in the New Deal (all those claiming JSA for more than six months) just over 300,000 were white. During the first phase of New Deal, known as Gateway, just over a quarter get jobs: this varies between different ethnic groups, with those from the black African community only getting jobs in 17% of cases compared with 27% of whites.

Gateway lasts up to four months and after that, those who haven't got jobs are forced to choose either subsidised employment, work with a voluntary sector organisation, work with the environment task force, or a course of full-time education and training. The report refers to a "sanction" which means loss of some or all benefit to those who have failed to jump through all the required hoops – this happens to around 6% of participants.

The majority of New Deal participants do not get jobs. While the precise rates vary between different ethnic groups (43.6% for whites and 35.4 % for those from ethnic minorities), the general conclusion is clear. However a substantial minority of those leaving New Deal go to "unknown destinations" (in other words the Employment Service doesn't know). 57% of the "unknowns" were found to have got jobs – what role, if any, New Deal played in this remains unclear.

The research suggests that New Deal fails precisely those it was supposed to assist, such as the residents of inner cities and in particular, the long-term unemployed on sink estates. As a flagship policy this is spectacularly ineffective.

It's *our* bloody 10%!

Gregory Palast takes a (very) critical look at the Utilities Bill.

Stephen Byers said it, the *Guardian* repeated it and therefore, it must be so. The Government's proposed Utilities Bill will cut electricity bills by 10%. Trade Secretary Byers not only promises it, he pledges it. Although I hunted through all 169 pages of the draft Bill, I was unable to find my 10% discount coupon. In fact, I found not a word about my 10% cut.

Ever the optimist, I waded into the Bill's thickening drifts of horse manure, certain I would find a pony. Disappointed and aromatic, I called Mr Byers about the missing money and was waylaid by DTI Civil Servant Richard Bent.

"Where's me 10%?"

The servant remained civil. "No, it's not actually in the law. It's, well, it's in the effect of the law on the regulator's ability to reform the power pool trading arrangements."

All right, then. "But where's me 10%? I want me bloody 10%!"

Pause on the other end, then impatiently: "We understand, Mr Palast, you have been talking with Alan Simpson."

As an undercover reporter, I'm not worth a damn these days. On the line now was Byers's First Advisor, Dan Corry, who remembered days long ago (1995) when I was a consultant to Labour's Shadow Trade and Industry spokesman Jack Cunningham. I was imported from the US to assist Labour in drafting the plan, used in the election campaign, to end the Tories' anti-consumer, anti-worker regulatory system. British consumers pay 170% of the US price for electricity and about 200% more for water and telephone services.

Where, Dan, is the reform New Labour promised in opposition? The British consumer is getting screwed and the Utilities Bill, introduced this month, is just another screwdriver. How does it the end the rip-off?

Dan knew I wouldn't be impressed with the old "reform-of-power-pool-trading-arrangements" magic show. To impress me that the new law had teeth, I was informed that the big generating monopolists had moaned about the new rules. That struck me as ingratitude given that the City saw the reforms as so laughably weak that National Power's stock vaulted an unprecedented 6% on the day the Bill was announced.

What Opposition Labour promised, then slashed from the Bill, is the irreplaceable ingredient of regulation: democracy. In the States, prices are lower because everyone – individuals, consumer groups, unions, big industries – has complete freedom of access to utility company books, records and notes. Prices are set in public meetings – it is against the law for a regulator and a utility honcho to meet in secret. If you breathe, you qualify to take part in the price review. You do not need to be selected by Blair or Byers to challenge the electric company.

How does democracy lower prices? In a nutshell: utilities lie. In 1994, water companies said they would spend more than £3 billion a year to fix England's decrepit water infrastructure. Nearly a third of the nation's water simply drains from leaking pipes, so the regulator authorised they collect a surcharge from customers. The companies sacked workers by the drove and simply pocketed a hunk of the charges, £420 million siphoned off last year alone.

This is the second time the water regulator fell for this "repair" sucker punch. There is no way such flim-flam could have survived if the private companies and their half-baked regulator had to lay all the investment accounts on the table and answer sharp questions from the public. The regulator's buffoonery could not have survived the laughter.

Under current law, consumers' rights are protected by regional "consumer councils", hand-picked by the regulator. They protect consumers the way Albanian workers' soviets protected Albanian workers. Labour's reform consists of eliminating these Tory-appointed quangos with a centralised "consumer" council hand-picked by the DTI minister.

No wonder National Power shareholders celebrated. OFGEM regulator Callum McCarthy had the temerity to accuse the company of effectively colluding with PowerGen corporation to corner the wholesale electricity market in the summer months. But nothing in the Bill lays a glove on this dual-monopoly game... which has gone on for ten years.

You should know what National Power has done with the extra dosh sucked from the England-Wales Power Pool. After an orgy of special dividend pay-outs, it gambled on power adventures in Asia. In Pakistan, charges of bribery against NP executives led to their courts cancelling NP contracts.

The World Bank demanded Pakistan pay NP, but local customers simply refused to pay the higher prices and workers threatened to strike. To keep the payments rolling to NP and its partners, last January, the military intervened, seizing power plants, jailing union leaders, and dispatching troops to collect electricity bills. But the losses still mount.

So there's your bloody 10%.

- Gregory Palast, author of *Regulation and Democracy*, writes a fortnightly column in the *Observer*. A wider analysis of corporate power and the Clinton-Blair Project will appear in the April edition of *Ecologist* magazine.

Stephen Byers surveys his fingers while addressing the TUC last autumn. He then comes up with the 10% discount.

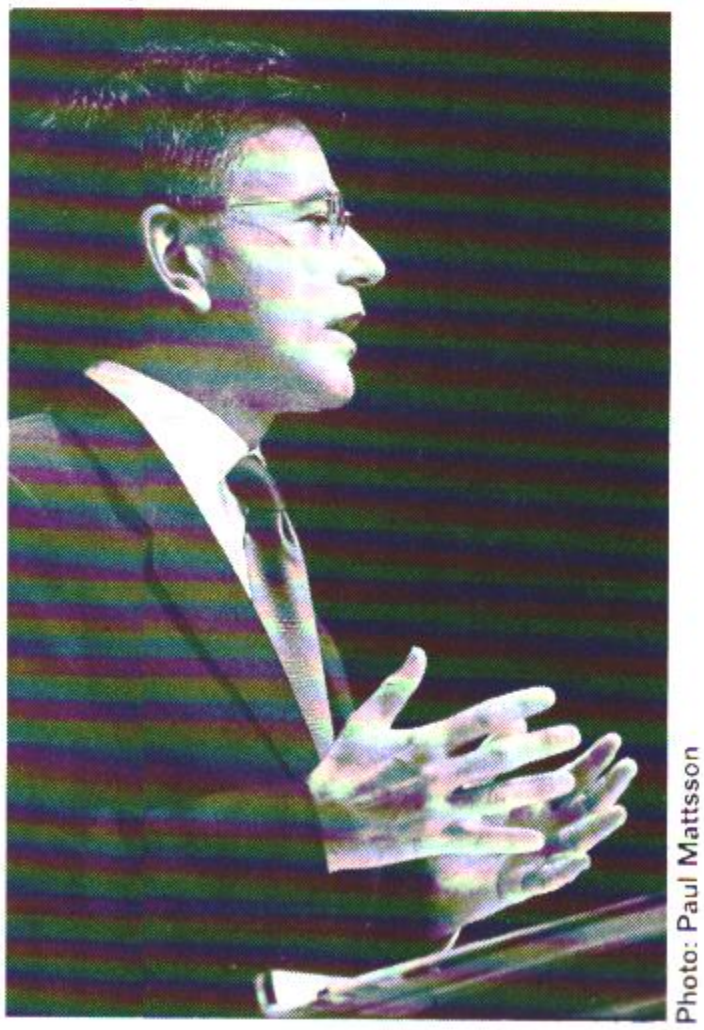


Photo: Paul Mattsson

Let's learn to laugh at the bastards!

Provoked by Jeff Slee's contribution in the last issues of *LLB*, Malcolm Christie of Leeds Left Alliance continues the debate on the crisis of representation.

Throughout the period of Thatcherism, and more rapidly under New Labour, the powers once vested in representative structures have been deliberately weakened in the UK.

The Labour Party's power is effectively concentrated in the hands of the leader; the trade unions remain hampered by vindictive Tory laws; local authorities' powers are now controlled by so-called executive boards and will in future be wielded by executive mayors. Most elected ward councillors have no say in decisions any more. The credibility of Parliament has been weakened by basing the reformed second chamber on anti-democratic patronage.

Much of the agenda that activists struggled for a Labour government to achieve has been treated with contempt by a government which has dedicated itself in power to extending the Thatcher project

I agree with Jeff Slee that the tests for Labour Party members to apply should include the three issues he specified: (i) the trade union link, (ii) the likelihood of parties to the left of New Labour achieving electoral success, (iii) the ability of ordinary members to change the Labour Party from within.

On the first point, I agree that any party to the left of New Labour must compete for the political, financial and moral support of trade unions. My view is that there has to be such a party and that this must be one of its first aims. Many of us feel that this is feasible, given time and the increasing resistance of union members to paying contributions to a party which frustrates their objectives.

On Jeff's second point – the difficulty of success under a first past the post electoral system – we should take a long term view. It took 23 years from the formation of the Labour Representation Committee before a minority Labour administration took office. If our predecessors had all tried to make the best of staying in the Liberal Party this would have taken forever. With hard work, it is possible for smaller parties to win local elections in particular wards and then to win parliamentary seats. It may be that this road is only travelled to its destination once every century. But how often have both main parties been as far to the right as they are today?

Jeff's third criterion relates to the ability of ordinary members to use the Labour Party's democratic structures to bring about their policy ends. In my view this is now hopelessly lost. When New Labour destroyed Clause IV it changed the fundamental objective of the Party. It has made irreversible changes to the constitutional arrangements, concentrating all power in the hands of the leadership. CLPs, Conference and even the NEC are now neutered. The Party apparatus is licensed to conduct vendettas against individual members. For example, I was expelled from the Labour Party because a regional official alleged that I had been "out to cause trouble" by suggesting that the prospective parliamentary candidate ought "to live up to the highest standards of honesty and probity"! A party which cannot tolerate that sort of opinion being expressed by an ordinary member is not one that I shall apply to rejoin.

In summary, on Jeff Slee's criteria, I contend that ever increasing numbers of comrades still in the Labour Party will come across to organisations such as Left Alliance, which aim to take over its historic role.

We must remember that New Labour is not in fact controlled by Tony Blair, nor by any other elected politician. The leadership and the Millbank apparatus are merely the servants of their paymasters, the super-rich. It is not only their financial support which sustains "the project", but also their ability to dictate the media agenda.

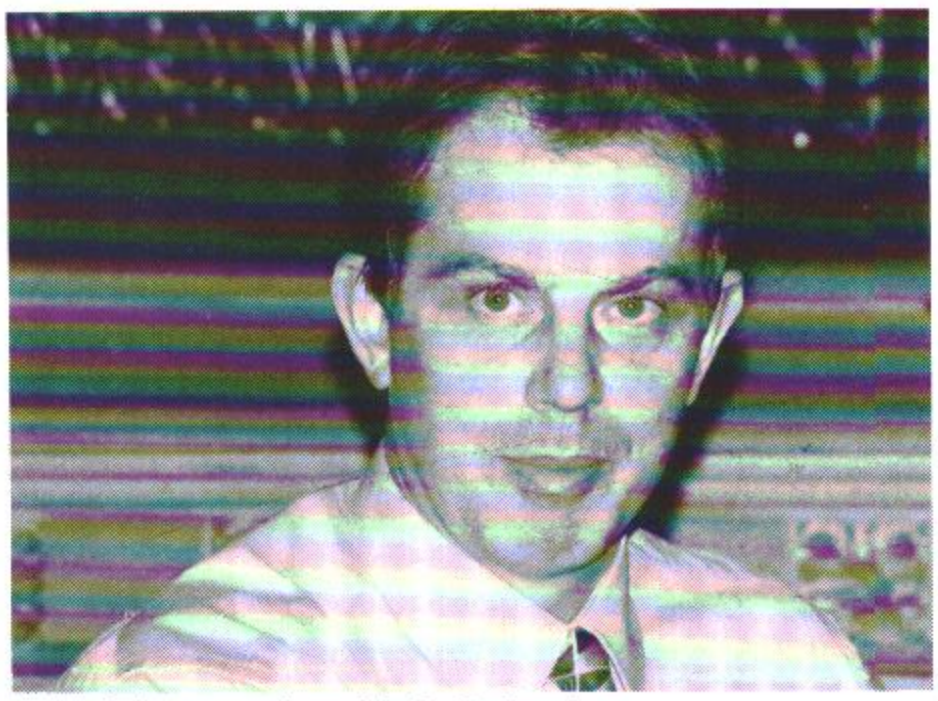


Photo: Phil Maxwell

Tony Blair gets ready to join in the laughter.

All is not lost, however, if we remember their weaknesses. Poltroons like Blair and his cronies soon forget that they are not really in control, and start to make themselves ridiculous. They resort to intolerant and repressive behaviour, which alerts people that something is wrong. They try to rationalise their philosophy, which really consists of no more than self-serving greed, in the form of hilarious drivel, such as the Third Way.

How can socialists in the UK fight back? We should recognise that there are many types of socialist both inside and outside the Labour Party. We must work on what unites us all; organise, socialise, network and campaign together; think local and global as well as regional, national and European; remember that solidarity is our strength – and, above all, enjoy fighting the bastards!

My final thought is to stress the importance of anti-authoritarianism as a guiding organisational principle for our great fight back. Any figure of authority has characteristics which can be pointed out and mocked. If they are hypocritical, they should be made fun of. Two fingers to Blair, the sanctimonious prat. Let's all learn to laugh at the bastards!

Scottish Socialists break through

Hugh Kerr
Press Officer of the Scottish Socialist Party

I used to write and advertise regularly in *Labour Left Briefing* when I was Labour MEP for Essex and Hertfordshire. After Ken Coates and I were expelled I returned to my roots in Scotland. The good news is that there is life outside the Labour Party for dangerous socialist activities. In Scotland it is healthy and growing in the shape of the Scottish Socialist Party.

The SSP was founded in September 1998 after three years' careful work of the Scottish Socialist Alliance – a federation of most of the left groups in Scotland. The Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Labour Party were invited, but declined to attend. However, the SWP has co-operated in elections and campaigns. The SLP are under orders from Arthur Scargill not to co-operate with anyone, but some members have joined the SSP.

Starting with under 1,000 members and some 25 branches, in November 1998 we stood in the European Parliament by-election in the North East of Scotland, coming fifth with 2,500 votes and beating the Greens. This worried New Labour, who had been pushed into third place. They revamped their strategy for the Scottish Parliament elections to stress their "Scottishness" and commitment to traditional Labour values, winning the biggest number of seats in the Scottish Parliament (56) – short of an overall majority. Labour's share of votes fell from 46% in the general election in May 1997 to 39% in May 1999. Votes for their regional list candidates were 33% (their lowest share in Scotland since the 1930s). Voters in Scotland had begun to see through New Labour rather more quickly than in England.

The SSP put up a full list of candidates all over Scotland, getting over 70,000 votes. In Glasgow we won 7.5 % of the votes, successfully electing Tommy Sheridan as an MSP and transforming our status. We are now seen as a real alternative to New Labour and get much better coverage in the press. Tommy Sheridan, an effective media performer, is probably Scotland's best known MSP.

In June's European Parliament election we doubled our share of the vote to over 4%. Last September, the party made an even bigger impact in the Hamilton South by-election, coming third, beating the Tories and Liberals, with 10%. In Scotland's last opinion poll in January the SSP was running at 6% overall. In working class areas like Glasgow and the Central belt we are now the third party with up to 13% support, on course to win seats in the next elections.

The Party now has over 2,000 members and 50 branches all over Scotland. Many new members are ex-Labour Party members. Scots have a healthy contempt for New Labour control freaks as demonstrated by Dennis Canavan's victory at Falkirk West, where he trounced the Labour candidate when standing as an independent. In the forthcoming Ayr by-election to the Scottish Parliament, Labour refused to allow Alec Smith (the ex-MEP for the South of Scotland) to run as the candidate because of speeches critical of Blair. He has now attacked New Labour and many Labour voters in Ayr are likely to vote Scottish Socialist as a result.

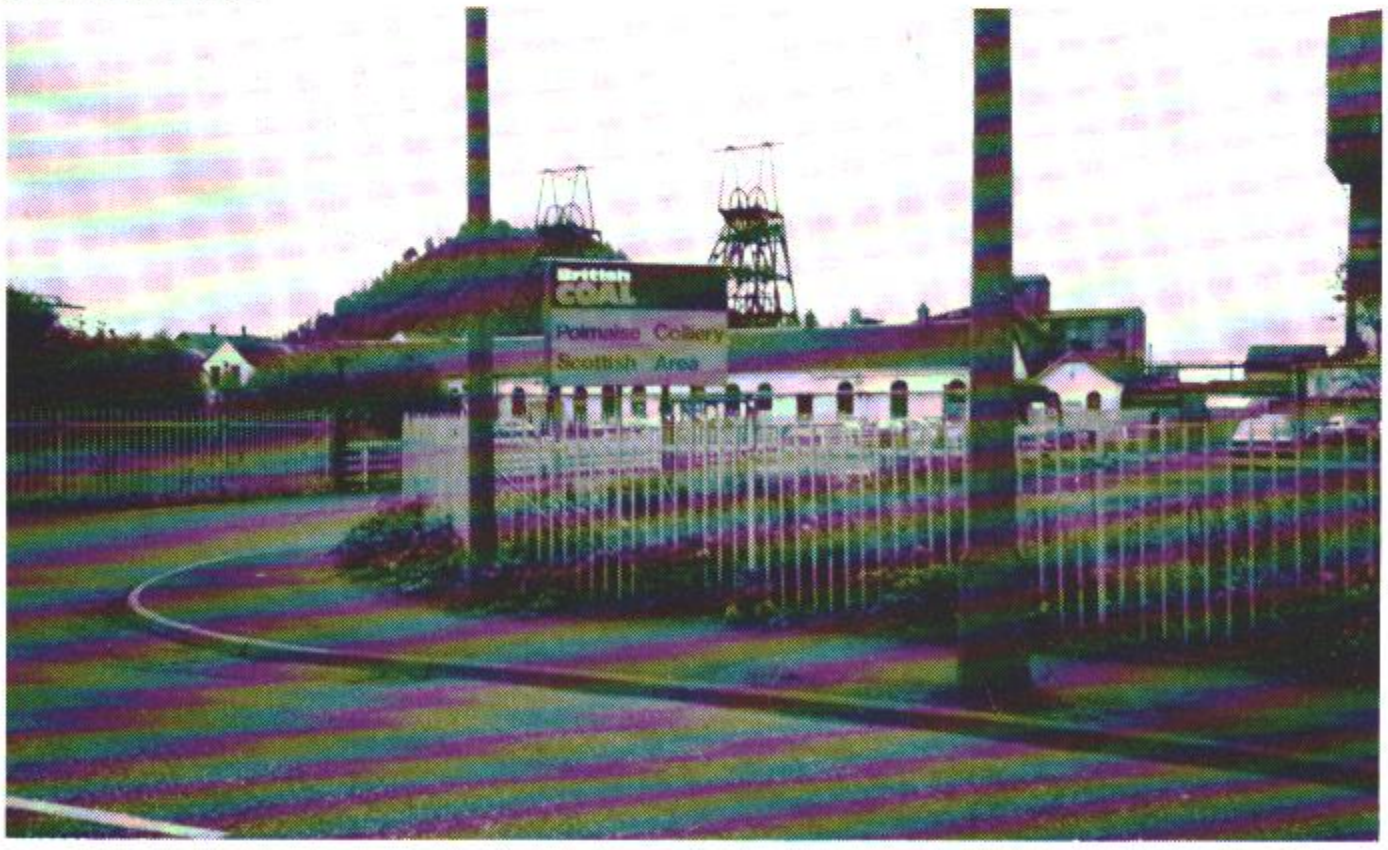


Dennis Canavan MP won voters' confidence.

When proportional representation comes in for local government in Scotland – probably by the next election – we are likely to be established in local councils. Our 11% of the vote last time in Glasgow should give us ten councillors. SSP members are also active in the tenants' movement fighting New Labour plans to privatise all council houses in Scotland. In the trade union movement we are fighting PFI initiatives in health and education. In Scotland we have created a broad, democratic, pluralistic socialist party with its own newspaper, *Scottish Socialist Voice* – the only socialist newspaper published in Scotland.

The situation is different in England, but the left could get its act together and create a socialist alternative to New Labour. Socialists in the Labour Party can no longer argue that the Labour Party is a viable vehicle for socialists to be active in. The attempts of the Socialist Alliance show some promise of the left co-operating together in England. *Labour Left Briefing* could give a valuable lead by dropping the "Labour"! We in Scotland would be delighted to give advice and support.

Polmaise colliery – English and Scottish socialists had a common struggle to defend jobs during the miners' strike.



Defeat from the jaws of defeat

Ceri Evans, Cardiff West CLP and Welsh Labour Action, looks at the background to the rise and fall of Alun Michael.

Alun Michael, Blair's man in Wales, has been forced to resign as First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly and Rhodri Morgan has been elected in his place. This is probably the most significant political upset for the Blair Government since coming to office. The celebration bash organised by Rhodri's Cardiff West constituency was described by one London journalist as "Blair's nightmare party from hell". Blair and Brown will now have to negotiate directly with the man that they tried so hard to block little over a year ago. Rhodri Morgan has promised that he will not be "Blair's poodle in Wales" and most people in the Wales Labour Party will hope that he sticks to that promise.

The year between Alun Michael's election as leader and his demise has not been a good one for Labour in Wales. Members and supporters already outraged by the conduct of the leadership election were further infuriated by the blatant rigging of the top-up lists for the Assembly elections and the ranking of the European election lists. The electorate gave their verdict by delivery Labour's worst results for many years in both the Assembly and Euro elections. Despite these clear warnings, the Welsh Labour leadership refused to learn the lessons and carried on regardless, showing contempt for the new realities of Welsh politics and arrogantly dismissing those who raised criticisms. Further humiliation was provided by the Ceredigion by-election, which saw Labour slip to a humiliating fourth place.

The issue which finally prompted the three opposition parties to support a motion of non-confidence in Alun Michael was that of matched funding for Objective 1 projects in Wales. Objective 1 status is awarded by the European Union to those nations and regions whose Gross Domestic Product per head is less than 75% of the EU average. All of West Wales and the South Wales valleys now qualify, which reflects a very real growth in poverty and deprivation in those areas.

When a guarantee of matched funding was not forthcoming, Michael's fate was sealed. It was at this point that events took a bizarre turn, as Alan Michael tried to resign before the no-confidence vote was taken. Both Labour and opposition

'But, just like the hapless Baldrick, Michael's plan was built on sand'

Assembly Members (AMs) were thrown into confusion and it was only on the insistence of the more farsighted among them that the motion was tabled and passed. It has since been revealed that Michael's resignation was a cunning plan to pre-empt a vote of no confidence and survive a little longer. He hoped that Labour AMs would refuse to accept his resignation and insist that he continue as leader. But, just like the hapless Baldrick, Michael's plan was built on sand. Once the vote was carried, he was obliged to resign under the rules of the Assembly. As any chance of survival began to fade, more and more Labour AMs transferred their support to Rhodri, leaving Alun Michael with a hard core of five supporters in a group of twenty-eight.

This represents much more than a defeat of one individual and his style of leadership. It is also a setback for the Blair project in Wales: that of conceding administrative devolution while maintaining central control through the Party. Blairism is extremely good at taking radical ideas and gutting them of any radical content – witness the reform of the House of Lords, the Freedom of Information Bill, and now the abolition of Section 28.

Of course, it would be a big mistake to conclude from Blair's enmity towards him that Rhodri Morgan is a left winger. He certainly is not, but has effectively moved to the left by standing still while the Party has moved right. What Rhodri does represent is a growing and heterogeneous current in Welsh Labour that questions both the right wing direction of New Labour and the nepotistic and paternalistic attitudes of Welsh Labour in its council and trade union strongholds. The campaigning group Welsh Labour Action has welcomed Rhodri's appointment as an important step forward for the Labour Party and Assembly.

● Welsh Labour Action is a grassroots organisation of Labour Party members. It was originally established to campaign for greater powers for the Welsh Assembly, in line with those of the Scottish Parliament. It also campaigned for the use of PR in the Assembly elections and for the equal representation of women, aims which have been partially achieved. It has now broadened its remit to look at issues of democracy, autonomy and policy for the Welsh Party.

● CYFLE (Campaign for Your Franchise on Labour's Executive) is an organisation set up with the sole objective of democratising the representation of Party members on Labour's Welsh Executive. It has the support of a majority of Labour AMs, along with a number of MPs, councillors and prominent Party activists. The campaign is proposing an amendment to the Party's constitution to allow Party members to elect their representatives to the Executive directly on a regional basis.

Swings and roundabouts

Eddie Tucker reviews *Report on the first Welsh Assembly Elections* by Ceri Evans and Ed George, £2.00 inc p&p from Welsh Labour Action, 23 St Martin's Rd, Caerffilt, CF83 1EF.

This report points out that the surge in Plaid Cymru's support cannot be put down to isolated protests at failing Labour councils in Islwyn and the Rhondda, but rather that there was a huge, almost uniform swing across Labour's heartland of the Welsh valleys. Peter Hain may say that Labour was actually implementing radical socialist policies but failing to get the message across: this report argues that "Labour voters in Wales understand only too well what the Labour Government is doing and don't like it."

Plaid Cymru's vote – not just their percentage – actually rose, not just because their supporters are more motivated to vote than Labour's, but also because they won votes from all other parties and, in tens of thousands, from Labour. The authors suggest that a pattern of differential voting will emerge – with continued support for Labour in British parliamentary elections, but increased support for Plaid Cymru in Assembly and local elections.

Labour's share of the vote was down in every constituency, apart from Rhodri Morgan's. Particularly spectacular was Neil Kinnock's old Islwyn seat, where Plaid came from 4th place and 6% of the vote to win on 42%. The report describes Labour's best results as "merely dreadful rather than catastrophic". It points to the reaction against the way the Welsh leadership contests were conducted – it wasn't the fact of the contests that people objected to, rather the stitch-ups and control freakery.

The report includes useful tables of every national election since 1885 including the latest – last year's Euro Elections where Labour did, incredibly, do even worse.

It's a shame those in charge of London's mayoralty contest didn't read this. Well worth the price of a pint.

Torpedoed from the top!

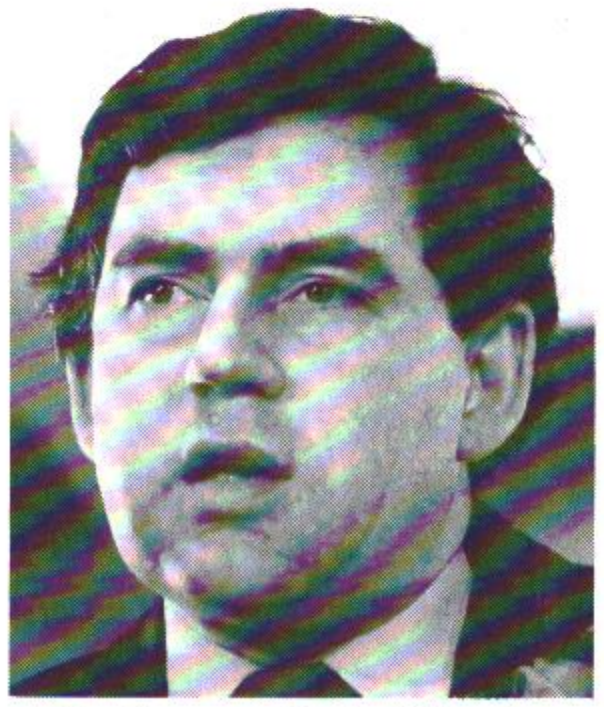
Carole McKeown, Secretary, Ceredigion CLP, analyses the recent by-election

So just where is Ceredigion? For those who have neither lived nor holidayed in Wales, Ceredigion (formerly Cardiganshire) is a seventy mile stretch of beautiful countryside bordering Cardigan Bay, with Aberystwyth at the northern end and Cardigan to the south. Our main features are mountains, seascapes, rolling hills, and sheep.

In the General Election, Labour had moved from fourth to second place and we held on to that second place in last year's Assembly Elections. By the time of the by-election caused by the Plaid Cymru MP standing down to devote more time to the National Assembly, we had a real chance of winning! The Wales Labour Party machine moved up from Cardiff, led by Jessica Morden, their new and enthusiastic General Secretary. Rooms were rented, arrangements were made and we selected our candidate. Maria Battle fought the Assembly Election for Ceredigion, worked in the constituency, and was a splendid, well-known and well-liked candidate.

We worked as never before and ours was easily the best campaign. We almost buried the constituency in leaflets, while red and yellow posters sprang up like mushrooms – from car stickers to huge roadside displays. We door-knocked, telephone canvassed (an absolute necessity in this huge rural area) and did all the other things incumbent on electioneers. The Welsh MPs and Assembly Members turned up and and Paul Murphy did us proud, but apart from him and Nick Brown we were ignored by London. Frantic pleas to Cabinet members to come and support us were greeted either by a polite excuse or total silence. That was the first setback.

Why did we slip to an ignominious fourth place on 3rd February? Despite the best campaign we have ever fought, splendid work by Wales Labour Party and a brilliant candidate, we were undermined at every turn by London and Cardiff. The



Gordon Brown would not raid his election war chest to fight poverty in Wales.

main issues losing us votes were the NHS, student tuition fees (there are two universities in the constituency) and the 75p pension rise. Last year's Labour leadership fiasco in Wales still loses us significant support and Ron Davies's press statements supporting Plaid Cymru over Objective 1 match funding, plus the then impending confidence vote against Alun Michael weighed against us. Peter Kilfoyle's resignation and call for more socialist policies was one many of us agreed with – but why couldn't he have waited another week?

Other minus points were Gordon Brown's silence on Objective 1 funding, the whole sorry mess of the London Mayor selections (when will they ever learn?) and finally, Tony Blair's stated intention of visiting rural areas (in the final week of a by-election in rural Wales, where does he go? The West of England of course!!)

The message from Ceredigion voters is loud and clear. We, like the rest of Wales, want more socialist policies, with health, education and welfare at the top of the agenda. Tony Blair must understand that the Labour vote in Wales cannot be taken for granted!



NEC elections: nominate now!

NEC member Christine Shawcroft reports from the grassroots.

The Grassroots Alliance slate for the NEC this year is: former Birmingham councillor Raghib Ahsan; Ann Black of Labour Reform; Rosina McCrae from the Campaign for Socialism (Scotland); *Tribune* editor Mark Seddon; Christine Shawcroft, Secretary of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups; and CLPD star Pete Willsman.

If your CLP nominated one of these last year, the advice is to try to get them nominated again this year. In other cases please try to nominate one of the two new candidates, Raghib Ahsan and Rosina McCrae.

We are lumbered with the ridiculous timetable brought in last year to enable Michael Cashman to stand for the NEC even though he was about to become an MEP. Last year the nominations period was while the Welsh and Scottish parties were shut down for regional elections and voting took place during the Euro election campaign. This year the whole process has been crammed in to the only election period this year (for councils and the London Mayor). The deadline for nominations is 7th April and ballot papers are due out shortly afterwards with a return date in May.

Candidates will be looking for opportunities to speak at meetings and help build support for the slate. Contact the *LLB* office for details on 020-8985 6597.

Ken denounces Millbank stitch-up

John Stewart, Hackney North CLP, reports on the CLPD AGM.

The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) AGM, held in London just before the selection for the London Mayoral candidate closed, heard keynote speaker Ken Livingstone reiterate the importance of left-wingers staying members of the Labour Party – whichever way the ballot for Labour's candidate for London Mayor went.

Suffering from a "ghastly cold", which he put down to Millbank's "biological weapons unit", Livingstone outlined the way the whole Labour Party machine had been used to support Frank Dobson's candidature. There was the rigged electoral college; the pressure put on independent-minded London MPs to cast their block vote for Dobson; trade unions such as the AEEU were voting for Dobson without balloting their membership; the Bulgarian practices of the South London Co-op Party; and the former MEP, Pauline Green, was still able to cast a vote for Dobson (worth the vote of 1,000 ordinary Party members) despite no longer being an MEP and no longer living in London. No scrutineers were to be allowed at the count and the ballot papers were to lay uncounted for three days following the close of the ballot.

Livingstone made it clear that, if he won the nomination and Millbank tried to keep the commitment to a Public/Private Partnership for the London Underground in the manifesto, he would publicly oppose the policy. He also would not accept Trevor Phillips as his deputy, as Phillips had said Livingstone would be a "disaster" as Mayor. If Dobson's preferred deputy could be parachuted into first place on the top-up list for the GLA, then Livingstone's choice for Deputy – Glenda Jackson – could be moved to the top of the list if Ken won the nomination.

The other major issue to come out of the contest was the amount spent on the campaign. With five mailings to Party members the Dobson campaign had spent around £100,000 in postage, not to mention the costs of opening an office, telephone bills and the extra staff employed. The danger was of a slide towards US presidential campaigns where only candidates with a massive war chest could afford to stand for election to public office.

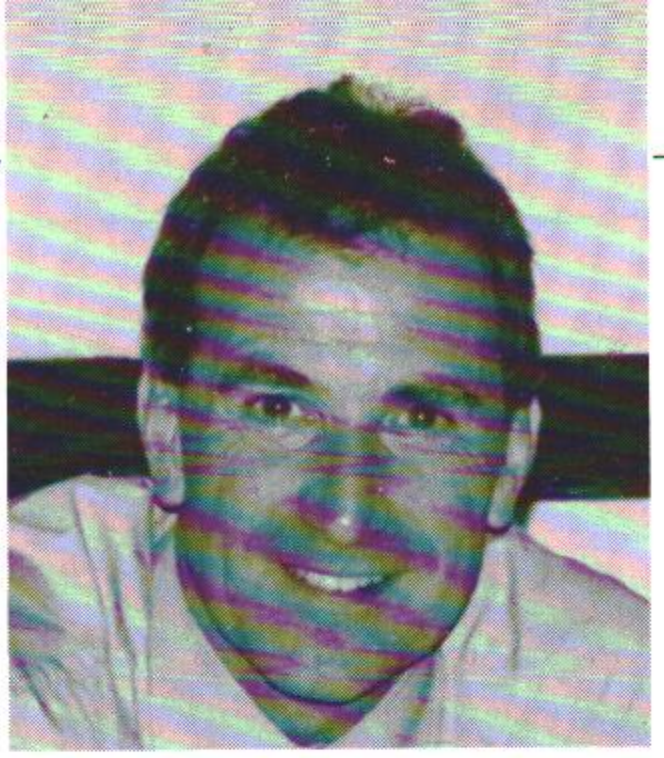
Later in the AGM Francis Prideaux, of Regents Park CLP, and Stevie Stevenson of trade union EPIU spoke about the dangers of the *21st century party* document on changing Labour Party structures. Prideaux explained how Party members would have less say in decision making under the new structures and Stevenson pointed out that if trade union affiliation at CLP level was abandoned this could be the first step in breaking the link at national level between Labour and the trade unions. A model response to the consultation document (available from CLPD on 020-8458 1501) was circulated.

Christine Shawcroft gave a report on her work on the National Executive of the Party and encouraged everyone to work hard to elect all six Grassroots Alliance candidates for the NEC in the forthcoming elections. Ruth Clark, of Erith and Thamesmead CLP, was elected as the new chair and Vladimir Derer, of Finchley and Golders Green CLP, was re-elected secretary.

Trevor Phillips sees Ken as a "disaster" for London.



Photo: Paul Mattsson



THE **ALAN SIMPSON** COLUMN

When Alun Michael was shoehorned into the leadership of Labour in the Welsh Assembly it was more than just an electoral fix. The trade unions that pulled votes out of Executive back pockets didn't cast them for Michael in some capricious desire to dump on the overwhelming preferences of Party members. They were sold a line, and a simple but persuasive one it was too.

Michael was Downing Street's man. Why go for a rebellious spirit who will only lead you into trouble when you can have someone who can deliver the goods? Michael was sold to Wales as Millbank's meals on wheels.

The message hasn't been much different in London. Ken may be the people's choice by a million miles. He may have done the job before and have delivered London's only sensible transport strategy in decades, but he's not Downing Street's man. Forget the bile directed at Ken by the Party machine and the queue of loyal colleagues eager to skewer him. The core of the leadership's arguments in favour of Frank Dobson is the same as it was in Wales – there is our man (sic). He has our ear. And only the chosen one can deliver.

This descent into the personalisation of politics will turn out to be New Labour's nemesis. Beyond the crude cynicism of patronage in the selection process lurks a much bigger contradiction which the control freaks at the centre have yet to catch up with.

Alun Michael wasn't ditched in the no-confidence vote because he was uglier than Rhodri Morgan, or less funny than him or because Tony Blair fell out of love with him. There was the little matter of Wales having been allocated some £640 million in structural funds from the EU and yet being unable to claim them because the UK government would neither come up with the necessary "matched funding" nor allow Wales to raise the extra cash itself.

'Londoners will go for someone who will fight for the tube, for housing, for health and education'

The irony of Wales being too poor to claim money allocated to it to tackle its backlog of poverty was lost entirely on Treasury mandarins. They work to a different theology. Wales (and every other part of the UK) can have extra taxation as long as it is private taxation. The Bank of England raises interest rates to suppress inflationary pressures in the south east, and then everyone in the country with a mortgage or an overdraft has to pay for it.

The folly of this as a tool of economic management is that the revenues raised by interest rate taxation go directly into the banking system without generating a single penny of extra public spending. Effectively we are choosing to pay tax to extend poverty and under-investment rather than reverse it.

The Treasury's part of this Faustian pact has been to place tight public expenditure limits not only on central government departments but also on devolved area spending. This is where Alun Michael came unstuck and it is the trap waiting for Rhodri Morgan too. It doesn't matter whether Downing Street loves you or not.

Come back without the cash and your days are numbered. New Labour's decision to introduce a voting system which has turned Wales into a Labour marginal may have shortened the countdown for such collisions, but exactly the same fate awaits the Mayor of London. And it will be no different for the queue of wannabe mayorettes likely to be foist upon unsuspecting conurbations once London has been done and dusted.

If you pursue personality politics as a substitute for more open and accountable party politics, you shouldn't be surprised if the public look for someone who is unafraid to stand up to the centre. There will be few votes for the divinely endorsed bag carriers in the rough house of this new model democracy. There will be no second terms for the nice but dull.

The debacle over European structural funds simply puts this into a very specific context. Across the country Britain has an allocation of over £4 billion in European structural funds, targeted specifically for anti-poverty work. The inability to come up with matched funding guarantees is what puts at risk at least £1 billion of this money.

This gives a sharp edge to the "who will fight for me?" question punters will start to ask in the new Celebrity Squares politics. In Wales, they aren't looking for a Vera Lynn to go and sing in the valleys. Londoners will not go for a comedian to help them chuckle on the tube. They will go for someone who will fight for the tube, for housing, for health and education – whatever the government of the day says. Party loyalty will rapidly give way to personal credibility in the local electoral battles which determine whether you are in office or out on your backside.

Millbank's desire to replace the party, at its base, with a more colonial system of administrative governance is actually going to accelerate this collision between an obsessively controlling centre and an increasingly independent outside. A refusal to give a public expenditure lead from the centre simply makes this inevitable.

This is what Alanis Morrisette should look at if she wants to understand the meaning of ironic.

Dome Doomed

Steve Wilkinson, Regional Publicity Officer, London UNISON reports.

"Not in our wildest dreams did we think we'd end up in the Dome for the May Day demo," exclaimed an astounded Geoff Martin, speaking in February to London UNISON's Regional Council. Expressing shock at UNISON National Executive Council's judgement in opting for the TUC's planned "Domefest", he scorned the "cut price" admission charge of £12.50, negotiated by UNISON via the TUC, describing it as "social exclusion of the highest order, beyond the reach of many low paid members and equivalent to four hours pay at the minimum wage."

Speakers also cited potentially discriminatory Dome employment practices – including personality profiling and punitive dress and appearance codes – along with rumours of imminent redundancies. The Regional Council unanimously agreed to boycott the event. Outside formal meetings, rank-and-file discussions have centred on what might happen were frustrated employees to mount May Day pickets on Dome entrances, and on whether free admission might still be a possibility.

The fiasco engulfing the most expensive public project in living memory has infuriated UNISON members. With local authority budgets and staffing slashed across the capital, they are startled to witness their funds and contributions being used to bail out New Labour's pet project. London UNISON is looking to other unions to back their decision and throw their weight behind alternative May Day events planned for the streets of the capital.



Photo: Lionel Sims

RTS street party, June 1998.

Dome doubts

Chris Knight Chair, University of East London Barking Branch NATFHE, makes a plea for a true May Day festival.

The TUC is still negotiating with the New Millennium Experience Company to hire the Dome for an event including a concert on May Day. However, there are numerous complications, not least of which is that London UNISON have declared a boycott of the proposed event (see Steve Wilkinson's article on this page). The new Mickey Mouse management which has replaced Jenny Paige looks set to be abrasive and confrontational. If rumour is to be believed, it could well be that by May Day, picket lines will have been mounted on all gates.

Meanwhile, Reclaim the Streets activists are discussing occupying the Dome on May Day, but on this issue appear as divided as everyone else. Some eco-warriors are concerned that if the Dome were occupied, unwanted guests would simply trash the place, sending the wrong signal to those who may like the Dome as a potentially useful space. Now that so much public money has been wasted on the structure, the main criticism is that its contents are boring.

Against this background, the TUC would do well to tread carefully. The University of East London would like to be officially invited to the event, because 1st May marks the carnival-style launch of the "Festival of Lifelong Learning", a year-long project in which UEL champions the widening of access to higher education for working class people, ethnic minorities and others who have traditionally been excluded. Management have agreed in principle to book the London School of Samba to stage a brilliant show in the Dome, partly to advertise our courses, partly just to have a good time.

Can these various strands be combined in a traditional, free May Day festival? The Dome's takeover by the official labour movement might work if the TUC took up the issue of trade union rights, opened the doors to everyone, made a proper May Day Carnival of the event and allowed us to celebrate our solidarity freely and responsibly.

One amazing day!

A contributor from Reclaim the Streets (RTS) explains why their next action could be a very public targeting of the Millennium Dome.

"Proletarian revolutions will be festivals or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce." – Mustapha Khayati.

May Day is an extraordinary day, on which historically the green, red and black have come together. It blends an ancient fertility rite with the world-changing energy of modern revolutionary politics.

May Day is "green". For thousands of years, it has been a festival of renewal marking the arrival of spring. It is "black". The struggle for the eight-hour day came to a head with an enormous strike across the US on 1st May 1886, after which some of the strike's anarchist organisers were executed. This event marked a turning point in US and world radical politics.

Four years later, in 1889, May Day was adopted as International Workers' Day, since when the day has been "red". To link these traditions, we combined red, green and black in the RTS flag. The design is an attempt to give visual form to a new coalition of joy, solidarity and hope for our common future.

"Alone, we cannot change the terms of this rotten deal. But together, anything is possible. Undo the leash of time and money. Take back your lives. We have the right, and we have the ability, to make life worth living – to make our lives what we want them to be, not what the absurd logic of private property and wage labor says they must be." Narration from 1999 Reclaim May Day pageant, San Francisco.

The past two years have seen RTS grow in strength, typically by reacting to dates set by others such as the G8 or the World Trade Organisation. May Day 2000 is our chance to be positive, celebrating our alliances and dreams of a better world. Last year, history moved fast in just five months, from the Carnival against Capitalism on 18th June to our almost unbelievable victory in Seattle on 30th November. At last, we seem to have fled the ghetto.

"The real issue is whether an economic system that is endemically unstable and causes chronic inequality can survive in its present form. The events of the past two years, culminating in Seattle, suggest that it can't." Larry Elliott, *Guardian*, December 30th.

"One Amazing Day" shouts the propaganda for New Labour's prize emblem – the loss-making, disaster-prone Millennium Dome. It will certainly be amazing if by May Day we have prepared the ground well. Can we create confidence in a vision of the impossible – of a global action which contributes to the crumbling and replacement of the capitalist system across the world?

This is my proposal for one local event – in London. Imagine 50,000 leaflets distributed around the country – perfect full colour spoofs of the official Millennium Dome leaflet: "One Amazing Day. May Day 2000. Free entry to the Dome".

On the back, in New Labour doublespeak, the text explains that this is a philanthropic gesture to celebrate the anniversary of our movement's landslide election victory of 1st May 1997. New Labour, the text explains, has realised that the Dome, after all, should be handed over to the people instead of remaining a corporate circus. A web address, http://www.UKPlc.com, takes the reader to a well-researched site drawing on the Dome as a model to explain how capitalism works. The site also provides reasons why the City of London is to be evicted along with other commercial sponsors. The Dome, a contrite Prime Minister explains, has been made available to host a People's Assembly. This is to compensate for any perceived procedural inadequacies in the elections to choose London's Mayor. To sort out London's problems, the leaflet finally explains, nothing short of direct action will do. Beginning in the Dome, the event will not stay confined but will culminate in a wonderful all-night street party extending right across the capital.

The proposal, then, is to break with previous RTS precedent and on this occasion develop a totally open action. It would mean going completely public and telling the world exactly what is planned: we are thinking aloud about occupying the Dome. Radical economists will take over the Money Zone, devoting workshops to the Abolition of Money. Sexual freedom performers will liven up the Body Zone, pagans the Faith Zone, tube workers the Journey Zone, and so forth.



Photo: Molly Cooper

Homeless shelter under the Body, filmed by the Mark Thomas Product, Channel Four.

Why be so public and open? Primarily to build alliances. We urgently need to counter the current spate of media propaganda which alleges that we are "terrorists" practising "protest by stealth" in "shadowy cells". Seattle showed that with a broad enough coalition, even the mightiest opposing force can be stopped. RTS has forged links with, among others, RMT workers and Liverpool dockers. But more needs to be done. Only on the basis of openness and trust can the necessary anti-capitalist alliances be forged and maintained.

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, we were told that it was "the end of history". A decade later, capitalism is seen less as victor than pariah. New movements across the world are combining against the common enemy. Who knows what the future will bring? May Day has traditionally been a pivotal moment of renewal and rebirth. There has never been a better moment to seize the time.

Strike action forces Council retreat

A member of Haringey UNISON explains how the union beat the Blairites.

Haringey Council sought to tear up our contracts of employment. We took three days of strike action and the Council retreated. After years of defeat it is great to be able to report a success for the trade unions within Haringey Council. Maybe it will be short lived, but we hope that it will give other trade unionists the confidence to take action to defeat their employers.

Last year the Council sought cuts of up to £4 million to its employees' terms and conditions of employment. They threatened to sack us and re-engage us on new contracts if we did not agree to negotiate these changes. These included not paying staff for the first two days of any sickness period, increasing the working week of officer staff by one hour, cutting the pay of manual workers, and reducing maternity leave. Such cuts would have taken Haringey outside of the national terms and conditions for council workers.

Now the Council has been forced to give us a series of assurances. They will only make changes by negotiation, and will abide by national terms and conditions of employment, including on the implementation of Single Status. They have put £1 million in the budget to help fund the reduction of manual workers' weekly hours to 37, and scrapped plans to seek savings on conditions of service of any particular predetermined monetary value. The urgency with which the Council is seeking change has also disappeared.

These concessions were achieved after three days of strike action in December. The strikes were incredibly effective, closing the majority of the Council's services, including schools, and involved over 5,000 staff. The atmosphere was happy and determined, with well supported rallies and demonstrations on each day.

Extensive public support was a key feature. Many parents and service users readily signed our petitions despite being turned away on the day. We collected large sums of money for our hardship fund.

The success of the strike was a massive shock to the arrogant council leaders, whose attempts to portray the staff as lazy, greedy and led by a tiny band of militants backfired. The people of Haringey agreed with us: the borough's problems are due to its councillors and senior officers, not its workers. They also recognise that you cannot have good services if you have poorly paid staff.

The only negative note in the whole experience was the GMB's betrayal of the strike. The strike began with UNISON, the T&G and GMB on strike together. This unity in action by three trade unions was one of the secrets of our initial success. Unfortunately after the first day's strike the GMB decided the Council had made sufficient concessions, called off their strike, and indicated their willingness to enter talks on changing terms and conditions of employment.

Whether by accident or design, the GMB then spread confusion by stating in public that the strike was off. And in an outrageous act, they paid hundreds of pounds to publish an open letter in a local newspaper, which included a personal attack on UNISON's branch secretary. These actions were completely misjudged. The GMB's credibility in the eyes of its own members collapsed, and during the next two days of strike action many of them left to join the T&G or UNISON on strike.



Striking council workers, December 1999.

Photo: Paul Mattsson

The success of this strike was due to months of organisation and activity by UNISON branch activists. We used every opportunity to build our campaign and build the confidence of staff to go on strike, bombarding them with round after round of publicity and workplace meetings. A campaign within the Labour Party led to many branches condemning the Council's action, culminating in Tottenham CLP voting to oppose the attack on staff despite the personal intervention of Council leader George Meehan.

The patient work by UNISON's branch officers in building an alliance with other council trade unions was also significant. Its reward has not just been in persuading the Council to withdraw its attack, but also in rebuilding union organisation. UNISON alone recruited over 500 new members in the course of the dispute.

However we cannot be complacent. We know that the Council will renew its attack on our terms and conditions, and that other battles are continuing. A two-year campaign against a PFI scheme for Haringey schools is reaching a climax, with every hope that we can persuade many schools not to participate. We are also gearing up to try to stop the privatisation of home care, street cleaning and refuse collection.

Striking carers call for support

Leicestershire care workers followed their one day strike on 22nd January with a 72-hour stoppage from 10th to 13th February.

The dispute was sparked when the Tory/Liberal Democrat controlled County Council forced through new contracts which removed the right of home care workers and residential home assistants to enhancements for working weekends. Payments were stopped in January.

An angry meeting of over 300 workers, just after the 72 hour strike, voted to step up the campaign with a further three-day strike commencing on Sunday, 20th February.

The union has succeeded in adding over 100 care workers who have joined UNISON since the strike ballot to the list of "affected employees" – they will therefore be out on strike next week, instead of being forced by management to work. More applications are arriving in the union office daily, suggesting that future strikes, if they are necessary, will be bigger still.

Management's other tactic has been the suspension of a key activist in social services, Joy Alleston.

Send donations to the strike fund (payable to Leicestershire County UNISON) and messages of support to Room 419, County Hall, Glenfield, Leicester LE3 8RN (telephone 0116-265 6280 for further information). Messages of support are being passed on to the strikers daily from the union's office (email them to leicestershire@unisonfree.net).

●In neighbouring Derbyshire all 13,000 council workers are to be balloted on strike action in an escalation of a dispute caused by the Council's cutting the pay of home care workers by 15% for refusing to accept "electronic tagging" as means of time control.

Many councils and NHS Trusts are watching with interest to see whether Leicestershire County Council can force their changes through. Other UNISON branches will find it very much in their own interests to support the Leicester and Derby disputes now.

UNISON: grass-roots campaign pays off

Roger Bannister
CFDU candidate for UNISON General Secretary

As *LLB* goes to press, the UNISON General Secretary election is drawing to a close. Whatever the result, the grassroots campaign of the Campaign for a Fighting Democratic UNISON (CFDU) has been fantastic.

The campaign of the establishment candidate, current Deputy General Secretary Dave Prentis, was handled in the opposite manner. Having secured the backing of the NEC and the top layers of the union, they avoided hustings wherever possible (only one of the thirteen regions called hustings meetings this time), sat back and waited for the votes to roll in.

They were in for a shock. The CFDU campaign has united the left in UNISON, in and beyond the CFDU itself. CFDU speakers attended meetings all over the country speaking on my behalf when I was elsewhere, demonstrating the genuine activist base of our team approach. Leaflets have been distributed and discussions encouraged in workplaces throughout UNISON.

But even more important is the fact that the Prentis camp seriously misjudged the mood at the bottom of the union. Disillusionment with the New Labour Government is extremely high among UNISON members. Expecting a change from the Tories, they are faced with a continuation – or even an extension – of the same policies: tight spending limits despite the war chest being held back for tax cuts; PFI in the NHS; PFI in Higher Education; closures of university departments; cuts and the advent of Best Value in local government. The bosses are as hard as they have ever been.

On top of this, UNISON's response has been seen to be lack-lustre too often. The decision to cancel the NHS ancillary workers' strike ballot enraged the members, and there is a strong suspicion that this decision was taken at the behest of the Government. As one local government worker in Cardiff put it, "Down here UNISON is seen as a pushover, and too close to the Labour Party!"

The Prentis camp panicked when they realised things were not going well for them and encouraged the press to carry witch-hunting attacks on me. These cut no ice, and the emphasis on Tony Blair's concern at the outcome of the ballot did little more than add a further possible disaster to his Peter Kilfoyle, Alun Michael and Ken Livingstone list. Dave Prentis himself sprang into action – attending meetings but making little headway with members feeling themselves under attack from all quarters.

Whatever the outcome of the election, UNISON's left is stronger than ever, having found a massive echo for a programme of fighting policies, opposition to the witch-hunt and questioning the continued links with New Labour.

Demonstration in Wandsworth, February 2000. Across the country UNISON members are fighting back.

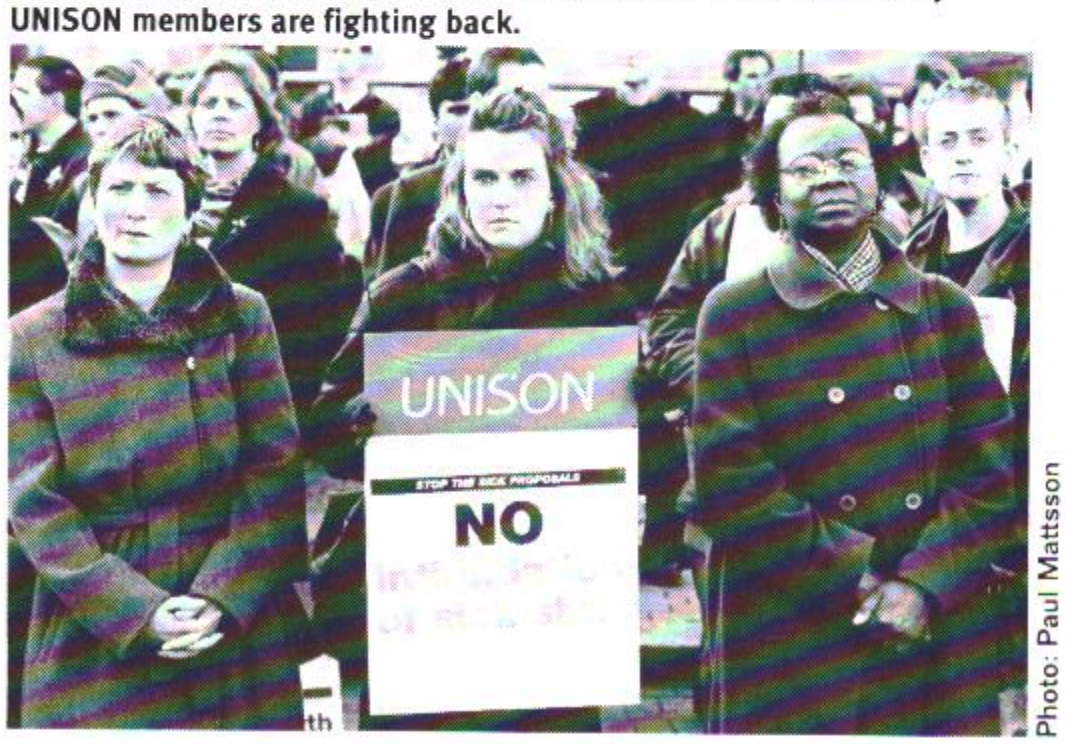


Photo: Paul Mattsson

New Labour threatens the vulnerable

A member of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) highlights the little-known but potentially devastating effect of civil service reforms.

During his last days in Paris, Oscar Wilde famously remarked that either he or the wallpaper had to go. In the end, he declared the wallpaper had won. Civil Servants working in the Public Trust Office (PTO) must now feel they face a similar position. Many of the PTO's clients, some of the most vulnerable members of society, now face an uncertain and anxious future.

The PTO is an Agency within the Lord Chancellor's Department which deals with the administration of the assets of the mentally incapacitated. This entails sorting out their tax returns and their income support and other benefits, thus ensuring their financial well-being. The PTO also provides an important service to the carers of the incapacitated by using this expertise to allow them to get on with the basic care that is needed.

The majority of these carers are the receivers. When there is no one willing to take up the position, the Public Trustee will be appointed as the receiver of last resort. With a growing population who are living longer, there is already an increase in the mentally incapacitated. Now the experience and skills of the PTO are required more than ever.

A report produced in November 1999 proposes that the PTO should be scrapped and its functions should be hived off to the private sector, the Benefits Agency, the Inland Revenue, and the local authorities.

But criticisms of the PTO by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in its mental health role have focussed on the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine, and his Department for failing to resource the PTO properly. All the junior staff were commended for maintaining service to the public in difficult circumstances. However the criticisms have only proved an embarrassment to Irvine, and many observers, including the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) suspect this is why he wants to scrap the PTO.

The Lord Chancellor's Department (LCD) initially only offered a three month consultation period which included "selected" bodies or stakeholders. This was insufficient to find out from those who use and need the PTO what is the best way to provide a service that an ageing population will require – particularly a service of a very sensitive nature. With assets of £4 billion under its management, it is amazing that the LCD would try to rush the abolition of the Public Trust Office without a proper public debate.

Staff have received phone calls from worried receivers, carers and solicitors concerned at the proposals and their possible effects. One barrister who works in the mental health area has already complained to the PCS that he has not been told what is going on and that he has clients, mostly solicitors, who are worried about their jobs. This inadequate consultation period has produced a flurry of letters to MPs and expressions of concerns from the Law Society. As a result a one-month extension has been granted, but even this is not enough

PCS state that one option has not been considered, namely to increase the resources of the PTO itself. After all it made a surplus in 1996/97 of £4 million. The Public Trust Office was never criticised for breaking even, but for not having an adequate computer system which would have enabled it to improve the follow up of outstanding accounts in its mental health sector. The LCD was criticised for not making sufficient investment to enable the PTO to make effective use of information technology.

Anne Chant, author of the recent report, formerly worked for the Benefits Agency and has recently been appointed a commissioner for the Inland Revenue. She recommended that these two bodies should take over certain functions, including visiting the patients and carers and assisting them with their accounts. This proposal has upset many carers and receivers.

Meanwhile ex-PTO Chief Executive, Julia Lomas, who was also criticised by the PAC, is now working for Messrs Irwin Mitchell, a firm of solicitors who have expressed an interest in taking over some of the functions of the Public Trust Office.

These two events have caused consternation and cynicism among PTO staff and should also raise concern outside the LCD.

Unfortunately Lord Irvine's wallpaper, which caused so much concern earlier in his term of office, is less embarrassing than looking after the assets of those who are mentally incapable of looking after themselves. But then, as one cynic pointed out, the Lord Chancellor does not have to stand for election and most of the mentally incapacitated do not vote.

Teachers oppose PRP

Teachers demonstrate against performance related pay, London, February 2000.

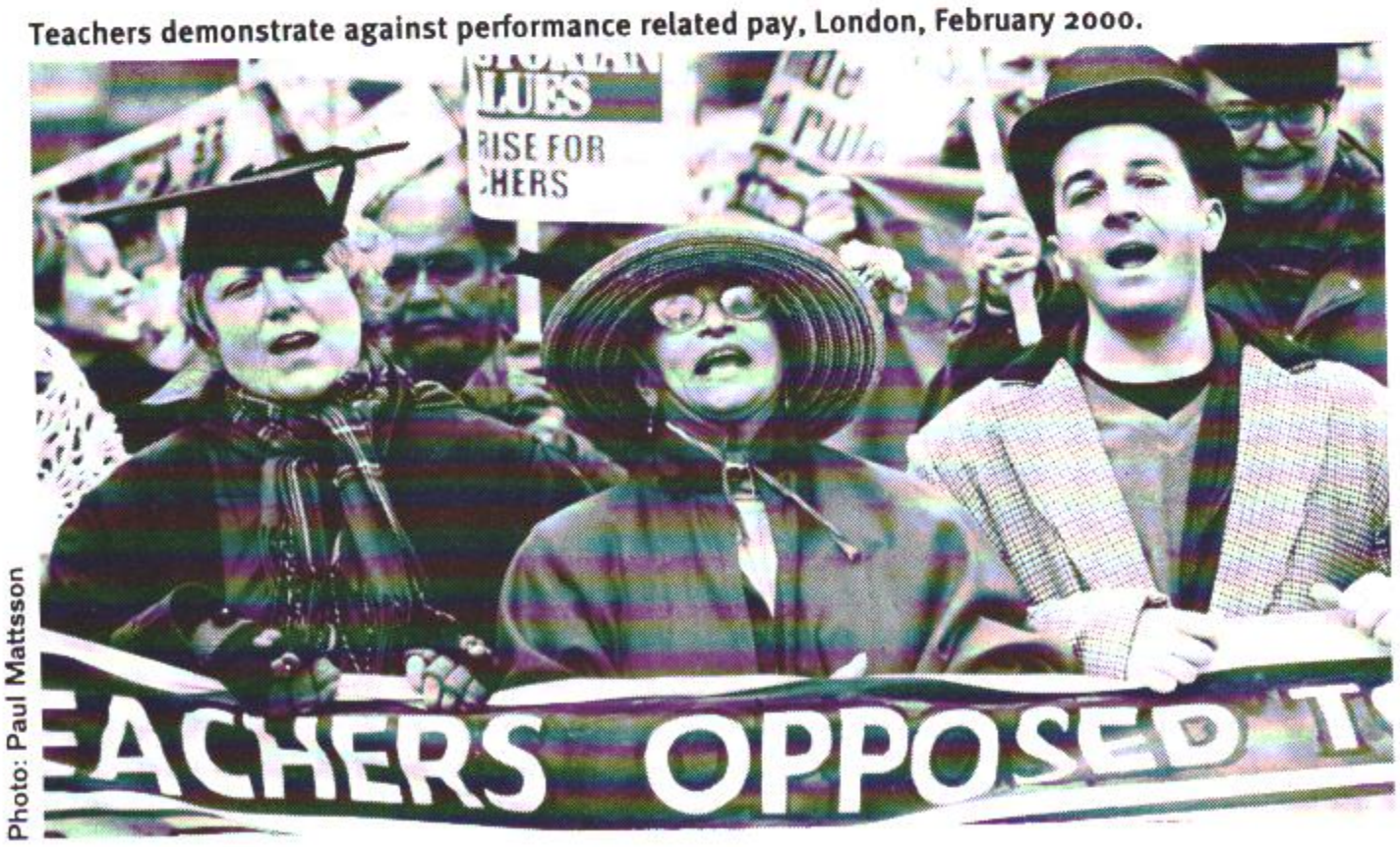


Photo: Paul Mattsson

Don't submerge MSF!

Jim Mortimer (London Region MSF) argues against plans for a merger with the AEEU.

The majority of the MSF leadership is pulling out all the stops in a propaganda drive to persuade the union's annual conference in May to back its proposal to merge with the AEEU.

MSF publications is totally one-sided – no opposition voice has been published. So desperate is the leadership to win approval that – quite undemocratically – the influence of full-time officials has been summoned to influence branch conference delegates.

Why this desperation? Their own comments offer an answer: the "status quo" is not an option as it would require regular belt-tightening. They say they share the "same fundamental approach" as the AEEU. They point to the AEEU's financial reserves, suggesting that a "strategic alliance" would provide more resources for organising and servicing the membership.

The case against merger is much more persuasive. The AEEU is a declining union, with a less democratic structure than MSF and an approach to trade unionism that appears to owe more to the traditions of the electricians' union (EEPTU) than to the former Amalgamated Engineering Union. Before the amalgamation with the AEU, the EEPTU was excluded from the TUC for actions detrimental to trade unionism. These included a damaging role in the print dispute with Murdoch's publishing empire and giving support to breakaway unions or organisations in rivalry with established TUC unions.

There are substantial sections of MSF's membership where there is little sense of occupational or industrial identification with the AEEU, including the finance sector, the NHS, and the growing voluntary sector. A merger with the AEEU, far from encouraging recruitment in these areas of employment, would be more likely to deter it.

MSF's leadership makes much of common areas such as engineering and manufacturing. But the majority of trade unionists in manufacturing are not in the AEEU! Among manufacturing unions, MSF's industrial profile is probably closer to that of the TGWU.

It is unrealistic to expect that the AEEU and MSF would have equal influence in negotiations about a structure for a merged union. The larger AEEU would set the terms for MSF.

The AEEU's rulebook gives extensive powers to the leadership at the expense of democratic accountability. General government, management and control of the union is vested in the lay Executive Council which meets only every three months. In addition, the EC has the power to conduct a postal ballot on any policy issue and the outcome of the ballot overrides any prior decision taken, for example, by the policy conference.

The recent record of the AEEU in the controversy about recognition at the *Western Mail* and its role in the selection of Labour's mayoral candidate have done nothing to enhance its appeal.

The idea that MSF, with an annual income of over £24m, is unable to stand on its own feet is ludicrous. The way forward is through vigorous trade unionism and not through submerging into the AEEU. The philosophy of the AEEU leadership is not the key to progress.

Nuclear power industry in turmoil

Colin Hall and Ian Malcolm-Walker report: Government plans to privatise 49% of the state-owned British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) may have been dealt a terminal blow by recent discoveries of serious safety lapses.

The Irish government has called again for the closure of the Sellafield reprocessing plant, following the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate's (NII) discovery that data on plutonium fuel pellets produced at Sellafield's mixed oxide plant had been falsified for up to four years. Japan (where the nuclear industry is trying to live down the country's worst nuclear accident last September) has now formally asked Britain to take back a controversial consignment of plutonium-based nuclear fuel which BNFL admits had falsified quality-control data.

The mixed oxide plant is now closed and will only be reopened if the NII is convinced that its recommendations have been implemented. With the plant's main customer, Japan, announcing it could no longer trust BNFL, its long-term viability is less than certain.

Although BNFL sacked five production workers, NII reports contain scathing attacks on the inadequate safety culture within BNFL and pin the blame firmly on the massive staff cuts made in preparation for privatisation.

Energy Minister Heather Liddell has responded weakly – asking BNFL chairman Hugh Collum to produce "comprehensive and radical solutions for change which will deliver the management that the company needs within two months".

In a further blow to BNFL, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has announced that the company is to be prosecuted for breaches of safety regulations following an incident in March 1999 when two workers were injured.

● The AEEU has backed calls for a halt to job cuts at British Energy following a damning HSE Report. British Energy, while pledging to address the recommendations, claimed they concerned a relatively small part of its business and would not affect its ability to reduce costs and improve output. The company, which has already cut 1,300 jobs since privatisation in July 1996, currently employs about 5,200 people and is aiming to reduce the figure to below 5,000 (a trend which the HSE said should be halted).

TRADE UNION NOTEBOOK

●Seafarers on Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships are beginning a campaign of industrial action following rejection of a 3.25% pay offer. Their union, RMT, says that pay settlements in the merchant navy have been far too low over recent years and "our members want to catch up with the rest of industry." The planned action continues to June and only involves vessels moored securely in a safe berth.

●The dispute at Ford involving salaried staff, which we reported on last month, has now led to strike action. It concerns the company's failure to reduce working hours for the engineers, technicians and secretarial/clerical staff who belong to MSF and the TGWU. After the reduction in working hours for manual workers at Ford, the unions sought a cut for salaried staff and, following management's refusal, a ballot produced 63% for industrial action. As we go to press, Ford have announced large scale sackings at the Dagenham plant.

●Firefighters at Homerton Fire Station in east London (see photo, front page) have taken action following the suspension of eleven staff for allegedly refusing to work with personnel doing overtime on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. According to the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), they did not actually refuse to work with anybody, because nobody working overtime came to the station. The FBU has had a ban on pre-arranged overtime since 1974 as part of a policy of reducing working hours and ensuring that staff shortages are reduced by recruitment. A campaign of action involving demonstrations, lobbies and days of action succeeded in lifting the suspensions, but the threat of disciplinary action against the "Homerton 11" still remains.

●Trade unions in the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) have lodged an employment tribunal claim against the Department, alleging racial discrimination. The claim stems from DETR's insistence on linking part of the annual pay rise to performance. Statistics have shown consistently that white staff tend to receive better markings in their annual appraisal report than ethnic minority staff.

In the 1999 pay round, the unions sought a flat-rate pay rise and an end to performance pay, since the latter reflected the discrimination inherent in the appraisal system. DETR eventually imposed a pay award including the performance link, stating this was Government policy, and pointed to a report by consultants, which judged the system to be fair but was unable to explain discrepancies in markings.

Secretary of State John Prescott declined to meet unions during pay negotiations, but has since met the general secretaries. They urged him to consult the unions within DETR, but their plea has so far had little effect.

●Mining communities are demanding a refund from the Treasury of several hundred million pounds from miners' pension funds. Many ex-miners and their families are struggling on low incomes and coalfield communities are among the poorest in Britain. In 1994 the Tories did a deal in which miners were guaranteed index-linked pensions after privatisation in return for half of any surplus on the funds. Now huge surpluses, which could ultimately total £4 billion, have arisen from the investment of pension funds, while the guarantee poses no risk to the Government. Further information from the Coalfield Communities Campaign, 9 Regent St, Barnsley S70 2EG (01226-200 768).

●Connex have settled their dispute with rail unions ASLEF and RMT over working hours. As we reported last month, the unions sought a 35 hour week from the train operating companies and the company, unlike other operators, had failed to respond. However, after a series of 24 hour strikes, Connex agreed to cut hours to 36 a week by October 2000 and then to 35 by autumn 2001. ASLEF General Secretary Mick Rix said "We are pleased to have achieved this deal . It is thanks to the solidarity and determination of our members that we have been able to achieve this satisfactory result."

●Only under capitalism could a productive company in a boom industry be facing such crises. The bad third quarter results from BT UK plc have meant cost cutting in BT and the impending sell off of their "facilities management" and "human resources" divisions. And now Gordon Brown wants to bring forward the unbundling of the local loop, bringing "free" competition to more parts of the utilities network. The 14,000 BT Customer Service engineers know this will mean market pressure to reduce their pay and conditions.

●A close vote (52% to 48%) on a record turnout has brought the "way forward" negotiations in the Post Office to a close. The package has been accepted, but the union is divided. Many branches in London and the South East are unhappy with the small improvements in hours and basic pay that are the best features of the deal.

Much of the disappointment and bad feeling that has run throughout the ballots (razor blades in envelopes, rats thrown at meetings, negotiators escorted from premises by the police...) is the result of a long process starting before last year's bad productivity agreement and the eight days of strike action in 1996. It goes back to failed aspirations for a much shorter working week and big improvements in basic pay for all which have existed for years. In fact overtime and long hours have kept the postal service going for decades. "Commercial freedoms" and liberalisation are around the corner. And in the new competitive environment, CWU members will need to be united and strong to face the inevitable job cuts and pressure of pay and conditions that will result.

Students protest at tuition fees: occupation of Department for Education and Employment, February 2000.



Photo: Molly Cooper



THE GEOFF MARTIN COLUMN

● This month we hit the ground running with the kind of tale of bureaucratic incompetence which makes the cobbling together of this column a pretty easy task.

Just at the point when 99% of the general public have recognised that the Millennium Dome is the most scandalous waste of money since Chelsea spent £10 million on Chris Sutton, who's that riding to the rescue with bags full to the brim with workers' money – yes, it's the TUC!

The TUC plans to take over the Dome on May Day 2000 for some kind of "experience" drawing attention to low pay. The cost per head, a reduced rate negotiated with the benevolent chiefs of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), is a mere £12.50. Never mind that it would take more than four hours at minimum wage for one of the "young people" that the event is supposedly aimed at to earn enough for a ticket. The bottom line is that the TUC wants to do Blair, and his old flat mate Lord Falconer, a favour.

Why? Well, it would have absolutely nothing to do with all these new appointed seats in the "reformed" House of Lords that will need filling. Of course not. Anyone suggesting such a thing would be a cynical old git who's failed to grasp the modernising agenda. So that rules me out then.

UNISON's Greenwich branch have done some fine work drawing attention to the NMEC's dodgy employment practices. With the financial chaos at the Dome, despite the largesse of the Lottery, it's quite possible that the TUC could be leading us all up the backside of the Body Zone just at the time that hundreds of staff are being fired. Fantastic publicity for the movement!

UNISON London Region is campaigning to bring this whole fiasco to a close. We want all the effort and resources to go into the traditional London May Day march. If the TUC have got cash to throw around, why not an open air festival in Finsbury or Vicky Park along the lines of the successful Respect events? Anything but the bloody Dome.

● Some *LLB* readers will have noted my increasingly regular appearances on the Jimmy Young show on Radio Two – a fantastic opportunity to put forward some strong arguments on subjects like parental leave, the minimum wage and the lottery.

A good thing for the trade unions you might think, and you'd be right. But it hasn't gone down too well in some quarters. Word reaches me that some union press officers find my approach too "aggressive", "hostile to the Government" and "unhelpful". Me?

Of course, what these delicate creatures can't grasp is that the media are increasingly sick and tired of union officials who've got nothing interesting to say, who pull their punches and spend more time worrying about how their views will be received in Millbank than they are about fighting for their members.

But the listener response is what counts in my book. As long as that remains positive, I'll carry on popping up wherever the opportunity arises. If nothing else, it reminds people that I'm still around and it gives the chattering classes and the beautiful people around the HQ blocks something to moan about.

● The biggest turn up of the Labour London Mayor selection has to be the Albanian Engineering and Electrical Union's (AEEU) shock decision to support Millbank's own Frank Dobson.

It gave my close friend and ally Sir Ken Jackson the opportunity to parade around the media denouncing Ken Livingstone as "bloody dangerous" – strong stuff indeed. Of course, the truth is that if anyone is "bloody dangerous" it's Sir Ken and not Red Ken. If you don't believe me, just ask one of the workers who's been on the receiving end of one of Sir Ken's sweetheart union deals. Bloody dangerous? You bet your old boots.

● I've learned that failed spin doctor Paul Richards has been throwing his weight around down in Lewisham where he's employed on some kind of retainer by council boss and leading privateer Dave Sullivan. Anyone so desperate for media attention that they're prepared to employ Richards as their spinner really requires medical attention.

Anyway, Richards has taken to trying to bully reporters on the local rags who have had the temerity to question some of the council's actions. Some of these journalists happen to be personal friends of mine. I know that the future Lord Richards is an avid reader of this column so here's a quick word of warning – if you want to play the tenth-rate Al Campbell that's fine, but don't go thinking you can do it without any comeback.

● New Labour's plans to stigmatise millions of kids who are being brought up by single parents or unmarried couples, as some sort of deal with the moral minority over the abolition of Section 28, has got me spitting. What next – Ann Widdecombe invited onto a new Cabinet Committee to promote a moral crusade for a "normal" lifestyle?

● Finally, did you see the Punk Top Ten programme on Channel Four a few weeks ago? Those sexist old farts the Stranglers as the second best punk band behind the Pistols and ahead of the Clash! What a bloody travesty. What's that Ken Livingstone going to do about this outrage? That's what I want to know.

Austrian rulers are playing with fire!

Steve Myers investigates Jorg Haider's background and rise to power.

The conservative People's Party, which has just formed a coalition government with Jorg Haider's Freedom Party, is determined to carry out Thatcherite/Blairite policies in Austria.

Serious cutbacks in services and pensions, wholesale privatisation, a higher retirement age and attacks on trade union rights are on the agenda to meet the Maastricht criteria for a Single Currency. Socialist Party leaders have not been able to persuade the trade unions to co-operate in these attacks, so the ruling 2,700 Austrians (who own 70% of its wealth) are playing with a fireball by letting the fascist-front Freedom Party into power as the leading party in government.

Haider's Freedom Party leapt from 5% in 1986 to 27% (same as the People's Party) in the recent elections. The latest opinion polls put Haider's party at 33% and the People's Party well down at 21%.

Since news of the coalition emerged in early February, not a day has gone by without illegal mass demonstrations, often attacked by police and ending in violence. Along with many peaceful ones, even in the smallest of towns, they have rocked Austrian society to the core. Protests have also occurred all over Europe, even as far away as Dublin, but chiefly in Germany, as many young people came onto the streets for the first time ever.

Post-war Austria has been dominated by power-sharing coalitions of the People's Party and the Socialists. Over the years, corruption and cronyism have increasingly defined this coalition, while the only radical critical voice to whom the media have given space has been from the right. Combining this with populist opposition to the EU and Maastricht, Haider's popularity has grown. The complacency of many, especially Socialists, to this monster playing the game of respectability, is alarmingly similar to the reaction when Hitler came to power. Their failure to challenge Haider's scapegoating has driven many people into his arms.

The Freedom Party originates from the Federation of Independents of the 1950s, the political platform of the former Austrian Nazi party members. Since becoming leader Haider has made many pro-nazi statements in support of Hitler. But, like Le Pen of France and Fini of Italy, he represents a brand of Euro-nazism that is sophisticated enough to recognise the mainstream revulsion that open nazism produces.

However, even since the coalition's formation, Haider has given hints of his true intentions. He said, "The number of foreign children in schools is very high. Austrian children cannot learn their own language. For this reason we have proposed that the number of foreign children in classrooms be limited."

The mass demonstrations now engulfing Austria show the way forward. A general strike brought down Italy's Berlusconi-Fini government – now it must become Austria's turn!

Stop the war in Chechnya

Steve Myers reports on the campaign to show solidarity with the Chechens.

At the February *LLB* Editorial Board, we signed up to the Campaign to Stop the War in Chechnya and agreed a delegate to the Campaign organising meetings. So far activities have included pickets of the Russian Embassy, of Aeroflot, two public meetings and a march to Trafalgar Square. Dozens of organisations have signed the statement below, along with a long list of individuals; see our website.

Labour Party NEC member Liz Davies chaired the large public meeting launching the Campaign, where speakers included Jeremy Corbyn MP; Chris Harman, SWP; Lisa Taylor, ISWoR; and Bruce Kent. Few people have seen such unity of the left grow so quickly around a question of international solidarity!

The largest demonstration against the war in Russia so far is being co-ordinated by the Movement for a Workers Party, and is taking place later this month – details from ISWoR@aol.com.

●Contact the Campaign to Stop the War in Chechnya at www.cwsc.fsnet.co.uk; cwsc@cwsc.fsnet.co.uk. Donations should be sent to CSWC, Box C, 46 Denmark Hill. London SE5 8RZ. For details of future activities phone Mark on 020-7207 3997.

THE ANTI-WAR STATEMENT

We, the undersigned, condemn the Russian invasion of Chechnya. We call for the immediate withdrawal of all Russian forces, and for the recognition of the Chechens' right to self determination.

The war is not a response to "Chechen terrorism". It is an attempt to divert attention away from the social and economic crisis in Russia. Its goals are to restore the standing of the military in Russian society, and to secure Russian control of the oil and gas pipelines running through Chechnya.

In Russia the war has triggered a wave of chauvinism and anti-Chechen racism. In Chechnya the war is being waged on the basis of a scorched earth policy and disregard for civilian casualties.

Placing no faith in the half-hearted and hypocritical criticisms voiced by US and European governments of Russian aggression in Chechnya, we call for the labour movement world-wide to build links with socialist and trade union anti-war initiatives in Russia and to campaign for:

●recognition of Chechnya's right to self-determination;

●Russian military withdrawal from Chechnya.



South American workers have fought a long struggle against austerity. Civil servants demonstrate in Colombia.

Behind the smokescreen

US military interference in Latin America has reached a new stage with over $1 billion targeting the "war on drugs" in Colombia. Mike Phipps reports.

Sixty-five human rights activists were arrested when over 4,000 people trespassed onto Fort Benning Military Base, the US headquarters of the Army School of the Americas (SOA) last year. The demonstrators wore black mourning shrouds and "death masks" and carried coffins. They smeared red paint on themselves and lay next to the coffins. The event honoured the memory of the six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter who were murdered by SOA graduates in El Salvador. "We are telling the leaders of SOA that they can change their name and move the school, but we are not going away," said one Guatemalan human rights worker whose family members, including her father and two daughters, were "disappeared" during the Guatemalan civil war. Actor Martin Sheen attended the vigil.

The SOA was set up to enable the US to maintain its grip on Central and South America. The rationale is clear, observed Nihar Bhatt in a recent article. "Massive crisis and rebellion shook the foundations of Latin American society over the last year. In Venezuela, where the United States gets more oil than from the Middle East, output has fallen by 9.6% in the second quarter of this year, and the economy is expected to contract by 6% overall. About one-third of all Brazilians now live in poverty due to dropping wages and unemployment. Banks in Ecuador have collapsed, and in both of these countries, workers have staged mass strikes and demonstrations in protest at austerity measures. Colombia is experiencing its worst recession since the 1930s. Its largest rebel guerrilla group now controls almost half of the towns in the country. Twelve major strikes happened in the last year, involving millions of workers."

In 1999 the US gave Colombia $294 million in military aid – not including arms sales – making it the fourth largest recipient in the world. This year that rose to an incredible $1.3 billion, supposedly to help wage war on drugs, but in reality, much as the State Department may deny it, to fund counter-insurgency. Small wonder Colombia's main guerrilla group called off its recent truce hours after the US announcement.

The "war on drugs" is a convenient smokescreen for US involvement in Colombia. It is in reality the country's right-wing death squads that have been linked to largescale drug trafficking operations while both the head of the Drug Enforcement Agency and the President of Colombia have said that they have no proof that the rebels are involved. The Colombian military is also thought to be deeply involved in the trade, so how more aid for them will cut narcotics exports to the US is a mystery. Similarly, it is the paramilitary forces, sponsored by a 1994 law still in force, that are responsible for most of the country's human rights violations. By 1999 Colombia's long-running civil war had seen 1.5 million people displaced by force, often peasants driven off their land by powerful economic interests. There are currently 4,000 political assassinations a year, again mostly by the right-wing paramilitaries.

The huge sums the US is pouring into the country have done nothing to help ordinary Colombians. Unemployment is 15%. Half the urban young have had no more schooling than their parents and three-quarters of the rural young have had even less than theirs. Every day, human rights groups report new massacres in remote areas, often explained away by the authorities as part of the US-directed anti-drugs programme.

"The US Army School of the Americas, a training centre for Latin-American and Caribbean military and police officers, plays a key part in this," argues Nihar Bhatt. "In 1996, the Pentagon declassified manuals used at the School of Americas instructing in torture, false imprisonment, bounty hunting and blackmail. The US government admits running a school that has trained some of the most notoriously brutal dictators, generals and death squad leaders who have committed atrocities in Central and South America." The increase in military aid to Colombia represents an escalation of this policy.

Spanish left unites at last

Graham Copp examines progress towards a common programme of the left in Spain.

Spain's two major parties of the left have announced a French style electoral pact, opening up the possibility of defeat for the ruling Spanish right-wing Popular Party (PP) and the first coalition of the left since the restoration of democracy.

Relations between the two parties have seen a sudden improvement in recent months after years of mutual hostilities between the Socialists (PSOE) and Communist led United Left (IU). After the 1992 elections when the PSOE lost its majority, it turned to the centre-right to support the government. However, recent times have seen the PSOE and IU change tactics leading to the creation of the electoral pact.

The PSOE has over the last few years tried to recoup its support with a dual strategy of appealing to the "centre-ground" while calling for a dialogue on the unity of the left. It is fair to say that this was at best rather opportunistic and aimed at IU supporters who were disenchanted at the lack of pluralism allowed in the coalition, particularly since the expulsion of the left social-democratic element.

After the IU's disastrous European and local election results in 1999, the PSOE had stepped up the pressure on IU which responded, as previously, that it wanted to talk about common programmes before coalitions. And to make matters even worse for IU, its leader, the charismatic Julio Anguita, retired from politics after suffering a major heart attack, leaving the little known Communist leader Francisco Frutos at the helm.

So IU was in a debilitated state, with a leader only recognised by 22% of the population and with European election results of 5.8% compared to 10.5% in the 1996 general elections. At this point the Socialists offered an electoral pact and common programme. They expected a negative answer, but instead Frutos replied by beginning the dialogue that has secured the pact.

At every stage in the negotiations, IU has demonstrated itself to be constructive and flexible and has consequently gone some way to redress the discontent among its supporters. The severe financial crisis that the party was suffering has been abated with a flood of donations, avoiding the embarrassing possibility of having insufficient funds to send out mailings to the public.

The pact will see the two formations agree common candidacies for the Senate, but in the more important Congress, there will be separate lists. The common programme includes a gradual move towards a 35 hour week, electoral reform and a modest increase in pensions, the minimum wage and public spending, along with promises to improve public health and education. The two parties will also maintain some important differences, most notably IU's opposition to the euro "stability pact" and Spanish membership of NATO.

If the left does win the election it is clear that the resulting government will not be at the vanguard of the revolution, but it will be important. Almunia, the PSOE's leader, has long seen himself as a pupil of Tony Blair, but political reality has shown him that he cannot emulate Blair as there is a vibrant left alternative. As he will only govern with the consent of IU, the new Spanish government will be tied in to a commitment to the working class that Blair thinks does not apply to his Third Way model. Just as Jospin's election was a blow to the project of permanently de-radicalising social-democracy, so will be a new left-wing government in Spain.

Britain's hidden war

What did you do during the war? Ask people this question about the last nine years and most of the answers would be around going to work, attending (and then leaving) school, getting older, etc. But in Iraq people have been getting poorer, seeking shelter, becoming ill, dying.

In the nine years since sanctions were imposed against Iraq, child mortality has doubled. Each month, with or without our permission, Britain and the USA fire over 100 missiles into Iraq in a hidden war which goes on virtually unreported. It costs the UK £4.5 million a month to conduct this war without any sign that it has a military let alone a moral purpose.

Hatred for Saddam Hussein may be justified but bombing and starving Iraq back to the middle ages has neither threatened him nor freed Iraqi people. It cannot only be the UN representatives for Iraq who make a stand on the grounds that this is no longer compatible with the basic UN charter – so must the rest of us.

●Alan Simpson MP has tabled an Early Day Motion opposing the war on Iraq.



Photo: Molly Cooper

14th February (Valentine's Day): three members of Voices in the Wilderness are arrested for criminal trespass outside the US embassy in London. Eighty-six activists from the US and Canada were arrested outside the UN, on the same day, during non-violent protests against the ongoing economic sanctions against Iraq.

Labour and Liberal accommodation 1852-1867

In the second part of a series on the history of the Labour Party, John Halstead, lecturer in adult education at the University of Sheffield and vice chair of the Society for the Study of Labour History, takes up the story after the end of Chartism. This series is edited by Bernie Moss.

The Chartists' failure to present the "monster petition" for the Six Points on 10th April 1848 to Parliament set the working-class movement on a new course. With arrested and divided leaders, "numbers unlimited" melted away. While significant numbers struggled on, collapse was complete in 1858. Yet on 6th May 1867, a new agitation, against similar opposition to that of 1848, provoked the first parliamentary reform since 1832. By 1869 the second reform almost doubled the electorate, substantially increased the urban "respectable" working-class element and made further concessions difficult to resist. 1885's third reform created a more solid base for increased pressure from the labour interest.

Twenty years after the issue of the Charter, working class political rights again became a great national issue, this time on the basis of two of the six points: universal manhood suffrage and vote by ballot. The instrument, the Reform League of 1865, while a predominantly working class body, was financed by advanced Liberals, who promised to raise £5,000 to work up an earnest agitation. There was a marked change in circumstances between the 1840s and the 1860s. The earlier hunger and the condition of handicraft workers in the textile trades, which made agitation into a "knife and fork" question, was transformed by mid-Victorian prosperity into more of a "collar and tie" question. Labour leadership was that of "careful" managers of substantial institutions of co-operation and trade unionism, rather than of perambulating prophets and demagogues. If this made it take some deals with representatives of middle-class parliamentary politics more seriously, it also made the latter more attentive to its claims.

The growing dissatisfaction of urban radicals, combined with confidence in the Liberal loyalties of skilled artisans, prompted Gladstone to attempt to widen the borough franchise in 1866. While this Reform Bill was being debated there was little agitation in the country, but the collapse of the Government reunited the Reform League and led to months of intense agitation. Immense demonstrations in Trafalgar Square in July 1866 were followed by a League resolve to meet in Hyde Park. The chief of Metropolitan Police, Sir Richard Mayne, was charged with preventing entry. The President of the League, Edmond Beales was denied admission and departed to the Square with followers and supporters while various well-dressed and well-spoken people were individually admitted to the park, incensing the crowd. The railings were broken down and three days and nights of intermittent skirmishing followed, only resolved when the Conservative Home Secretary gratefully accepted the League's offer to go back to the Park to restore order.

But this episode was a prelude. If the Home Secretary had scraped home with order intact, there was indignation at the manner of doing it; on the other side the will to push was strengthened. Moreover, in late 1866 and early 1867 circumstances conspired to assist the reformers.

Economic depression threw tens of thousands out of work and cholera reappeared. The attempt to prosecute Governor Eyre for brutality in Jamaica, Fenian activity and publicity for explosions and murder by Sheffield trade unionists created growing preoccupation with political violence. Impressive northern reform demonstrations, fronted by John Bright, were a backdrop to a London Reform meeting coinciding with parliamentary resolutions from Disraeli on reform. The resolutions led to Bills and, outside Parliament, to further pressure for a Hyde Park demonstration. The left within the League overcame the President's caution. Aided by 40 billboard men, hundreds of posters, and 35,000 handbills, an announcement was made for a reform meeting in the Park. The Government proclaimed that this was not permitted and advised all to abstain from attendance. Police superintendents were sent to the League to warn in person. 10,000 men – hussars, all kinds of guards and police – were put in readiness. To no avail – on 6th May the Clerkenwell Branch of the League entered with a red flag surmounted by the cap of liberty, heading some 150,000, while the military stood by. The Government's irresolution and humiliation provoked the resignation of the Home Secretary. The consequence was felt in Parliament. The prestige of the League was enormously enhanced and the Reform cause with it, while Gladstone discovered the importance of votes for lodgers as well as householders. When Disraeli accepted an amendment from Hodgkinson, the 1867 Tory Reform Bill became a new and more democratic measure.

So while class was recomposed it was also reasserted!

AN EVENING FOR ROBERT HAMILL

Sunday 5th March 2000 at 7.30 pm

The Jazz Cafe, 5 Parkway, Camden Town, London NW1 7PG

JO BRAND; ARDAL O'HANLON; KEVIN McALEER; JEREMY HARDY; NECK; JOHN MOLONEY; ROBERT NEWMAN; ED BYRNE; GINO LUPARI; LARRY LOVE (ALABAMA 3 UNPLUGGED)

Robert Hamill was kicked to death by a Loyalist gang in Portadown in 1997. The Robert Hamill Campaign aims to assist his family in bringing private proceedings against both the RUC and the six suspects, and in seeking an independent judicial inquiry.

TICKETS: £15 (subject to booking fee) available from credit card hotline 020-7344 0044, Ticketmaster outlets, from The Ticket Shop, 3 Parkway, Camden. Information line: 020-8963 0940.

Third way? No way!

Matthew Wilgress reviews *The Third Way to the Servile State* from Spokesman Books (edited by Ken Coates).

Spokesman books have consistently published books, pamphlets and weighty journals (such as this one) which have provided an informative analysis of many important issues facing the world labour movement. This edition contains a reproduction of Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder's The Third Way joint declaration, with one reply by Ken Coates and Michael Barratt Brown and another reply from Gregor Gysi – the leader of the German PDS.

This journal is strongest in its demolition of Blair and Schroeder's joint declaration. Although the contributors' own analyses contain weaknesses, the articles counter the criticism that much of the left has done too little to answer the basic Blarite arguments and the philosophy behind it.

At one point of the Third Way Declaration, we are told that "modernisation is about adapting to conditions that have objectively changed, and not reacting to polls." This was news to me, as at the recent National Policy Forum in Eastbourne a leading Blairite MP told me that the words "redistribution of wealth" couldn't be used as they were unpopular and would help the Tories get back in! Indeed, I was under the impression that reacting to polls was the whole basis of the "modernisation" process.

The basic programme outlined in the declaration is nothing more than "Thatcherism with a human face" in which government "does all it can to support enterprise but never believes it is a substitute for enterprise." As Coates and Barratt Brown correctly point out, this is well to the right of the "middle way" of old one-nation Tories such as Harold Macmillan who believed in further regulation of capitalism, while the Third Way believes in increased "flexibility" and only maintaining "minimum social standards".

Since laissez-faire economics have had particularly dire consequences in Eastern Europe, Gregor Gysi's essay *Justice is Timely* is of special importance. He points out that "a genuine modernisation does not mean dismantling and deregulating social institutions, it means searching for a new path of development and deciding in favour of an alternative reform policy, linking economic, social, ecological and individual developments." Gysi prefers a long-term approach to politics, which inevitably involves more regulation and planning, and is also necessary to save our environment.

The left needs to find its own "third way" between the failed bureaucratic societies of Eastern Europe on the one hand and the old "social consensus" of Keynesianism on the other. In my opinion, this involves a socially planned economy where those who produce and distribute the wealth exercise democratic control. But the move to the right has been so great that we must also concentrate on putting the idea of working-class representation back on the agenda.

This could provide a real "modernisation" of society, not a return to the ideas and values of 19th century liberalism which the Third Way seems to hold so dear.

Guns for hire

Mike Phipps reviews *Mercenaries*, edited by Abdel Fatau-Musah and J.'Kayode Fayemi, published by Pluto, price £15.99 pbk.

Mercenary armies are on the increase. The international security market had a revenue of $55.6 billion in 1990 and this is expected to rise to $202 billion by 2010.

There are many reasons for this: the onset of the "Vietnam syndrome" in the 1970s which made the US far more cautious about using its own forces as a world policeman; the new spirit of military interventionism following the end of the Cold War; the acceptability of privatising core state functions in this epoch of neoliberalism.

In this context mercenaries have interpreted political instability as a market issue and positioned themselves perfectly to take advantage. This is especially true in Africa. In South Africa alone 2,700 security companies operate, employing 130,000 private security personnel, 40,000 of them armed (only Russia has more). The problem of mercenary involvement was particularly highlighted by the role of Sandline International, benefiting from the collusion of the Foreign Office in the civil war in Sierra Leone, which has left 20,000 people dead and 1.5 million displaced.

Here as elsewhere there have been close links between mercenaries and the mineral extraction industries. In some cases, the spoils of war include remuneration in the form of diamond and oil concessions. The contract between the Angolan government and Executive Outcomes is thought to have included a diamond concession awarded to their subsidiary Branch Energy, worth $40m. Thus the company secured a key place in the future of one of the world's poorest countries.

In the civil conflict in Zaire in 1996-7 new developments could be observed. The same mercenary company supplied both sides in the conflict, Serb mercenaries were used on a large scale for the first time and strategic alliances were built between rival mercenary companies.

This book is strong on solutions to this growing problem, from controlling the spread of weapons in the continent, to addressing fundamental issues of governance and economic justice and attacking the cultural basis of militarism. At the heart of the problem lies the empowerment of local civil society and the reconceptualising of security in terms of human needs and safety.

Swimming against the stream

Mike Phipps reviews *The Return of Radicalism*, by Boris Kagarlitsky, the third and final volume in his *Recasting Marxism* trilogy, published by Pluto, price £12. 99 pbk.

"The intellectual capitulation of the left since 1989-91 has been based on an undeclared but very profound inner conviction that history has come to an end once and for all. We have no need to fear the judgement of our descendants, since they will not be any different from us. We do not have to answer to anyone for anything, since we are not linked to them in any way." So thunders Kagarlitsky at the end of his book.

Yet the epoch of reaction we are living through will not last forever. Nor does it demand heroism – simply an ability to swim against the stream and learn from the past. Unfortunately, too many socialists have drifted with the prevailing current, discovering the advantages of the market at the very moment capitalism is moving in a completely different direction. So as workers are obliged to compete against each other in a concessions race to the bottom, corporations find new ways, such as government subsidies and joint ventures, to cushion themselves against the rigours of the market.

At the heart of this book is a critique of the opportunist and conservative nature of post-modern identity politics that has had such a baleful effect on the left. Kagarlitsky insists that some forms of oppression and domination are objectively more important than others for the reproduction of the capitalist order. Different struggles are not strategically equal and to get unity, it is necessary to formulate priorities. He links the fragmentation of politics to the rise of NGOs, which substitute their own narrow professional agendas – such as seeking grants for their work in competition with other groups working in the same field – for the action of the masses who are excluded from this process.

Yet it is precisely the scope of mass action that allows room for some optimism about the situation, in particular that of the trade unions – for example, in South Korea, South Africa and Brazil, where the CUT federation is now the largest social force in the country. Elsewhere, trade unions have played an important role in aiding the democratisation process, as in parts of Africa. Even in Europe – Scandinavia for example – there has been an increase in trade unionism, which suggests that the fate of unions depends not only on the prevailing hostile objective economic trends, but also on the strategies adopted by the labour movement. Thus the mid-90s strike wave in France paved the way for the election of a left government two years later.

Kagarlitsky is adamant that the left must learn from its past experiences. The modern left cannot and must not be homogenous, he argues, given the greater differentiation in the working class. Eclecticism is not a virtue, but a necessary step forward for socialists after the years of bureaucracy and sectarianism.

He concludes that the scope for reform within capitalism may have narrowed considerably, but whether such reforms can be accommodated or will challenge the system head on is not half as important as creating the preconditions for such changes. This is essential reading.

Desperate dynamics

Rebecca Rogers casts a critical glance at *American Beauty*.

Sam Mendes' directorial film debut *American Beauty* is being sold to British audiences as an incisive exposé of American suburban life. From the opening shots of tree-lined streets and white picket fences which are accompanied by Lester Burnham's (Kevin Spacey) caustic voice-over to the prescient but shocking act of violence which closes the film, we are increasingly embroiled in the desperate dynamics of a nuclear family at crisis point.

We are shown many scenes that reveal the psychological and emotional chasms which exist between the different characters. Instead of being overwhelmed with a sense of tragedy at the futility of these lives, one is left with a feeling of hollowness.

In a similar vein to its recent predecessors *Happiness* and *Election*, which also professed to reveal the dark underbelly of modern middle-class America, we are offered many laughs but not much heart. We are thrust intellectually into muddy, mixed-up lives but the characters remain distanced from us and we are offered no emotional way in. A smiley family photo is used to signify the bonded, happy family the Burnhams used to be but the narrative offers no proof of this closeness. If the family had no past together, why worry about their future?

***American Beauty* supposedly blows apart the smug-satisfied existence of the materialistic, image-conscious world it portrays but what does it offer as an alternative? Lester eventually reaches a state of enlightenment but it is not clear how he got there and what he'll do with it now he's found it.**

The film's images of plastic bags dancing in the wind and rose petals cascading from the chests of young women might make the world a more beautiful place but they will not give Lester the means of changing his life within capitalist America. Thus, his sense of satisfaction and resolution is false and Mendes is wrong to present it as such.

Fighting racism round-up

Free Samar and Jawad

On 17th February Tony Benn and former Tory Defence Secretary Lord Ian Gilmour joined members of the Palestinian National Council and members of the families involved to present a 200,000 strong petition to Tony Blair demanding the release of Samar Alami and Jawad Botmeh.

Samar and Jawad are serving a twenty-year sentence for the 1994 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in London. There is evidence that both were framed, primarily because of their political activities supporting exiled Palestinians. A former MI5 officer has revealed that British security services had advance knowledge of the bombings and many believe the bombings were carried out by the Israeli Mossad. Vital information was withheld from the defence on grounds of national security. To support the campaign for Justice for Samar and Jawad contact BM Box FOSA, London WC1N 3XX.

Protest at Home Office

Around 100 people protested outside the Home Office on 10th February following the suicide in Harmondsworth Detention Centre of asylum seeker Robratas Grabys. Mr Grabys took his own life two days after a failed attempt to deport him to Lithuania. Around 800 asylum seekers are currently detained indefinitely in prisons, police stations and detention centres with no access to judicial review or oversight. Contact the Campaign to Close Harmondsworth on 020-8571 5019.

Reports by John Stewart, National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns

PERISCOPE

Freedom of Speech

The French and Belgian Government ministers walked out of a recent informal European Union Council meeting in disgust at the presence of an **Austrian Freedom Party** representative. Of course, they could rely on one reactionary government's representative to stay and listen to the Freedom Party: minister Tessa Jowell, Labour MP for Dulwich.

Socialist Straw?

Home Secretary **Jack Straw** has now been to three meetings of the Socialist Campaign Groups of Labour MPs. This is a better attendance record than some SCG members. Rumour has it he's going to have to join – three strikes and you're in!

Scot free

Scottish Socialist Voice reports that **Henry McLeish**, Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning in Scotland, who is both an MP and MSP, missed every single vote at Westminster from October to January – yet still drew his full salary and expenses. As the *Voice* quipped, "Even being a former East Fife player doesn't explain that amount of misses."

New Times – same as the old "Times"

Periscope reported last month on the **Democratic Left**'s pupation into the New Times Network. In a final leap from Marx to Murdoch, its first newsletter reported on its founding conference, "We settled accounts with our socialist past. ...attempts to tie down our values and vision to the ongoing elaboration of socialism or socialist principles were roundly defeated."

Electoral liabilities

Millbank's new parliamentary panel contains some interesting names. **James Purnell**, now No. 10 policy adviser, was one of the three who apologised in the High Court for libelling Liz Davies and made a donation to Jeremy Corbyn's election campaign.

David Pitt-Watson was Labour's Director of Finance, and responsible for "high-value fundraising", soliciting donations from British Aerospace and Raytheon and dreaming up the infamous Somerfield-sponsored neck-tags for 1998 Conference delegates. In September 1999, he left Millbank – but didn't forget his former colleagues on the National Executive, who shortly afterwards received personally addressed letters from him – just to keep them in touch with his new business.

Luke Akehurst, another potential candidate, was fingered by *Panorama* as being one of Dobson's key advisers and centrally involved in obtaining the membership lists.

Privatisation mad

February's Labour Local Government conference was the liveliest in years. At the housing workshop, chairs of housing committees were uniformly hostile to council housing stock transfers. **Nick Raynsford** claimed the Government has no ideological position on this. So it must be a spooky coincidence that they are offering councils tempting bribes to offload council houses.

At the animated Best Value discussions, councillors complained about the ministry's guidance notes *which are heavily slanted* towards privatisation. For example, where a private market exists, councils must compare their services with it; and where no such market exists, it's the council's duty to try to create one! Already one Labour council has been called in by ministry officials to be warned that their Best Value criteria were deemed to discriminate against the private sector.

In Southwark, it has been discovered that the in-house bid for the refuse collection service was put at a bit of a disadvantage by comparison with private firms because its costs included all redundancy payments since the borough was set up in 1967!

UNISON witch-hunt

Candy Udwin, a well known SWP activist being threatened with expulsion from UNISON, was elected to the post of Deputy London Convenor at the regional council meeting in February. Udwin is currently fighting a disciplinary charge being brought by the union and will see her election as a boost to her chances of not being expelled.

One delegate at the meeting saw the victory as a clear statement condemning the union for its witch-hunt of the left.

TRIBUNE

News from the Inside



Every week, TRIBUNE carries all the news and views from Labour and the Left. TRIBUNE is essential reading for all those keen to keep up with events inside the Labour Party and the Government and in touch with key issues and campaigns. TRIBUNE is the independent Voice of the Left.

Tick the top box on the form below to subscribe to TRIBUNE at the special three-month introductory rate of £10, saving 20 per cent on the normal price. Or tick the bottom box to receive details of annual Direct Debit subscriptions.

❑ **YES**, I want to subscribe to **TRIBUNE** for three months under your **SPECIAL OFFER**. I enclose a cheque/postal order for £10 made payable to "Tribune Publications Ltd" and crossed "not transferable".

❑ Please send me details of annual subscriptions by Direct Debit

Name .....

Address .....

.....Postcode .....

Send to: **Tribune Subscriptions Offer, Freepost, 308 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8BR** (no stamp needed)

Correspondence

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

At the time of the event, your headline read "Police attack demonstrators at the Carnival against Capitalism" (*LLB*, July 1999), rightly suggesting that a peaceful protest was disrupted by police violence. Such a view is almost universal on the left. "The Carnival continued peacefully for around two hours... Baton-wielding police arrived on the scene in force ... beating anyone who came within range... The violence was a reaction to a very sudden and violent police presence," and the City had been closed down well before (*Action*, 2nd July 1999). "The police deliberately provoked a riot: at no point did anyone threaten them or the yuppies and bosses in the City (*Workers' Power*, July/August 1999). "Almost all injuries were suffered by protesters... The police started the fighting, not the demonstrators... Outside the LIFFE building in particular, the police attacked the crowd and forced them to defend themselves," (*Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*, August/September 1999).

I was therefore very disturbed to read Ken Livingstone's remarks (*LLB*, February 2000) that the protests were "riots which brought the City of London to a standstill", "violence for political ends", "quite different" from direct action and unjustifiable. Ken is clearly relying on police and media distortions, and this is a very dangerous precedent in someone who could become head of the Met. I had hoped that as a socialist, Ken would do something about the ever more violent bully-boy tactics of London's police. The defence of our most basic freedoms depends on our seeing through the myths about police and demonstrators, and realising that the term "riot" is usually a cover for police attacks on peaceful protesters (remember the miners' strike, Wapping, Welling, the Poll Tax, the CJA?). Come on, Ken, don't sell us out now!

Andy Robinson
Derby

I enjoyed your February issue, especially the coverage of Ken Livingstone's campaign for London Mayor. However, one aspect of Ken's campaigning has been neglected by much of the media – that of his Private Member's Bill to ban hunting with hounds. As someone who has actively campaigned to ban hunting for well over 10 years, I know Ken has consistently stood up in defence of our wildlife and that he isn't a recent convert to the cause.

The Government has promised a new vote on a hunt ban – let's work hard to persuade them to back Ken's bill as the vehicle to do that.

Nick Morgan
London

As someone who left the Party at the beginning of last year and who has recently rejoined, I agree with the views expressed by Jeff Slee in his article "Don't desert the Party" (*LLB*, February).

Although it was a relief not having to support Blair's adventures in Kosova and not to have to be involved in the European elections last May, a growing feeling of political isolation has lead me to rejoin.

There is one point in Jeff's article which I would question, which is that political debate still exists within the Party. It very much depends on which CLP you belong to whether activists can raise issues of concern or introduce resolutions for debate.

In my experience in the Southend CLPs there was, and still is, a reluctance to discuss any issues such as welfare reform or economic policies, in particular the Single European Currency. It is also frowned upon to express criticisms on the actions and policies of the Government. Instead members feel more comfortable discussing what might best be described as humanitarian matters such as the banning of fox hunting and landmines. I believe that this reluctance to discuss hard political issues is common in other CLPs.

In the run up to the next General Election, Blair and the Millbank machine will have to decide whether or not they need the Labour Party to keep them in power. Despite their attempts to dismantle the Party, Labour remains a broad church in which socialists can still have influence. It is up to us how great that influence will be.

Ian Pope
Southend on Sea

Labour Left Briefing

20th Anniversary Dinner
7.30pm, Saturday 29th April
Celebrate with **special guests**
and the editorial board
Caxton House
129 St Johns Way, London N19
3 course meal: £15.00/£10.00
Tickets from Leonora Lloyd, 4b Byrne Road, London SE26 5JE.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

"It is sad that much press and media coverage has focused on disagreements – missing the real story of creative joint action across the Assembly."
Alun Michael AM, MP, *House* magazine, just a week before his resignation. The piece was titled *A Fresh Start for Wales*.

"Virtually every fight he (Tony Blair) has picked has been with a very discredited opponent: Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, Labour's left-wing..."
Peter Kellner puts us in our place, *Evening Standard*, 31st January 2000.

"I always wanted to be on the top-up list. It would have been too much for me to have won a (constituency) seat because it would have meant going around having surgeries."
Patti Boulaye, Tory candidate for London Assembly, *Evening Standard*, 2nd Feb 2000.



THE LIZ DAVIES COLUMN

● The January NEC meeting was another example of New Labour's strategy of decision-making by stealth. Usually I read *The Guardian* on my way to the meeting to find out what the NEC is about to do. This time, the papers were silent until the day after the NEC, when they reported decisions that had not actually been taken... Now read on.

At the November NEC we had been presented with a paper called *Making the NEC work better.* I objected to taking an immediate decision on it and the discussion was postponed to January. Mark Seddon and I then put in lengthy written objections and there was even some highly critical coverage in *The Times, Tribune* and on The World at One. The press reported that NEC members were to be silenced.

Following the media criticism, the leadership reworked the paper and when it reappeared in January it was almost unrecognisable. The most draconian proposals – NEC members not to presume to have speaking rights on every issue; debate on the leader's report to be restricted to key issues – had gone. The paper now emphasises the usual good practice for meetings such as written rather than verbal reports. It is still potentially restrictive: "a recognition of the authority of the Chair... may mean at times moving the debate on before everyone has been called to speak"; but there is no need for Grassroots Alliance candidates to advertise themselves as "the listening slate" just yet.

The debate around the revised document was highly acrimonious. Most NEC members clearly resent the reports in *LLB* and *Tribune* and the constituency bulletin sent out by the Grassroots Alliance. We are castigated for circulating "misinformation". The real gripe of course is that we provide Party members with accurate reports so that NEC members can be held to account by their electorate. Part of my submission suggested that NEC minutes should be available to constituency parties. I have yet to receive a response.

Discussion on the London mayoral selection provided a glaring example of Millbank misinformation about the NEC. General Secretary Margaret McDonagh was challenged by a number of members, not just from the left, who were anxious that the leadership and the London Party had been torn apart by the contest. Mark Seddon and Dennis Skinner both suggested that a "one member, one vote" system had to be considered for any future mayoral selections.

'Blair told me that British weapons had not contributed to the deaths in East Timor, since the killings were carried out by the militias, not the Indonesian military'

I asked McDonagh about the revelations on *Panorama* that either she or another senior Millbank official had authorised the release of membership lists to London MEP Claude Moraes's assistant who was working for the Frank Dobson campaign. McDonagh denied releaasing the list, but said that she would have been obliged to do so if asked, since Moraes, as an MEP, was entitled to the information. One wonders why Moraes's anxiety to obtain the list arose in early October, just after Dobson's sudden entry into the contest, rather than during the European elections campaign in May/June 1999.

I also asked McDonagh whether the cost of the round of all-member meetings at which Tony Blair and various cabinet ministers attacked Livingstone and implored members to vote "responsibly" would be treated as an expense for Dobson's campaign. The answer was negative. Labour Party members' subscriptions are paying for meetings which were, in effect, blatant electioneering. According to McDonagh, any discussion of the London mayor at those meetings was purely incidental.

Also on the agenda was the parliamentary panel. In yet another example of Millbank spin, reports of the successful applicants had reached the media long before the NEC saw the document.

● Three hours after the meeting finished, the press began to contact me. Millbank were claiming that the NEC had agreed to review the system of selecting candidates. Welcome though this announcement is, it was not discussed at the NEC (apart from the questions from Mark Seddon and Dennis Skinner), nor was a decision made. Clearly, after the meeting, Millbank decided that it was in the leadership's interests to suggest that a review had been agreed – a procedure not catered for in *Making the NEC work better.*

● *LLB* readers will recall that in September 1999, following the atrocities in East Timor, I asked the Prime Minister about the Government's failure to cancel arms sales to Indonesia. He told me that British weapons had not contributed to the deaths in East Timor, since the killings were carried out by the militias, not the Indonesian military. The United Nations disagrees with him. A recent UN report has found that Indonesia's military helped organise and took part in the violence. How many deaths were caused by the weapons sold to these murderers by New Labour between May 1997 and September 1999?

● So, Dobson is the official Labour candidate for Mayor for London, put there by the payroll vote (including one MEP no longer on the payroll!) and the block votes of a union and a co-op which refused to ballot their members. Livingstone remains the choice of the majority of Party members, trade unionists and voters. Will those disgruntled voters vote for Dobson? Will Party members campaign for him? If Dobson is to avoid the fate of Alun Michael in Wales, and if Labour is to avoid the disastrous electoral results it suffered in Wales, he should listen to Livingstone, consider his position and do the honourable thing. Resign.

Printed by Wernhams Printers Ltd (TU), 4 Forster Road, London N17