

# SOCIALIST

## ORGANISER

**Socialism  
and  
democracy**  
centre pages

# Resist the Poll Tax!

### An open letter to Neil Kinnock, leader of the Labour Party

**D**ear Neil Kinnock,  
You have expressed  
anger and hostility to  
those who got violent during the  
anti-poll-tax demonstrations  
outside council chambers up  
and down the country.

You accuse them of helping the  
Tories get themselves off the hook.

Now, that is a fair enough  
comment to make about any political  
organisation which deliberately  
creates an incident which the Tories  
can exploit to deflect attention from  
the big political question, the poll  
tax. But it comes very badly from  
you. And it is a shameful thing to  
say about the recent protests.

What happened outside Hackney  
Town Hall, for example, was plainly  
not something stirred up by "outsiders"  
and "agitators", but an angry revolt  
by young people, many of them black,  
who face an intolerable worsening of  
the quality of their lives when Mrs  
Thatcher's poll tax takes effect.

Homes will be broken up, and  
numbers of young people even  
larger than now will be thrown out

on to the streets, as a consequence  
of the poll tax. Those young people  
have good reason to be angry and  
impatient of political palaver!

If anarchists — and semi-  
anarchists like the SWP — who reject  
politics were able to take the lead  
in those angry demonstrations  
and create "incidents" the Tories  
could exploit, then a large part of  
the blame for it belongs to you. To  
no-one else but you, comrade Kin-  
nock!

It's one of the oldest patterns in  
the international labour movement  
that anarchists and semi-anarchists  
come to the fore when the official  
leadership of the movement is  
timid, and trims instead of fighting.

Your entire posture on the poll  
tax is hard to understand. The poll  
tax is a vastly unpopular measure,  
and it will have an immense effect  
on the lives of millions of people. If  
the British people were allowed a  
democratic vote on it, then it would  
for certain be rejected.

It has been pushed through  
Parliament by a government elected  
by far less than half of those who  
voted in the 1987 election. Even  
large numbers of those who voted  
for Mrs Thatcher have taken to the  
streets against it.

Not in living memory has such a  
widespread revolt been seen among  
the rank and file of the Tory party.  
Beside this, the early '70s rank and  
file Tory dissatisfaction with the

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Poll tax demo in Manchester. Photo: Paul Herrmann (Profile)

# Labour must lead!

## 2 POLL TAX

### Millionaire press continues Scargill smear campaign

**W**hat do you do if you are a media millionaire and the working class is showing signs of revival?

Thousands are protesting against the poll tax. Even Tory councillors are resigning in disgust. The Tory government has discredited itself deeply with its handling of the ambulance dispute.

So what do you do if you are a media millionaire? Answer: seize every chance to launch a diversionary smear campaign against the left.

That's why the media are full of denunciations of anti-poll tax campaigners and of miners' president Arthur Scargill.

Last Friday, 9th, the miners' union executive met and decided to set up an independent inquiry by a barrister into the allegations of financial misdeeds by union leaders during the 1984-85 miners' strike. The allegations were launched by a disaffected former union employee, Roger Windsor, through Robert Maxwell's *Daily Mirror*.

The executive vote for the inquiry was unanimous. Opponents of Scargill within the executive, both from the right and from the soft left, declared themselves satisfied. Labour front-bencher Kevin Barron also backed the decision.

So the matter is closed until the inquiry reports? Not for the media millionaires.

They have been scraping together everything they can find in order to keep up the pressure on Arthur Scargill.

• They report that the NUM opened some 14 secret bank accounts during the miners' strike. No wonder! The NUM's own funds were seized by the courts during the strike, and improvisation and fancy footwork were necessary to keep the strike and the union going.

• They report that some money went through accounts in the name of the International Miners' Organisation, an international trade union organisation to which the NUM is affiliated.

And why not? It is true (and SO said at the time) that the IMO can be criticised politically. It is a split from the main miners' international federation, and it combines some genuine miners' unions like the NUM and the miners' section of the French CGT with the now-crumbling state-controlled miners' "unions" of Eastern Europe.

But it is not true — as some papers have suggested — that the IMO is just Scargill's personal artefact. And political criticisms of Arthur Scargill's views on Eastern Europe is quite a different matter from smears on his personal honesty.

Socialist Organiser has always criticised Scargill's attitude to Eastern Europe, and we will continue to do so. But people like Robert Maxwell, who has made millions from publishing the self-justifications of East European tyrants, have no right to preach morals to Arthur Scargill.

• Maxwell makes a big deal of the fact that Scargill has not sued for libel. But suing for libel — especially against a wealthy newspaper company — is a game for the rich. Scargill is well off compared to the average miner, but he is not a millionaire.

Arthur Scargill is on our side, despite his political faults; Robert Maxwell is scum.



Poll Tax protests have also hit the Tory shires

## Don't pay, don't collect!

**By Ron Strong, Chapeltown APTU, Secretary Leeds Labour Against the Poll Tax**

**O**ver 100,000 non-payers in Leeds" promised Ian Greaves, secretary of the Leeds Federation of Anti Poll Tax Groups after a 350-strong angry demonstration outside the Labour-controlled council meeting which set a poll tax rate of £348 last Wednesday (7 March)

The protestors had tried to get inside the Civic Hall to sit in the public gallery, only to find the way blocked by security guards. A few who did get through to the council lobby were set upon by the police, and dragged out by the police, who arrested people at random.

The protestors were told that the public gallery was full up — in fact senior council staff had been given

the afternoon off just so they could fill up the gallery!

The crowd of angry protestors moved around the building to stand outside the windows of the council chamber, chanting "Break the poll tax, not the poor" at the councillors inside.

The demonstration ended with a pledge from Ian Greaves that the

anti-poll tax protestors would be back, and would beat the tax.

He finished his speech to cheers from council workers leaning out of office windows.

That evening the Leeds Anti-Poll Tax Federation met to plan the way forward. We unanimously supported the demonstration that day, and condemned the police action in

breaking up the protest, giving backing to the two people charged.

The Leeds Federation, an open federation of over 25 local anti-poll tax groups, plans now to leaflet over 200,000 homes in Leeds, asking people not to pay their poll tax and calling on the council workers to refuse to implement it. Leeds is set to fight the poll tax to the end!

## Bristol councillor resigns

**By Leon Edwards**

**2,000 people demonstrated outside Bristol City Council House last Tuesday as a poll tax of £490 was set, amid anger and protest.**

Labour Councillor Keith Mahoney resigned, saying he would neither vote for cuts or a poll tax rate on Bristol people, and left to join the protestors, who represented a cross-section of Bristolians.

Police presence of over 80 sparked violent scenes when they used horses to force back those who wanted to get in. Speakers broadcasting the debate were smashed and a spontaneous surge by the crowd effectively seised the council house as people crossed the moat and climbed the ramparts.

Although there were 21 arrests, many more arrests were prevented as crowds "rescued" those who were being escorted away by the police.

As the meeting finished, the

crowd marched through the centre of town, effectively stopping the traffic for over two hours by sit-downs. There was a great feeling amongst those there, who were joined by people leaving work and those at bus stops.

Most of the drivers stopped by the march hooted their horns in support and an ambulance returning from a call was cheered as it sounded its siren in mutual solidarity.

As one person said: "This is fantastic. The anger against the Tories must be massive, we would never be marching through town at half past eight on a Tuesday if something big wasn't happening!"

## Unions back Islington protest

**By Vicki Morris**

**O**ver 2,000 people attended the demonstration outside Islington Town Hall on Monday 12 March, as the

**Council met to set its poll tax. The Labour-led council set a rate of £498.**

The demonstration was good natured and lively, although it might have been easy for people to

feel daunted by the number of police present, and the sight of the tabloid press vulturing around for pictures of "rioters".

We heard speeches from NALGO and NUT members — both unions which will suffer the immediate effects of cuts in local government spending, and who have pledged locally not to implement the tax.

They called on the people present to remember and support them when they take action against the poll tax, in defence of their jobs and services, and in the interests of the local community. The UCW and civil service union NUCPS were also represented on the demonstration.

Other speakers included someone from Islington Against the Poll Tax, NUS London, and prospective Labour councillors, who have pledged not to implement the tax if they are elected.

All the speakers — and the crowd who applauded them — talked about the need to link the fight against the poll tax with others fighting against Tory legislation, such as the NHS cuts.

And everyone called upon the Labour Party — both nationally and locally — to lead the fight. Even if they don't, the campaign will go on in Islington and nationally, but the pressure on Labour must be stepped up.

**2000 in Sheffield**  
**By Mark Shwenk**

**A**t the biggest anti-poll tax demonstration in the region, 2,000 protestors lobbied Sheffield City Council budget-setting meeting on Friday 9 March.

They were met by a large police presence and tight security, which prevented all but a handful of protestors entering the council chamber.

Anti-poll tax groups, students, trade unionists and former Tory voters were among those participating in a noisy, but largely peaceful demonstration.

Despite pleas from the crowd, not one councillor came out to speak to the crowd.

At the meeting a poll tax figure of £355 was agreed. That is set to rise considerably next year. Sheffield Against the Poll Tax has invited speakers from Scotland who will be touring the city over the next fortnight, to talk about the success of their non-payment campaign.

With 82% of people in Sheffield due to lose out under the poll tax, non-payment will be massive, and it is essential that the Labour Party — both locally and nationally — takes a lead in the campaign.

## Students link tax and loans

**By Dave Barter**

**S**tudent occupations in Manchester Further Education colleges have linked the issue of student loans to the fight against education cuts imposed by Manchester City Council's implementation of the poll tax.

The student unions at North Manchester Community College and South Manchester Community College — both of which have sites threatened with closure — responded to the National Union of Students' call for a 24-hour shut-down and overnight occupations. They organised occupations protesting against the cuts as well as student loans.

The North Manchester occupation received a message of support from one of the rebel Manchester City councillors, Tony McCardell, who voted against the council's im-

plementation of the poll tax and cuts.

The occupation also voted to send a delegation to the conference against cuts and poll tax called for Saturday 17 March by Manchester's Labour Against the Cuts and Poll Tax.

Students from both colleges will be joining NATFHE and other education trade unions in a lobby of the City Council education committee on Thursday 15th March.

These occupations proved the potential that exists to organise the fight back in the Further Education sector. They also point to the way council workers and users of council services, such as education, can unite to fight cuts and poll tax.

**Labour Against the Cuts and Poll Tax Conference**  
**Saturday 17 March**  
**12.00**  
**Manchester Town Hall**

# Resist the poll tax!

## From front page

Heath government's immigration policy was a minor uproar. Mrs Thatcher would lose a general election now. But she doesn't care to call one for two years or more.

If we had a parliament with annual elections, such as the early labour movement (the Chartists) set out to win over a hundred and fifty years ago, then Mrs Thatcher would be driven from office.

But of course we have nothing like that. We have a system whose need of reform could not be more glaringly illustrated than it is now.

This minority government, with its arbitrary and non-representative majority in the House of Commons, is pushing through the latest piece of savage class legislation — legislation to benefit the haves and penalise the have-nots — against the manifest opposition of a big majority of the electorate. No wonder there is widespread and growing dissatisfaction with the government and the system of election under which it was chosen.

No wonder there is a vast ignoring wave of civil disobedience by people refusing to pay the poll tax — up to one million in Scotland.

And what do you say to those people? You tell them to obey the law! In effect you say to Thatcher, "I disagree with everything you do,

*"...your notion of democratic propriety is a central reason why Mrs Thatcher has been able to abuse democracy in the way she has and does."*

but the Labour Party under my leadership will defend to the death your right to do it!"

Thatcher and the Thatcherite press create a great hue and cry about "violence" to distract from the real issue, and what do you do? You join in the condemnation. You don't even have the decency to make a distinction between the angry young people outside Hackney Town Hall and the few political boneheads who may have wanted rough-housing demonstrations outside Town Halls because they aren't interested in the broader political processes.

Your calculations here are obvious. Don't let Thatcher do what she wants to do, and "blame" Labour for the violence. But you also tell the millions of potential non-payers of the poll tax to obey the law. You turn yourself into Mrs Thatcher's political outsider and trouble-shooter over the poll tax.

Why, Mr Kinnock? You say democracy demands it. The law is the law. We must bow down before the law, even rapacious class law enshrining inequalities and breeding a vast crop of injustice.

Your idea of democracy, Mr Kinnock, is, I submit, not one that those who fought for and won the democratic system you support would recognise.

Any notion of democracy which does not recognise the right of

resistance to bad laws and to tyrannical governments — and how would you go about arguing that Mrs Thatcher's government is not now behaving tyrannically? — is a recipe for passive submission to any indignity inflicted by an ephemeral majority — or, in this case, by a government which is far from being elected or supported by a majority of the electorate.

Any living democracy — even one as shallow and "bourgeois" as the one we have, which combines civil liberties and the vote with a system of grinding tyranny of the rich in industry — will include *struggle and conflict*. What a government can and cannot do will often have to be determined by *resistance to government decrees*.

The democratic system we have now, inadequate though it is, was shaped and expanded by decades and centuries of such struggles by our class and political ancestors, Mr Kinnock. So what has changed?

Is the present system so perfect a democratic mechanism that the example of all our long history of struggle becomes invalid? That is the only possible argument you and your supporters could bring in here. It is plainly absurd!

A system that allows a government with only minority backing to ram through what Thatcher has rammed through over the last ten years is patently imperfect, if not positively malign.

The truth, Mr Kinnock, is that your notion of democratic propriety is a central reason why Mrs Thatcher has been able to abuse democracy in the way she has and does. She has met with only feeble resistance and has thus pushed ahead, getting bolder and bolder. Yet she could have been stopped and prevented from doing much of the evil she has imposed on the working people of Britain if the labour movement's leaders had been less supine, less willing to accept and to champion her "democratic right" to wreak havoc against the majority on behalf of a minority of the minority who elected her.

Is this just "the usual totalitarian claptrap"? Mr Kinnock, it is your idea of democracy which corresponds most closely with that of the totalitarians in the labour movement. It is you who preach the divine right of an elected government to do what it likes and deny the democratic right of resistance to injustice and tyranny. It is you who defend Mrs Thatcher's "elected dictatorship".

More than that, though. One reason why some people who wanted to be socialists feel for the Stalinist totalitarian claptrap and undervalued and rejected democracy was because they understood democracy as you understand it — a matter of passive submission to rigged parliaments and manipulated majorities. Like you they didn't understand democracy as a matter of struggle.

Where you worship the bourgeois version of democracy and make a god of it, they rejected it and made a devil of it. The basic attitudes about what it is have much in common, though.

I repeat: those who fought for, won and built the modern limited parliamentary democracies — what Marxists call bourgeois democracies

# Labour



"I defend Thatcher's democratic right to do injustice."

— had a radically different notion of what it was all about. Democracy to them was something alive and real.

This, for example, is what the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 says about it.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

"That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

"... When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security".

In principle one could make a plausible case for full-scale insurrection against the poll tax and still be completely in step with the real spirit of even bourgeois democracy! In fact a vigorous political campaign centred on civil disobedience would be enough to defeat Mrs

Thatcher's tyrannous poll tax.

Labour should advocate such a campaign, and you should lead it, Mr Kinnock.

Right now you hope to sail calmly towards an election victory in two years time. You want no upsets, no risks. Your strategy is one of half-passive speculation and hope that the tides and waves of politics will see Labour home and dry in 1991 or 1992.

But what if you miscalculate? What if the tides change? Better than hoping and speculating would be a vigorous Labour campaign to harry the Tories by organising the opposition that is now seething and steaming under the Tories.

Nine years ago Michael Foot was elected leader of the Labour Party. Thatcher was very unpopular in the opinion polls. Unemployment had begun to bite into the sinews of the labour movement, but the movement still had the heart and morale for a fight.

Michael Foot promised to raise "a storm of indignation against the Tories" and to drive them from office. He never did it, never even tried to do it. The result of that failure was that Thatcher thrived and the '80s were terrible years for the labour movement and for large sections of the working class.

The mass revulsion now against Thatcher — which is even convulsing the Tory party itself — gives Labour the chance to organise a new "storm of indignation" and make sure that the Tories are kicked out. Labour should do that. It

should side with and defend the youth, such as those who got out of control outside Hackney Town Hall, against the Tories who would grind them down further.

Labour should dare to seize this chance to rouse and organise the storm of indignation which Michael Foot talked about at the beginning of the Thatcher years.

Labour should not say: "We disagree with Thatcher, but we'll defend her democratic right to do injustice". It should say: "We disagree with Thatcher, and we'll support the right of the people to oppose her, lead their fight to resist her".

**John O'Mahony**

**NO POLL TAX**  
the **DEMO**  
**Sat 31st March**  
Meet at Kennington Park at 12 noon  
March to Trafalgar Square LONDON

*The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of sex or race*

Karl Marx

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## 4 LETTERS

# Engaging Mr Jaques

### GRAFFITI

I rubbed my eyes. Could it be true? Standing before me, bathed in the light of a visual display unit, was surely Martin Jaques, editor of *Marxism Today*.

I could tell it was him from the look of self-satisfaction in his eyes and the price tag on the bottle of claret he had with him. He sat down, proudly opening his copy of the *Financial Times*, anxious for me to see the scoop he had scored: an interview with Karl Marx.

I had so much to ask him. So without ado, I began.

Tell me Mr Jaques, do you feel disappointed to see regimes that you once supported collapsing, all across the world, because the people they ruled simply can't bear to live under them any more. Doesn't it make you feel bad?

No, he responded immediately. The people of Eastern Europe believe in democracy. And so do I.

But you are a long-standing member of the Communist Party. That party's whole political existence, surely, was based on the idea that the system in the USSR and similar countries was socialist. How can you so easily accept their demise?

But I'm a Eurocommunist. Or I was one; maybe I'm not any sort of communist any more. But we Eurocommunists long ago rejected the Soviet model. This happened after we read Gramsci.

But the Eurocommunists were a wing of the mainstream pro-Russian movement, weren't they? That's your tradition.

Oh, but I'm a radical, and we don't believe in tradition. You're such a typical Trotskyist, always going on about the past.

So you deny every having supported the USSR?

I think that question is now firmly on the agenda.

What? There are, of course, a multiplicity of discourses on this question. What the Left has always failed to understand is the variety of individual experience.

You mean, just because you thought you supported the USSR didn't mean you necessarily did?

I think we have to get away from this way of seeing things. You see everything in such simplistic terms. Let's talk about the fact that the working class is disappearing.

Making Marxism out of date?

Well, it certainly is out of date. Except for the Russian alphabet, of course, which looks awfully nice on a black leather shoulder bag.

But apart from that? Exactly. Marxism was all right in its day. Marx was very influential. Lots of people were influenced by Marx. Take Gramsci. He read Marx, or so I believe. And well...others too.

But let's face it, the working class really isn't just a load of thick men in clogs any more, is it? Well, there are a few left like that, I'll grant you, but for the most part they go on holiday, these days, so they're not at all like they were when Marx was around, and as for everyone else, fortunately these days people are quite cultured and eat foreign foods, and all that sort of thing. Completely different, you see.

I'm not sure I do. Well that's because you're so stuck in all those stuffy old for-

mulas.

Such as?

Ah well there you have me, but anyway I want to talk about something else.

Do you think the working class was ever just a load of thick men in clogs?

Of course.

When?

Before post-Fordism, naturally. He sipped his wine. You see, he said, leaning back in his chair, knowledgeable, we are living in a whole new period now, which for the sake of simplicity I will call post-Fordism. We could call it post-modernism, too, of course, or, bearing in mind the great march of democracy, post-Marxism.

He played absent-mindedly for a moment on his personal telephone. Look around you. What do you see? The traditional working class is dead, and traditional socialism dead with it. All the factories have been shut. Fordism was about big factories, making cars, with male workers, in strong unions, believing in socialism, eating fish and chips and living on council estates. All gone.

Isn't it that the working class is changing? There are still big workplaces, including factories. There are still unions, still strikes. Aren't you confusing a depressed time for the labour movement with the end of it?

No. Everything has ended. Everything.

And isn't your conclusion just that old-fashioned social democracy has found a new lease of life?

There's nothing old-fashioned about social democracy I'll have you know. They all read *Marxism Today*.

But you're confusing the failure of the Stalinist tradition with a failure of Marxism.

At this point Mr Jaques got angry. Look, you unbearable Trot. We used to treat you people like you deserved, no messing around. There was only one Marxist tradition, do you understand? Only one.

I was determined not to be intimidated. You say that socialism came to be identified with a bureaucratic state, but isn't that your fault, or the fault of the pro-Russian communist movement?

Of course not. Socialism was identified with a bureaucratic state because that's what it is. Which is why we have to forget about it. I mean, wouldn't you rather have a Next store to shop at than queue up for boiled bacon.

Most definitely. But this isn't relevant, is it?

Of course. We all have to signify our own individuality, stupid. He turned away from me to flick through an untitled Penguin Original. No one wants to wear crimplene, do they? Think of all the wonderful things Thatcher has given us. Think of what Sainsbury's used to be like.

I wondered what he was going on about and noticed how empty the wine bottle had become. He hadn't offered me any, I realised.

So what is the role of the Communist Party in this situation? I asked.

That's an agenda we have yet to engage with meaningfully he said, meaningfully. We must play, essentially, an ideological role. Engage with other people's discourses, that sort of thing.

Suddenly he had gone, leaving only the faint odour of expensive aftershave. Was this a dream, or does this dreadful man really exist?

# Reforging domestic slavery

### LETTER

Until I read Liz Millward's article (SO433) I was puzzled why little bundles of SOs addressed to my erstwhile partner kept arriving through my door months after he'd moved out. All is now clear. You are determined to keep us as a nuclear family unit whether we like it or not.

Even mentioning the nuclear family makes me feel like a dinosaur. It's not very '90s, not designer socialism, is it? It harks back to the days when we talked about 'domestic slavery' and demanded free 24-hour nurseries. I suppose to many of your readers that's ancient history.

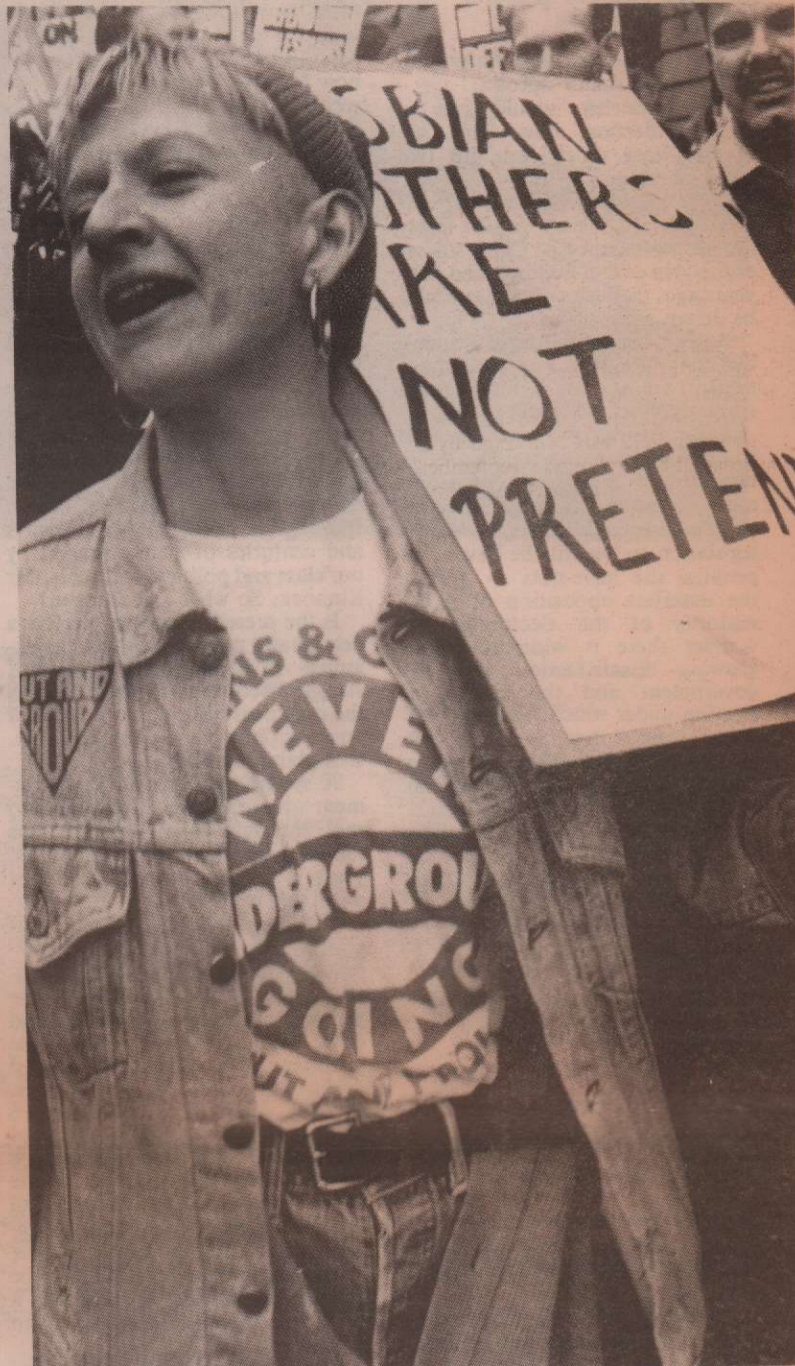
I shrugged off Liz's first article as a bit of ill-considered naivety bunged in to fill a column. But a second article, reiterating the first, implies a degree of editorial approval. Men, as they get older, do get more patriarchal.

It is important to respond to Liz because, though she and SO seem unaware of it, we're facing an ideological offensive in defence of the nuclear family. Abortion rights are again under attack. Tories are explicitly trying to use the law to ban women, especially lesbians, from creating families without fathers. There are calls to cut benefit for single mothers who won't name their children's fathers (spearheaded by Labour's own failed abortion, Frank Field).

In many ways it is reminiscent of the 'maternal deprivation' (ie. working mothers) horror stories of the '50s. The same ills — psychological trauma, delinquency, under-achievement — are now being blamed on single parenthood as were once caused by working mothers. Paternal deprivation looks like being the buzzword of the '90s.

Research isn't ideologically neutral; it doesn't come out of a vacuum. You find what you set out to look for. I'm sorry if this sounds very '60s, but it does save time not to have to relearn yesterday's lessons from scratch.

I don't know the American research Liz refers to. I don't know how their samples were selected. Were the children of divorced parents matched with randomly-selected children from 2-parent families? Or with children from families which would have split up but for religious or cultural bans on divorce? Were they compared with children who lost a parent through death of imprisonment, or who



The Tories are trying to use the law to ban women, especially lesbians, from creating families without fathers. Photo: Peter Walsh (Profile)

never had two parents? The inferences it is proper to draw would depend very much on what was being compared to what.

Bowlby, the father of 'maternal deprivation', was within his own terms a scrupulous and child-centred researcher. His findings revolutionised the way children in institutions were treated. His work was used in an utterly reactionary (unsuccessful) attempt to drive women back into the home and reforge the shackles of domestic

slavery.

We are now witnessing another attempt to turn back the tide. The Tories are horrified that a quarter of children are now born outside marriage; that three quarters of divorces are initiated by women; that lesbians are openly articulating their right to have and keep their children. We should be dancing in the streets. This is the (partial) break-up of patriarchy.

We shouldn't be callous about the casualties of this social revolution. I'm in favour of more research into how to minimise the trauma of parental break-up. I'm more sceptical of Liz's uncritical endorsement of Relate and conciliation services: I await to be convinced of their relevance to the problems of working class people whose relationships break up. In practice, Liz's solution seems to come down to women yet again having to mend their ways. Thanks very much, but mothers have enough guilt-tripping from the straight press without socialist newspapers adding to the chorus.

Marx and Engels (whoops, sorry, not trendy) argued that whatever the personal horrors of the industrial revolution drawing women into the factories, it was a progressive trend which socialists had to support. On the terrain of the labour movement, SO has resisted New Times designer capitulation. What makes it OK to ditch the ideas of Women's Liberation? Is it that you were less attached to them in the first place?

In sisterhood,  
Gerry Byrne  
South London

## Astounding 'tolerance'

For all I know, John Cunningham (SO 437) is right that Michael Powell was a "high Tory". If he was, then the political 'tolerance' and 'liberalism' of his film 'I See a Dark Stranger' is even more remarkable than I've always thought.

Made in 1946 or '47, this film is about German spies in wartime England and Ireland. A central character is an honourable old-fashioned non-Nazi patriotic German spy, which is nothing surprising in Powell and Pressburger.

Very surprising for the time is the main character, a young Irish woman, brought up on stories of Ireland's fight against England for

its freedom, who goes to England and works there to help Germany destroy England. The IRA — both its 'left' and right wings — was then allied to Germany.

She is presented sympathetically, as are her reasons for seeing things the way she does. She is shown as blinkered and politically ignorant and she changes sides when it comes home to her that her spying must mean the deaths of many English — and Irish — soldiers.

But if you remember that Winston Churchill was so bitter about Southern Ireland's war-time neutrality that he attacked the Irish state even in his 1945 victory speech on the radio, then the political attitudes of this mainstream British film are astounding.

Fergus Ennis  
Rotherhithe

# Coup in Afghanistan

By Alan Gilbert

**P**resident Najibullah of Afghanistan last week suppressed an attempted coup led by General Shanawaz Tanai.

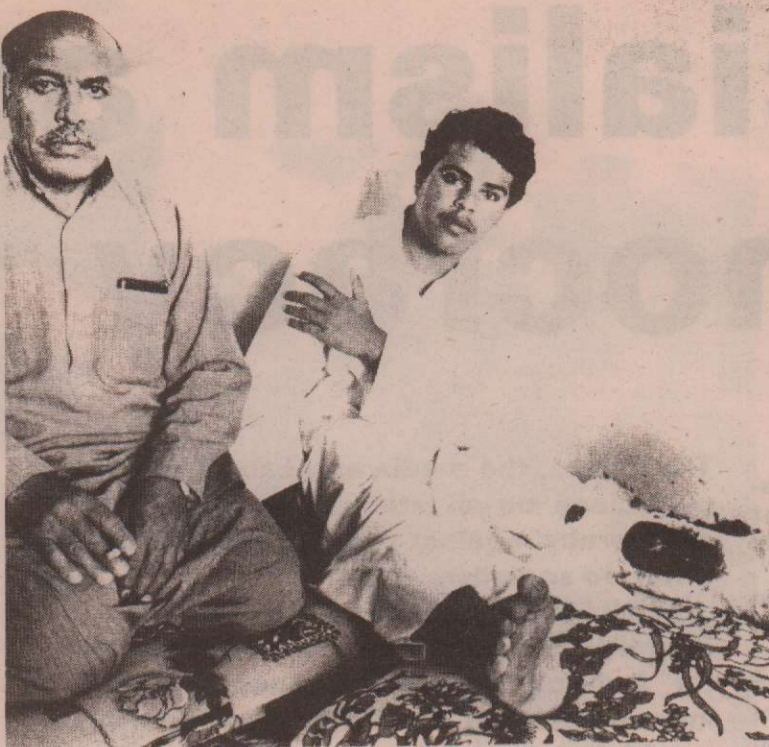
According to the press, General Tanai was the chief of the Khalq faction in Afghanistan's ruling Stalinist party, the People's Democratic Party. Conflicts between the Khalq and the rival Parcham faction, to which Najibullah belongs, have been a big part of politics in Afghanistan ever since the PDP (whose main base was and is among army officers) took power in April 1978.

The Russian invasion of December 1979 was prompted by a successful Khalq coup in September 1979. Khalq leader Hafizullah Amin was ousted and apparently killed the Parcham president, Nur Mohammed Taraki.

Khalq was, and reportedly still is, more 'leftist' than Parcham, less willing to compromise with the Islamic rebels, more inclined to reply on force and firepower to impose reforms whether the peoples of Afghanistan like them or not.

In 1979, Brezhnev and the Soviet leaders became alarmed at Amin's policies. They believed he would push the PDP regime to destruction. They invaded to oust Amin, to restore the Parcham faction to office, to take control, and (so they must have hoped, though vainly) to suppress the Islamic revolt quickly and efficiently.

This time the Parcham faction was better prepared than in 1979. And, whatever the internal tensions in Najibullah's regime, divisions and disarray are even worse among the Islamic rebels; over a year after the withdrawal of the last Soviet troops, Najibullah is still relatively secure in power.



Casualty of Afghanistan civil war

## A woman's place is in her union!

### WOMEN'S EYE

By Liz Millward

**H**ow well does your union represent women? If the answer is 'badly' you aren't alone.

In percentage terms no British union has as many women on its leading body as in its membership. NUPE, for example, has a 75% female membership but only 50% of the national executive are women. CoHSE has 79% women members but women make up only 31% of the executive!

Both these unions do have full time Women's or Equality officers, which is more than can be said for the Banking and Insurance union BIFU, where 55% of the members are women.

Yet women's representation is not being taken more seriously by most unions. Several have reserved places for women on executives or delegations. Other unions have resolved to monitor the number of women at different levels in the hierarchy. Too little, very late!

The representation of women on union executives is of vital importance for rank and file women union members. For too long the union has been seen as something for the boys. Meetings in pubs, without transport or childcare exclude women. But so does seeing men make all the speeches, both in the workplace and on TV coverage of TUC conference. It is a great boost to see women up there on equalish terms with men.

The increasing recognition of women's rights within trade unions has coincided with Tory attacks on working women's rights. Thatcher has reduced the entitlement to maternity leave, cut nursery places and crazily taxed workplace creches.

But the TUC has made little public fight about any of those attacks. And neither has the Labour Party.

Too often women union representatives have gone along with the retreat. Women members of most executives have often seemed to have more in common with their right-wing male colleagues than with rank and file women.

So does that mean that we are against reserved seats, or women full-timers? No. But don't expect a few women to transform the TUC into a body which fights for women's rights. Representation is vital, but it's not everything. A left-wing man prepared to struggle against the Tories will do more for working class women than a right wing woman who wants to wait for the next election, and in the meantime looks after 'number one'.

Many labour movement 'leaders' have leapt on the equal opportunities bandwagon, with glossy leaflets, a few token reserved seats and a press release. But until those leaders are prepared to organise militant campaigns for women's rights at work, they will just demoralise and betray working class women and men.

If we are going to have reserved places for women (and we should) it should be more than 3 out of 18 on a TUC delegation representing a union (CoHSE) with 79% women members. But more importantly we as socialists, must organise campaigns around women's rights to draw working class women into struggle. Working class women have a tremendous and proud history of fighting both the Tories and men in our own movement.

Women make up half the working class and without our full participation there never will be working class victory over capitalism.

All statistics from 'Labour Research'.

# Israeli government on brink of collapse

By Clive Bradley

**T**he Israeli national unity government is on the verge of collapse following a walk-out by Labour Party members.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, of the right-wing Likud, Labour's partners in the coalition, refused to bow to pressure for a vote on American proposals for peace talks with the Palestinians.

Shamir is worried by the prospect of a revolt of the far right and the religious parties, and sees the fall of the coalition as a lesser evil.

The sticking point in the US proposals is the criteria by which the Palestinians to negotiate with will be chosen.

Right-wingers consider any negotiations in-effect a capitulation to PLO pressure, as any authoritative Palestinian representative will have PLO backing. The Labour leadership is impatient with this kind of dead-end intransigence

— which is not to say they are enthusiastic about negotiations with 'surrogate' PLO representatives, either.

A further point, given a lot of publicity, is on the status of East Jerusalem, seized by Israel in the 1967 war.

The United States wants negotiations to lead to elections in the occupied territories. That would mean the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; but what about East Jerusalem? It

is a point of honour in Israeli politics that East Jerusalem was 'liberated', not occupied: it includes the Old City and the religious monuments, such as the Wailing Wall.

George Bush has indicated that Jewish inhabitants of East Jerusalem should be considered 'settlers' — like Jews in the West Bank — indicating that there should be Arab elections in the city.

Labour Defence Minister Yitzhak

Rabin, who on the Palestinian question is close to Likud, and is a firm believer on the need for a national unity government, has proposed a compromise, in which parliament would decide whether East Jerusalem's Arabs can take part in elections: it would not be left to international deals.

The crisis may not run to new elections. Smaller parties may prove enough to let Labour form a new government without the Likud.

# New name, old tricks

**N**ever accuse Italy's Communist Party of paying no attention to fashion. In line with the Eastern European trend, the Italian Communist Party, perhaps the biggest in Western Europe, has decided to change its name.

A hardline faction will fight to keep their old-fashioned reputation.

Of course, the Italian CP has never been afraid of novelty. It was, in the 1970s, the foremost 'Eurocommunist' party, advocating

what it called the 'historic compromise' with the Christian Democrats.

In plain Italian, that's a coalition with their equivalent of the Tories.

The CP, which is by far the biggest working class party in Italy, dwarfing the Socialists, was all for denationalisation, austerity programmes to deal with Italy's economic problems, and so on.

It never managed to get the Christian Democrats to take up the compromise idea. But not for want of trying.

Because of the CP's right-wing

stand on so many issues, a lot of Italian youth turned to more radical politics. In the 1970s, there was a big growth of semi-anarchist or semi-Maoist groups. And there was the 'urban guerrillas' of the Red Brigades.

Perhaps if enough 'Communist' Parties drop the name, in future it will be possible for real Marxists to feel confident to pick it up, without being tainted by the connotations it possesses today. Certainly, there are fewer and fewer communist parties around. Let's hope there are none by the year 2000.

# Junk capitalism

## THE HIDDEN HAND

By Colin Foster

**A**n article in the latest New York Review of Books reviews two new books about one of the greatest recent feats of market economics, the takeover of the RJR Nabisco food and tobacco business.

At \$25 billion, it was the biggest ever 'leveraged buyout' — takeover financed by selling high-interest 'junk bonds'.

The game with 'leveraged buyouts' is, or was, to use the ready credit available in the 'junk bond' market to take over a business. Then you 'asset strip' it. You sell off chunks for quick cash, and squeeze profits out of the selected

bites you keep.

Shareholders do well, as their share prices are pushed up by the buyout bid. Bankers, lawyers, PR consultants, and accountants do well; they pocketed around \$1 billion from the RJR Nabisco deal. And, often though not always, the buyout kinds do well too.

Of course there are risks. Michael Millken, the inventor of 'junk bonds', has had to withdraw from business facing criminal charges. His firm, Drexel Burnham Lambert, dumped him and pleaded guilty to criminal charges early last year, then went bust this year.

According to the New York Review of Books, RJR Nabisco now needs to keep its cash flow growing by 30 per cent every year to keep up with interest payments on its 'junk bonds'. Anything less than a rousing consumer boom could wreck it.

Despite everything, however, the supposed 'risk-takers', the capitalists, seem to be much better cushioned from ruin than the two

thousand or so RJR Nabisco workers who have been sacked since the take-over, or the thousands of others who may lose their jobs if the gamble fails.

Drexel's top staff got \$206 million in bonuses paid out just weeks before the firm went bust. And apparently "nearly all of the \$25 billion in financing used to pay for RJR Nabisco, from bank loans to the lowest-ranking junk, may in one way or another be backed by some kind of federal, for which read 'taxpayer', guarantee."

Lots of junk bonds, for example, were bought by pension funds. If the Nabisco fails to pay the money due on those bonds, then by law the US government has to step in to ensure that people get their pensions nonetheless.

The US federal government is already paying out billions to bail out the "savings and loans" companies (similar to small building societies) which went bust after their bosses invested heavily in junk bonds.

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# Socialism and democracy

Comrade Munis is dissatisfied with our assertions at the trial that "we submit to the majority". The Oehlerites also are scornful of this declaration and represent it as some kind of capitulatory repudiation of our principles in order to impress the jury. All of these assumptions are without foundation.

Our "submission to the majority" was not first revealed at the trial. We said it before the trial and continue to repeat it after the trial. It is a correct statement of our position because it conforms both to reality and necessity. Moreover, our Marxist teachers said it before us: we learned it from them.

What else can we do but "submit to the majority" if we are Marxists, and not Blanquists or anarchist middle-heads? It is a timely occasion to probe into this question because we believe any ill-considered talk about some kind of mysterious "action", presumed to be open to us while we remain not only a minority but a very small, numerically insignificant minority, can lead only to a dangerous disorientation of the party.

An exposition of the Marxist position on this question can also be useful as an antidote for any remnants of the half-Blanquist tradition of the early years of the Comintern in America.

The pioneer communists in the



Soldiers dispose of bodies during the Chilean coup, September 1973. Over 30,000 workers were butchered when General Pinochet deposed the democratically elected Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende. Democracy had got out of hand. The US government backed the coup. The *London Times*, which only this week lambasted Tony Benn for supporting civil disobedience against the poll tax, also supported the butchery. Backing Pinochet to the hilt, the *Times* editorialised: 'Any reasonable military man would have considered it his constitutional duty to intervene'.

**The Tories, the media and Labour politicians are all 'sticking up for democracy' against poll tax demonstrators. What do socialists think?**

**In 1941, the leaders of the American Socialist Workers' Party were put on trial for 'sedition'. James P Cannon, the best known leader of the SWP, used the trial as a vehicle for explaining the party's policies. The transcript of the hearing was later published as 'Socialism on Trial'.**

**Grandizo Mundis was a Spanish Trotskyist who criticised Cannon's presentation for 'conceding too much' to bourgeois democracy.**

**Here we reprint Cannon's reply.**

United States (and not only here) heard of the Bolshevik victory in Russia long before they learned about the political method and propaganda techniques whereby the Bolsheviks gained the mass support which made the seizure of power possible. Their first impressions were undoubtedly coloured by the capitalist press accounts which represented the revolution as a coup d'état engineered by a small group.

This distorted conception was epitomised by the title given to the American edition of Trotsky's classic pamphlet, 'Terrorism and Communism', which was published here by the party's publishing house

in 1922 under the completely misleading title 'Dictatorship versus Democracy'. We took the "dictatorship", so to speak, and generously handed over to the bourgeoisie all claim to "democracy".

This was far too big a concession, perhaps pardonable in a young movement lacking adequate knowledge about the democratic essence of the Bolshevik programme, but by far out of date today.

The bourgeoisie have always tried to picture communism as a "criminal conspiracy" in order to alienate workers who are profoundly democratic in their sentiments. That was the aim once again in the Minneapolis trial. It was our task at the trial to go out of our way to refute this misrepresentation and emphasise the democratic basis of our programme; not in order to placate our enemies and persecutors, as is assumed, but in order to reveal the truth to our friends, the American workers.

We cannot eat our cake and have it too. We must either "submit" to the majority and confine ourselves to propaganda designed to win over the majority — or we must seize power, more correctly, try to seize

*"The bosses have always tried to picture communism as a 'criminal conspiracy' in order to alienate workers."*

power and break the neck of the party, by minority "action".

Marxist authority is clear and conclusive in choosing between these alternatives. When we took our stand in court regarding "submission" to the majority we were not "folding our arms" and making "opportunistic" statements of "passivity in the face of imperialist war", as we are accused. Nothing of the sort. The testimony states, repeatedly, and with sufficient emphasis, that, while "submitting to the majority" — that is, making no minority insurrections or putsches — we are organising, speaking, writing, and "explaining"; in other words, carrying on propaganda with the object of winning over the majority to our programme, which

is the programme of social revolution.

Neither were we simply trying to "make an honourable impression on the jury without taking into consideration that we should talk to the masses". To be sure we did not stupidly disregard the jury which held the fate of 28 comrades, not to mention the legality of the party, in its hands. But we were speaking also, and especially "for the masses".

We testified primarily for publication. It was our deliberate aim to convince those who would read the testimony in printed form of the truth that the proletarian movement which we aspire to lead is a democratic movement, and not a "conspiracy", as the prosecutor and the whole of the capitalist press would picture it, and as loose talkers would unconsciously aid them to so picture it: not a scheme to transfer power from one clique to another, but a movement of the majority in the interest of the majority.

In addition, it may as well be said candidly that this testimony was also deliberately designed as an educational shock to such members and sympathisers of our movement as may still, at this late day, be dabbling with the idea of a shorter cut to socialism by some mysterious prescription for "action".

The Marxist authorities have all spoken in one voice on this question.

The Communist Manifesto, the first, and the most fundamental statement of the principles of scientific socialism, defined the proletarian movement of emancipation, in contradistinction to all others in history, as follows:

"All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."

The communist political method and strategy follow ineluctably from this basic premise. Nowhere and never have the authoritative representatives of Marxism formulated the question otherwise. The Marxists aim to make the social transformation with the majority and not for the majority. The irreconcilable struggle of Marx and Engels against the Blanquists revolved around this pivot.

In 1895, summing up the experience of fifty years, Engels wrote, in his Introduction to Marx's 'Class Struggles in France':

"The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of the unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for, body and soul. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that."

The successors of Marx and Engels followed in their footsteps. The experiences of the Russian revolution confirmed in line the basic premises of the founders of scientific socialism. It was precisely because Lenin and Trotsky had assimilated this concept into their flesh and blood that they knew how to concentrate their whole activity on propaganda to win over the ma-



The Czechoslovak general strike jority, biding their time till they gained the majority and resorting to "action" only when they felt assured of the support of the majority.

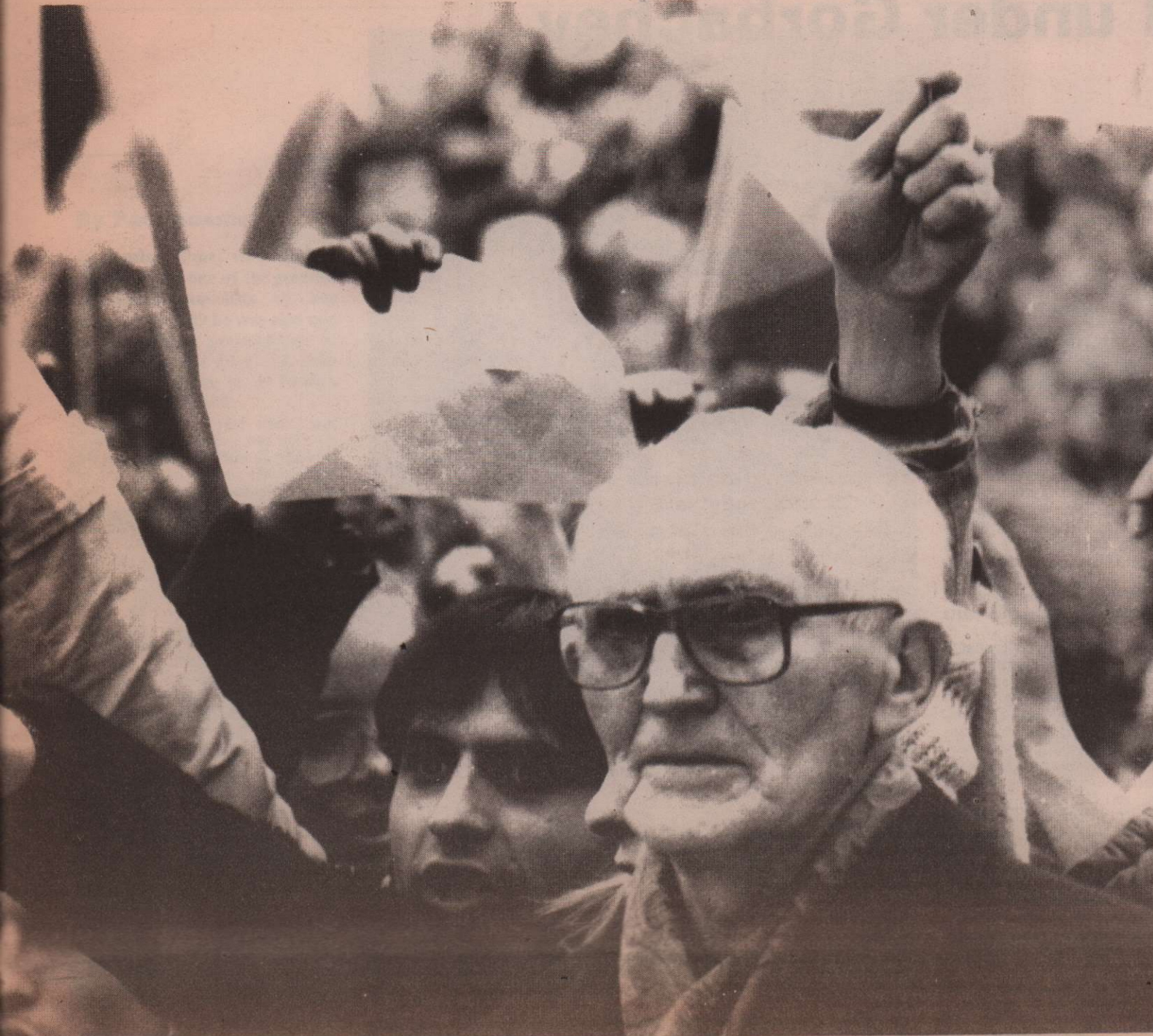
What did they do in the meantime? They "submitted to the majority". What else could they do? Lenin explained it a hundred times, precisely in those months and days when the Bolsheviks were consciously preparing the struggle for power. In his 'April Theses' on 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution', published in Pravda on 20 April 1917, a few days after his return to Russia, Lenin wrote:

"As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time advocate the necessity of transferring the entire power of state to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the masses may by experience overcome their mistakes."

A few days later, he returned to this question, explaining the reason for this attitude, the reason being that "we are not Blanquists, we are Marxists". On April 22 he wrote:

"In order to obtain the power of state the class conscious workers must win the majority to their side. As long as no violence is used against the masses, there is no other road to power. We are not Blanquists, we are not in favour of the seizure of power by a minority. We are Marxists, we stand for a proletarian class struggle against chauvinist defencism, phrases, and dependence on the bourgeoisie."

Not once or twice, but repeatedly and almost continually, so that neither friend nor foe could possibly misunderstand him, in the months directly preceding the October revolution, Lenin limited the Bolshevik task to the propaganda work of "criticising", "exposing errors", and "advocating" in order to "win the majority to their side".



This was not camouflage for the enemy but education for the workers' vanguard. He explained it theoretically as we, following him, tried to explain it in popular language at the trial.

Again, in April 1917, refuting the accusations of Plekhanov and others who accused the Bolsheviks of "anarchism, Blanquism and so forth", Lenin once again explained the question, for the benefit, as he said, of "those who really want to think and learn". Into a few paragraphs he compresses a profound thesis which every member of the workers' vanguard ought to learn by heart. He wrote:

**"Socialism is a democratic movement and its programme...can only be realised with the support of the majority."**

"I absolutely insured myself in my theses against skipping over the still existing peasant movement, or the petty-bourgeois movement in general, against any playing at 'seizure of power' by a workers' government, against any kind of Blanquist adventurism; for I directly referred to the experience of the Paris Commune. And this experience, as we know, and as was shown in detail by Marx in 1871 and by Engels in 1891, absolutely excluded Blanquism, absolutely ensured the direct, immediate and unconditional rule of the majority and the activity of the masses, but only to the extent of the conscious and intelligent action of the majority itself."

"In the theses I definitely reduc-

ed the question to one of a struggle for influence within the Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Labourers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies. In order to leave no trace of doubt in this respect, I twice emphasised in the theses the necessity for patient and persistent 'explanatory' work 'adapted to the practical needs of the masses'.

"Ignorant persons or renegades from Marxism, such as Mr Plekhanov, may cry anarchism, Blanquism, and so forth. But those who really want to think and learn cannot fail to understand that Blanquism means the seizure of power by a minority, whereas the Soviet of Workers', Agricultural Labourers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies are admittedly the direct and immediate organisation of the majority of the people.

"Work confined to a struggle for influence within these Soviets cannot, absolutely cannot, blunder into the swamp of Blanquism. Nor can it blunder into the swamp of anarchism, for anarchism denies the necessity for a state and for state power in the period of transition from the rule of the bourgeoisie to the rule of the proletariat, whereas I, with a precision that excludes all possibility of misunderstanding, insist on the necessity for a state in this period, although, in accordance with Marx and the experience of the Paris Commune, not the usual parliamentary bourgeois state, but a state without a standing army, without a police opposed to the people, without an officialdom placed above the people."

Again explaining where — in 'Marxism differs from Blanquism' — he obviously considered it absolutely necessary for the advanced workers to understand this so as to be sure of their ground at every step — he wrote in a letter to the Central Committee of the party on September 26-27, 1917:

"To be successful, the uprising

must be based not on a conspiracy, not on a party, but on the advanced class. This is the first point.

"The uprising must be based on the revolutionary upsurge of the people. This is the second point.

"The uprising must be based on the crucial point in the history of the maturing revolution, when the activity of the vanguard of the people is at its height, when the vacillations in the ranks of the enemies, and in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted, undecided friends of the revolution are at their highest point. This is the third point.

"It is in pointing out these three conditions as the way of approaching the question of an uprising, that Marxism differs from Blanquism."

Naturally, when Lenin, or any other Marxist, spoke of the necessity of the revolutionary party having the support of the majority, he meant the real majority, whose sentiments are ascertainable in various ways besides the ballot box of the bourgeois state. On the eve of the insurrection he wrote his devastating attack on Zinoviev and Kamenev who opposed the insurrection on the ground, among other things, that "we do not enjoy a majority among the people, and in the absence of that condition insurrection is hopeless."

Lenin, in 'A Letter to the Comrades', written on October 29-30, scornfully dismisses the authors of this statement as "either distorters of the truth or pedants who desire at all costs, without the slightest regard for the true circumstances of the revolution, to have a guarantee in advance that the Bolshevik Party throughout the country has received exactly one half the number of votes plus one". Nevertheless, he took pains to prove the Bolsheviks had the majority by "facts":

"The elections of August 20 in Petrograd"... "The elections to the Borough Dumas in Moscow in

September"... "The new elections to the Soviets"... "The majority of the Peasants' Soviets" who had "expressed their opposition to the coalition"... "The mass of the soldiers"... "Finally...the revolt of the peasantry". He concluded his argument on this point by saying: "No, to doubt now that the majority of the people are following and will follow the Bolsheviks is shameful vacillation."

Once again disavowing Blanquism, he wrote in his polemic against Zinoviev and Kamenev:

"A military conspiracy is Blanquism IF it is not organised by the party of a definite class; IF its

**"A democratic movement...a movement of the majority in the interests of the majority."**

organisers have not reckoned with the political situation in general and the international situation in particular; IF the party in question does not enjoy the sympathy of the majority of people, as proved by definite facts..."

On September 25-27 Lenin called upon the Bolshevik party to take power. In this famous letter, addressed "to the Central Committee, the Petrograd and Moscow Committees of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party", Lenin, with the logic and directness which characterised him, states his premise and his conclusion in the first sentence:

"Having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals, the Bolsheviks can and must take

power into their hands."

He was not worried about a 'formal' majority: "no revolution ever waits for this". But he was sure of the real majority. He insisted upon the revolution "right now", as he expressed it, not sooner and not later, because:

"The majority of the people is with us. This has been proven by the long and difficult road from May 19 to August 12 and September 25: the majority in the Soviets of the capitals is the result of the people's progress to our side. The vacillation of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, and the strengthening of internationalists among them, is proof of the same thing."

The prosecution at the Minneapolis trial attempted to convict us, as charged in the indictment, of an actual "conspiracy to overthrow the government by force and violence". We successfully refuted this accusation, and the indictment covering this point was rejected by the jury.

The most effective element of our refutation of this absurd charge against our small party was our exposition of the democratic basis of the proletarian programme, of the party's reliance on the majority to realise its programme, and its corresponding obligation, while it remains in the minority, to "submit to the majority".

In making this exposition we had a legal purpose, but not only a legal purpose, in mind. As with all the testimony, it was designed primarily to explain and simplify our views and aims to the workers who would be future readers of the published court record.

We also thought a re-statement of the Marxist position in this respect would not be wasted on the members of our own movement, and might even be needed. The discussion which has arisen on this question only proves that we were more correct in this latter assumption than we realised at the time.

Socialism is a democratic movement and its programme, the programme of the vanguard party, can be realised only with the support of the majority. The party's basic task, while it remains in the minority, is "propaganda to win over the majority". To state this was not capitulation to the prejudices of the jury; it is the teaching of Marx and Lenin, as has been shown in the foregoing references.

• Grandizo Munis was a Spanish Trotskyist who later became a spokesperson for the ultra-left group that calls itself the International Communist Current. They consider the existing labour movement as bourgeois, rejecting trade unionism, etc. They publish 'World Revolution' in English.

• Oehlerites were an ex-Trotskyist faction in the US led by Hugh Oehler. They made a principle of *proclaiming* "the revolutionary party" no matter how small its numbers and support, and of counterposing it as a supposedly finished institution to everything else. Essentially they were 'Trotskyists' who were extremely formalistic and rigid in their thinking on general political questions as well as on the party and thus parted company with Trotsky.

They are the unacknowledged political ancestors of organisations like the WRP and the SWP.

• Blanquism was an early form of revolutionary communism in France. The term as used here means the politics of armed insurrection by a conspiratorial minority who would seize power for the workers.

# The USSR under Gorbachev

By Gerry Bates

**T**he immediate background to the crisis of Stalinism was the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Quite soon, Gorbachev launched his twin policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Essentially, *perestroika* meant economic decentralisation and the introduction of some market mechanisms, while *glasnost* was the unfreezing of the political system. Along with them went a post-Cold War attitude to the West on defence issues.

The Western bourgeoisie and a lot of the Western left thought Gorbachev was wonderful. Perhaps the most forthrightly favourable left-wing assessment of Gorbachev was Tariq Ali's.

*"Gorbachev represents a progressive, reformist current within the Soviet elite, whose programme, if successful, would represent an enormous gain for socialists and democrats on a world scale. The scale of Gorbachev's operation is, in fact, reminiscent of the efforts of... Abraham Lincoln. In order to preserve the Union, Lincoln had to push through a second American revolution based on the abolition of slavery. In order to preserve the Soviet Union, Gorbachev needs to complete the political revolution (which is already under way), but one based on the abolition of the whole nomenklatura system."* ('Revolution from Above', p xiii.)

In this view, Gorbachev is a revolutionary if 'from above' taking the bureaucracy by storm from within. It is preposterous, but widely held.

In fact, a closer parallel than Lincoln would be F W de Klerk in South Africa: a reforming autocrat, forced to introduce quite wide ranging reforms because of the terrible problems faced by the ruling class he represents. Like de Klerk, Gorbachev faces a right wing 'traditionalist' opposition, and factions of the ruling class that would like to go further, faster. But like de Klerk, he is reforming the system because of and in the interests of the ruling group.

Like all reforming dictators, he is faced with a dilemma: if reform is not introduced, the system could suffocate itself and die. But once you loosen the chains, the prisoners want more and more. In two spheres, the prisoners have got completely out of control — sections of the working class, especially miners, have erupted in revolt; and the oppressed national minorities now threaten Gorbachev and the bureaucracy with catastrophe.

Undoubtedly, the economic situation in the USSR is very serious. The system is one of 'bureaucratic planning'; but the phrase doesn't capture the extent of the USSR's economic paralysis.

Soviet figures are unreliable, but the general outline is clear. In 1951-55 the average growth in national income was 11.2%. By 1966-7, it was 7.75%. By 1981-85, it had fallen to 3.5%.

Other basic indicators tell a similar story. According to Aganbegyan, life expectancy did not rise from 1966 to 1986, and is much lower than in Western Europe. Infant mortality rose from 22.9 per 1000 in 1971 to 26 per 1,000 in 1985 (much higher than Britain — 10.8). Quite contrary to the Stalinoid mythology of groups like *Militant*, Soviet expenditure on

health is lower than in Britain — less than 4% of GNP (6% in Britain 9% in France, 10.5% in the USA).

Labour productivity is notoriously bad and getting worse: the rate of increase in industry fell from 5.7% a year in 1966-70 to 3.2% in 1981-85; in agriculture from 6.6% to 2.6% and in construction from 3.9% to 1.6%. On average, it takes two Soviet workers to produce what one US worker produces in industry and in agriculture four.

Goods are of poor quality. Soviet computer technology is backward — a big, big problem in the 1990s.

In an average Soviet factory, work goes in cycles. Most of the time, everyone dawdles. Work is held up because supplies haven't arrived, or because machinery has broken down. Then comes the end of the month. The manager panics because the factory hasn't met its plan target. The target is reached by 'storming' — working frantically, striving to turn out goods any old how, without checking, with parts missing.

So a good proportion of what is produced is rubbish. And the bureaucratic chaos spreads throughout society. In the 1930s a sort of 'storming' produced results. Millions of workers were hurled into digging coal, building power stations, and producing steel. Even today, forced march methods can produce results in military and space sectors. But as a general regime for a modern economy, which needs to be flexible in response to changing technology and people's needs, 'storming' is disastrous.

Worse: the bureaucrats are incompetent. A large proportion of them are elderly men, with little

***"What Gorbachev's economics has meant so far is increased pressure on the workers to produce more."***

education, who got their jobs by toadying. The ordinary factories can't produce fridges, so the Defence Ministry produces them. Housing is scarce, so each factory corners its own chunk of housing. Each factory and each ministry tries to secure its own sources of supply by producing the supplies it needs itself, so there is wasteful duplication. The black market is huge.

Gorbachev wants to shake up the economy and the managers. He is moving in five main directions.

- \* A drive for discipline, against corruption and alcoholism.

- \* Giving the rules of profit and loss, supply and demand, more scope in the economy.

- \* Exposing corrupt bureaucrats to the threat of public exposure and losing their jobs.

- \* Stacking top jobs with his own supporters.

- \* Withdrawing from Afghanistan and negotiating arms cuts with the US to reduce the terrible drain on the USSR from military spending (although events in Azerbaijan are causing problems here).

On paper, he has gone a long way towards turning the USSR into a market economy. Since January 1986, 60% of industrial enterprises have been 'self-financing': they are supposed to keep profits and decide for themselves what to do with them — when and how to invest.

Since January 1987, individual ministries and some large enter-



Azeris burn down Soviet-Iranian border fence

prises have been able to do business with the West. Since May 1987, a new law has greatly increased the scope for co-operative enterprises. Private enterprise is being given more room. The USSR's first private hospital opened in May 1987.

In January 1990, McDonald's opened in Moscow, symbolising a new attitude to foreign investment (still very restricted).

Pro-Gorbachev economists talk about taking all industries except the most basic, large ones out of the central plan; having banks operate commercially; increasing wage differentials; 'shaking out' some 15 million workers from inefficient enterprises; and raising the prices of goods to gear the price system to supply and demand.

Since March 1988, groups of agricultural workers can make commercial contracts with a collective farm. Limits on private plots have been lifted. Collective farms can do business directly with the west.

But the results of all this have so far been meagre. Not only have growth rates been unimpressive, it is doubtful how far the market has become any sort of counterweight to bureaucratic command and inertia. Economic measures similar to Gorbachev's have been tried in the Eastern bloc before. In agriculture they have sometimes worked. In industry they have been unsuccessful. They were tried in the USSR in the 1960s. Again and again they have been thwarted by inertia.

The 'self-financing' enterprises, for example, say that 80% of their profits still go to their central ministries. The officials in the ministries don't want to let the money out of their hands.

In practice, what Gorbachev's economics has meant so far is increased pressure on the workers to produce more, increased wage differentials, and increased insecurity.

**O**n the political front *glasnost* was an attempt to unblock the arteries of public opinion, encourage a more critical attitude (especially among managers), and take the sting out of criticism of lack of democracy.

It has had significant effects. Most dramatically, there were elections of the 'parliament' in which dissidents like Andrei Sakharov were elected, and prominent CPSU officials were annihilated. Debates in Parliament are televised.

It is a very long way short of parliamentary democracy. Gorbachev is able to get very

***"The 'left' of the bureaucracy is a fraction of the ruling class. Socialists and the workers' movement need to retain their complete independence."***

authoritarian policies through, such as the ban on strikes following last summer's miner's strikes; the opposition remains feeble.

But the elections reflected a genuine opening up of public life. Dissidents do now get a platform. There has been quite a flowering of critical opinion in the arts: long-banned books, films and plays are now permitted. Newspapers discuss political issues with a new openness

(although hardly enough to justify Tariq Ali's comment that the USSR is the only place in the world with 'absolute freedom of speech!'). Old Bolsheviks have been rehabilitated — but not Trotsky of course.

Divisions within the bureaucracy are clear and public. Often this is discussed in terms of a three-way split: Gorbachev in the middle, Ligachev representing the conservatives, and ousted Moscow Party boss Boris Yeltsin representing the radicals. But this is too crude a picture. There is, of course, a conservative wing, and Ligachev is one of them. But the radical wing is by no means easy to define. Yeltsin is not even a socialist, and has some sympathy, at least, with the growing anti-semitic movement *Pamyat*. Yeltsin owes his popularity to the determination with which he launched his popular campaign against the old Mafia-style Party apparatus in Moscow. He is a very effective populist. But he represents little beyond that.

Essentially these divisions are within the ruling bureaucracy. There may be deeper divisions within the CPSU itself, and such divisions elsewhere have proved important. But it is important to remember that the 'left' of the bureaucracy is a fraction of the ruling class. Socialists and the workers' movement need to retain their complete independence from them.

Gorbachev's move at the Central Committee in February to abandon the CPSU's monopoly of politics must be a calculated gamble. The reform, he hopes, will calm the situation and give the CPSU sufficient credit to enable it to win supremacy in free political competition. Otherwise the CPSU's political monopoly will be eroded anyway, de facto if not de jure, and the system will collapse in an uncontrolled way.



By Paul Adams

Ignazio Silone, who died in 1978, was one of the greatest socialist novelists of our time. Until 1929 he was also one of the central personalities of the Communist Party of Italy and a key figure in its foreign underground work.

Silone — his real name was Secundo Tranquilli — was born on May Day 1900, the son of peasants in Pescina dei Marsi. He left this area at the age of 15 after the great earthquake of Avezzano which had claimed the lives of his mother and two brothers. The impressions of this early part of his life are contained in a number of his stories and novels.

At 17 he joined the socialist youth and soon became the editor of its weekly paper *Avanguardia*. He became the leading figure in the anti-war youth movement. With the split in the Italian Socialist Party in 1921, Silone was one of those who left to found the Communist Party, whose Young Communist League he was to lead.

Silone was never a leading thinker in the party. Above all he was an organiser and journalist — from 1922 he was editor of the Party's paper *Il Lavoratore*, though that work was soon interrupted by Mussolini's rise to power in October of that year.

A critical moment in his political development came, in his own opinion, when in May 1927 he and Togliatti participated as representatives of the PCI in an extraordinary session of the Enlarged Executive of the Comintern. The incident is recorded in the collection 'Emergency Exit'.

At the first meeting we attended we had the impression that we had come too late. It was held in a small office of the Comintern, and the German Ernst Thälmann was presiding. He immediately began reading a draft resolution against Trotsky to be presented in plenary session.

The resolution violently condemned a certain document sent by Trotsky to the political office of the Russian Communist Party. At that meeting of the senior convent the Russian delegation consisted of Stalin, Rykov, Bukharin and Manuilsky, which was extremely unusual.

At the end of the reading Thälmann asked us if we agreed with the draft resolution. The Finn, Ottomar Kuusinen, the future Quisling of 1941, did not find it strong enough.

Since no-one else asked for the floor, after consulting with Togliatti, I apologised to those present for having come late and for not having had a chance to read the document in question.

"Actually," Thälmann candidly remarked, "we haven't seen it either."

Confronted with this all-too-frank reply, I preferred to doubt my ears and repeated my objection in other terms.

"It may well be," I said, "that the Trotsky document should be condemned, but obviously we can't condemn it until we read it."

"But we haven't read it either," replied Thälmann. "And neither have most of the delegates here, except for the Russians."

Thälmann was speaking German and his words were being translated into Russian for Stalin and into French for two or three of us. The answer translated to me seemed so incredible that I had words with the translator.

"It's impossible that Thälmann should have said that," I said. "Please give me his answer again, word for word!"



## Eyewitness to Stalin's rise to power

### Ignazio Silone

#### A great socialist novelist

At this point, Stalin intervened. He was standing at one side of the room and seemed to be the only calm and unruffled person in the group.

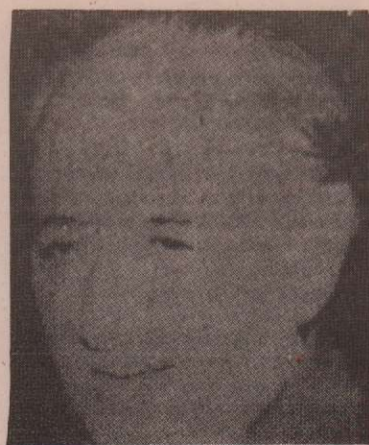
"The political office of the party has thought it best not to translate Trotsky's document and distribute it to the delegates of the International Executive," Stalin said, "because there are various allusions in it to the policy of the Soviet Government in China."

(Stalin was lying. The mysterious document was published abroad later by Trotsky himself in a pamphlet entitled *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* and, as everyone can now see, it contains no state secrets, but is a violent attack on the China policy of Stalin and the Communist International.)

In a speech on April 5 1927, before the Moscow Soviet, Stalin had exalted Chiang Kai-shek and confirmed his faith in the Guomindang, and that was barely a week before the famous anti-Communist about-face of the Chinese Nationalist head and his party...the Communists had been suddenly expelled from the Guomindang, and some tens of thousands of their followers were killed in Shanghai and Wuhan. It is therefore understandable that Stalin did not want a debate about his mistake and tried to protect himself behind "state secrets".

Ernst Thälmann asked me if Stalin's explanation satisfied me.

"I don't dispute the right of the political office to keep any document secret," I said. "But I don't understand how others can be required to condemn an unknown document."



Ignazio Silone

"This is unheard of," Kuusinen was shouting, red in the face, "that in the citadel of the world revolution we still have such *petit bourgeois*!"

The only person who remained calm and unperturbed was Stalin. He said: "If even one delegate is against the draft resolution, it must not be presented." Then he added, "Perhaps the Italian comrades are not well informed about our internal situation. I suggest we postpone the meeting till tomorrow and that someone here spend the evening with our Italian comrades and explain the situation to them."

The Bulgarian Kolarov was given this unpleasant task.

"Let's be frank," he said with a smile. "Maybe you think I've read the document. No, I haven't read the document. Shall I tell you the whole truth? The document doesn't interest me. Shall I tell you more?"

Even if Trotsky were to send me a copy in secret, I would refuse to read it. My dear Italian friends, this is not a question of documents. I know that Italy is a country of academics, but this is not academy. Here we are, in the thick of a struggle for power between two rival groups in the Russian central directorate. Which of these groups do we want to line up with? That's the question. Documents have nothing to do with it. It's not a question of finding the historical truth about the failure of the revolution in China. It's a power struggle between two opposed and irreconcilable groups. We have to choose. And I've already made up my mind. I'm for the majority group. Whatever the minority does or says, I repeat that I'm for the majority. Documents don't interest me. We're not in an academy here."

He refilled our glasses with tea and looked at us like a schoolteacher at two obstreperous boys. "Have I made myself clear?" he asked, looking straight at me.

"Yes," I answered, "very clear." "Have I persuaded you?" he asked me. "No," I answered. "Why not?" he wanted to know.

"I'd have to explain why I'm against Fascism," I said.

Kolarov pretended to get indignant, while Togliatti expressed his opinion in more moderate but no less decisive terms. "You can't come out for the majority or minority per se," he said. "You can't ignore the background of the political question."

Kolarov listened to him with a benevolent smile of compassion. "You're still too young," he told us as he accompanied us to the door. "You don't understand yet what politics is all about."

The following day Silone and Togliatti repeated their position and it was now supported by the Frenchman Albert Treint and the Swiss

Jules Humbert-Droz. Again Stalin intervened: "The draft resolution is withdrawn," he declared.

At first Silone believed that Stalin had been generous in withdrawing the resolution because it failed to be agreed unanimously. But he soon learned better. On his return journey he passed through Berlin:

(There) I read in the papers that the Comintern Executive had censured Trotsky severely for his report on the events in China.

I went to the headquarters of the German Communist Party and asked Thälmann for an explanation. "This is untrue," I said bitterly. "You know they didn't vote the censure." But he explained that in critical cases the statutes of the International authorised the President to adopt any measure in the name of the Executive. They had waited for us to leave Moscow to vote in our name on a text we had not approved. This also explained Stalin's impassivity before the senior convent.

During my few days of enforced idleness in Berlin, while I was waiting for my false documents to be put in order so that I might return to Italy, I read in the papers that the American, Hungarian and Czech Communist Parties had vigorously blasted Trotsky's letter.

I asked Thälmann, "So the mysterious document has finally been made public?"

"No," he answered. "But you should learn what Communist discipline means from the American, Hungarian and Czech Communists."

In Spring 1929 Silone asked for an unlimited leave of absence from the PCI on medical grounds and moved to Davos on doctor's orders. He did not resume political activity, and in 1931 he officially broke his links with the Communist Party, though he continued to give aid to the resistance.

For a period Silone retreated to a position which said the problem was the influence of the Russians; better concern oneself with the problems of one's own 'national' class struggle. While a few of his collaborators in the underground, like Pietro Tresso, understood the real significance of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the Comintern and became Trotskyists, Silone was to draw closer to the Catholic Church.

It was in Davos that he wrote his first book, the brilliant anti-Fascist novel 'Fontamara'. It is the story of the development of an anti-Fascist and socialist consciousness among South Italian peasants.

This book brought Silone worldwide fame.

He remained in Switzerland through the rest of the period of fascism in Italy, not returning until 1944. In this period he wrote a number of novels and short stories: 'Seed Beneath the Snow', 'School for Dictators', 'A Handful of Blackberries' and 'Bread and Wine'.

This last book, which became almost as popular as 'Fontamara', expressed in novel form Silone's growing acceptance of Christian values.

The hero, an underground organiser disguised as a priest and forced therefore to carry out some priestly duties, embodies the two 'currents' — Communism and Christianity — that Silone saw as expressions of humanity. Significantly the peasants in the novel warm more to the Christian than the Communist side.

Silone's political development continued rightwards. He joined the Democratic Socialists after the war; then when the party split into the Nenni (left) and Saragat (right) factions under the pressure of the Cold War, Silone left the party. But his sympathies seem to have been with the right.

# Tough guys and strong women

## CINEMA

Belinda Weaver reviews 'The War of the Roses' and 'Sea of Love'

**Strong women have men by the leading strings in two new movies in town, 'Sea of Love' and 'The War of the Roses'. Former screen tough guys Al Pacino and Michael Douglas don't seem to know what hit them.**

In 'Sea of Love', Frank Keller (Pacino), a cop with twenty years' service, gets involved with Helen, a suspect in the string of lonelyhearts murders he is investigating. Helen (Ellen Barkin) is a sexual magnet to Pacino; he can't resist her, despite the risk to his life.

The film is competent enough as a thriller, but there is something off putting and queasy in the character of Frank.

Thrillers are usually about crimes or conspiracies, with the main characters either cops or agents of some kind. In romantic thrillers, the heroine was rewarded for her terrors by the love of her knight. His armour might have been tarnished, but he was true blue underneath.

That formula is well past its sell-by date now. No-one believes that the cops or the CIA are 'nice', however necessary they may believe them to be. In movies now, we don't want the cop to get the girl. He's no catch.

This is particularly true in 'Sea of Love'. Pacino's Frank is a mess, a drunken, belligerent, self pitying manipulator who's waiting around to be rescued. Everything about Frank signals desperation, but he's gone slack; he won't lift a finger to save himself. Self pity has sapped

his strength.

Pacino is around fifty. Frank's face looks lived in, and by a bad tenant at that, someone who leaves the beds unmade and the taps dripping. Frank's self pity oozes out of him like sweat. He complains when people keep pressing him to retire; euthanasia seems more fitting.

And he's supposed to attract Barkin, a sexual powerhouse of a woman who's got it all together! The only way this can play is for her to fall for him out of pity, by sensing his desperation, his need. But it isn't shown that way. Helen's attraction to Pacino is just a given, not explained, not backed up.

For all her independence and style at the start, Helen is reduced to the role of mother figure, nurturer and rescuer of feeble Frank. It's a shame. We don't want to see a strong woman kowtowing to this pathetic basket case; Frank doesn't deserve her.

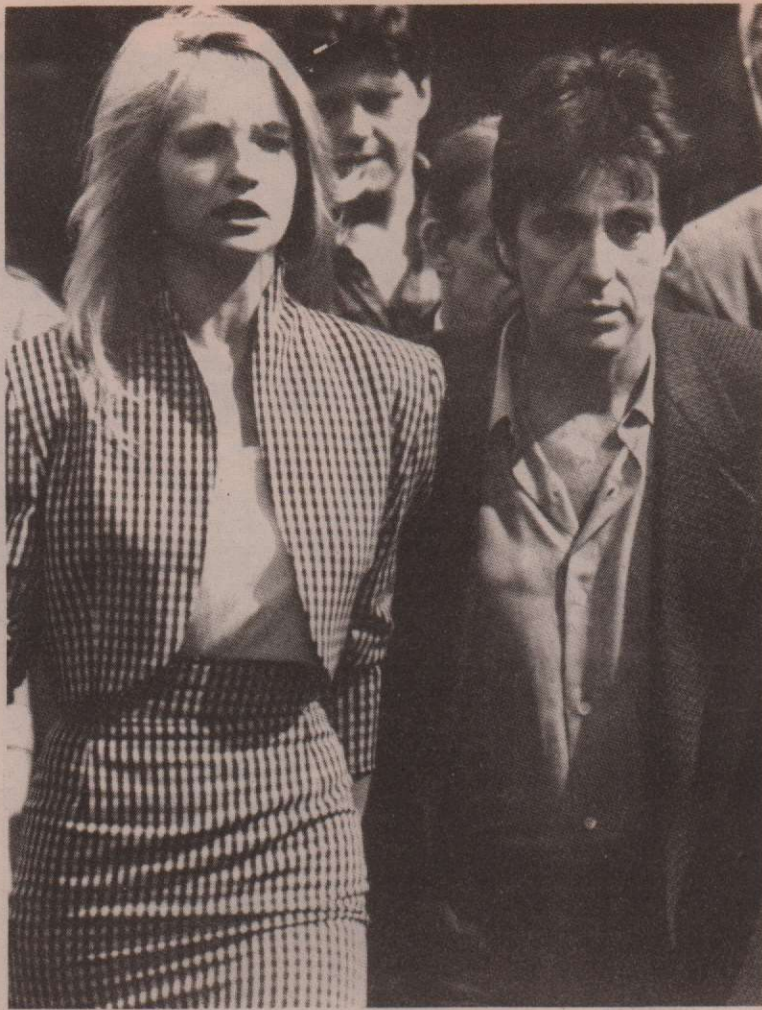
The film gives aid and comfort to the flabby, never-grown-up, middle aged male who, despite paunch, smoker's cough and incipient alcoholism, can kid himself he's really a tough guy underneath, and thus deserving of a woman of Barkin's stature.

Women turn the tables towards revenge as wife Barbara Rose (Kathleen Turner) dishes it out to movie husband Oliver (Michael Douglas) in 'The War of the Roses'. Oliver Rose isn't self pitying like Frank Keller, but he's just as pathetic, a man who only walks tall because a woman is propping him up.

Oliver is fatuously complacent. He thinks he has it all, a lovely wife, two children at college, a beautiful home, worldly success. Alas, things in the Rose household are about to go very sour. Barbara's needs, kept down for so long, are about to surface and she turns out to be as determined and as malevolent as the shark in 'Jaws'.

The disintegration of a marriage is about to begin.

The film should be better; you



Barkin and Pacino

come out with a bad case of the 'so whats?'. Sure, marriage can be hell, and people do crazy things to get revenge, but the savagery in this film is too cartoonish to be taken seriously. It's meant to be black comedy, so the laughs aren't unexpected, but the cautionary tale falls flat.

The Roses' pampered lifestyle may be partly to blame; the sufferings of the rich never seem all that bad, do they? But Turner and Douglas also seem to be playing it tongue in cheek. They're having a ball brawling and fighting, but they don't convince. Barbara and Oliver are like Ken and Barbie dolls, pretty to look at, but empty, empty. Tragedy could not touch them.

All the same, it's good to see a full frontal attack on male complacency, even if the tone is slightly

off.

What both films have in common is the way the male characters use their women for kicks. They like their women to keep them off balance, to inject danger and excitement and unpredictability into their lives. Of course, they want the house kept immaculate as well. But what do the women get out of it?

The subtle message of both films is that women's needs can, literally, be a killer; that, to fulfil herself, a woman may well walk all over a man, in stiletto heels, no less. Hollywood is obviously so terrified of strong women that it has to spike their guns or kill them off. But the women are on screen all the same, and we can draw a different message — what is a great woman like her doing with a bromide like him? That's our revenge.

# Out...on your own time

## TV

By Vicki Morris

**Channel 4 have boldly brought the new series of 'Out on Tuesday' forward an hour to 9pm on Tuesday evenings.**

Are they promoting homosexuality? Well, it's an interesting programme because it's all sorts of different people, as various as heterosexuals, and every bit as 'normal'.

Unfortunately, lots of 'straight' Britons still don't agree with this view. Sally Ardlé, who produces the programme, bravely took part in a Radio Essex phone-in about it, and had to put up with a lot of paranoid abuse alongside some more intelligent thinking from gay and some straight callers.

Channel 4 and Radio Essex alike are doing the right thing, giving lesbians and gays a platform, and at the same time not backing off from the inevitable abuse which will come their way. It takes a lot of courage to do as Sally Ardlé does and get on the phone to the listening public.

A lot of listeners' objections were part of a general prudishness and even disgust about sex as such. This is a remarkably repressed country, and the atmosphere is getting worse. We already have some of the most illiberal legislation on homosexuality of any West European country. And the Tory government is trying to make things worse.

The first 'Out on Tuesday' of this series talked about gays who, most people might find it hard to believe, support the Conservative Party. And some gays who embody every Tory value under the sun...money grubbing, go-getting, enterprising.

There was an interview with Matthew Parris, who was a Tory MP for seven years and gradually became known to be gay, although he didn't 'come out' until he had ceased being an MP. The only 'out' MP is Chris Smith of the Labour Party.

'Out on Tuesday' polled MPs on a number of issues around homosexuality. There were majorities among both Labour and Tory MPs against re-criminalisation of homosexuality, and for lowering the age of consent for gay men.

A small majority of Labour MPs are in favour of gays having partnership rights equal to those enjoyed by heterosexuals. There was the same support for lesbians' access to Donor Insemination. Tory MPs were massively against either of them.

Unfortunately, the programme didn't examine the reasons for the difference between the parties; hopefully it will be a topic for a later episode.

There was an examination of how Tory MPs are discouraged from coming out and encouraged to get married before they reach their forties in case they should even be suspected of being 'confirmed bachelors'.

The rest of the programme showed upper-class and yuppie lesbians and gays. I suppose just to prove that lesbians and gay men are as diverse in their political opinions and lifestyles as heterosexuals. Perhaps there was just a hint that if the Tories got their act together they could attract a lot more lesbian and gay voters.

Matthew Parris assured us that people's sexuality is included amongst the things to which Margaret Thatcher is largely indifferent. It makes no odds what top people do in bed, so long as they are good at bossing others around, or making a fast buck.

However, one of the women who was interviewed for the programme has been sacked for it — for being a lesbian in effect. Hers at least was one employer who has not been able to rid himself of restrictive prejudice.

# Other people's trades

## LES HEARN'S SCIENCE COLUMN

Les Hearn reviews 'Other People's Trades' by Primo Levi, Michael Joseph £12.95

**This book isn't specifically about science but it is by a scientist, the late Primo Levi. Born in Italy, and brought up in the Mussolini years, Levi's life was marked in two ways.**

Though not of the Jewish faith, he was by accident of birth and by Italy's Nazi-inspired racial laws classified a Jew. Arrested as a member of an amateurish and ineffectual resistance group, he was sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

There, his life was marked (and extended for some 40 years) by his university training as a chemist. Spared hard labour on starvation rations for menial laboratory work, he survived to the end of the war. His experiences in Auschwitz and on his long and circuitous journey home are described with humanity in his first books, 'If This Is A

Man' and 'The Truce'.

For me his best book is 'The Periodic Table' where the qualities of some of the chemical elements are adduced in the description of people and episodes in his life.

'Other People's Trades' is a collection of articles Levi wrote for *La Stampa*. They range from reminiscences of childhood impressions and adolescent contests to the dangers of a little knowledge, via butterflies' brains; the versatility of beetles, with their armoured wing-cases and their life-styles which include sucking out the predigested innards of snails or laying their eggs inside carefully rolled balls of dung; the origins and fate of shellac, made by the parasitic activities of myriads of tiny insects on plants; reasons for fearing spiders; the spuriously scientific credentials of psychological tests of job applicants; Jewish culture in Eastern Europe; and children's games.

His observation of human peculiarities is acute. In one piece, Levi describes the unofficial hallmark of the traditional chemist — a crescent-shaped scar in the palm of the hand. This is caused by the ill-advised manoeuvre of pushing a glass tube through a small hole in a rubber bung to make a gas delivery tube. The tube predictably breaks, stabbing the victim in the hand. Levi suggests that the stigma is becoming less common as the newer generation of chemists can quickly construct this apparatus from precision-made sub-units. However, the impoverished school

chemistry lab still relies on make-it-yourself equipment and I, a careless chemistry teacher, too bear "the mark of the chemist"!

Then there is the friendliness, beauty and usefulness of wood which goes hand in hand with its propensity for self-destructive oxidation. Levi exemplifies this with the case of the ten barrels of sawdust kept at his chemicals factory for clearing up. After some months, one barrel only 'remembered' its instability and started smoking. Inside, a tiny nest of embers was found.

He muses on the language of chemists, not perhaps deliberately obscure but nevertheless incomprehensible to most. How to characterise the process by which the Arabic for 'Java incense' transmutes by mishearing, misspelling and mistranslation over the centuries into 'benzene', there to be confused with the name of the motor car inventor, Benz?

And talk of a 'system' for naming the elements is empty when some are named for their chemical origins, others for nationalistic reasons after their town or country of origin, or for reasons of honour or pride after famous scientists or after their discoverers.

Levi ponders the strange data of our world: the 15,000 tonnes of space dust falling on the Earth each day; the snail's pace of electrons in a wire (25cm per hour!); that a Danish cow weighs twice an Indian cow but produces 10 times the milk; that a hectare of land can support

equal weights of cows and bacteria; that a cubic centimetre of soil contains as many bacteria as there are people on Earth; that the energy used up in speaking for three hours a day for one's whole life would barely heat a cup of tea.

In another cautionary tale, like that of the self-combusting sawdust, Levi recounts his dealing with a spillage of petrol. Not only was there a danger of ignition from the static electricity that builds up as petrol and other organic solvents are poured out.

The day being cold, the petrol vapour hung around in an explosive cloud. Levi got the fire brigade to cover the neighbourhood in foam. But there was also the vapour-filled tank, prone to explode just as do empty car petrol tanks. He suggested emptying several carbon dioxide fire extinguishers into the tank and there was no explosion.

Only later did Levi learn that, while CO<sub>2</sub> puts out fire, CO<sub>2</sub> extinguishers can cause and have caused some bad fires. As the extinguisher is rapidly discharged, the gas cools down, forming some needle-like crystals of solid CO<sub>2</sub>. Friction causes these to become statically charged, with the attendant risk of sparks.

One always learns from Primo Levi's writing, whether it is about people or things. His readers were much saddened by his presumed suicide some three years ago but cannot fail to be heartened by the humanity that sparkles from his pages.

# Solidarity wasted

By Sam Eaton

**T**he ambulance workers have voted to accept the pay deal cooked up by Roger Poole and NHS management.

As the Merseyside ambulance workers explain on this page, the final settlement looks very similar to the original offer rejected by ambulance workers in September last year. Poole has managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

The ambulance workers have had one of the best opportunities presented to any group of workers over the last few years to decisively defeat the Tories, they have had massive, overwhelming popular support. But that support has been wasted. Why?

A big part of the blame for the outcome of the dispute lies with the strategy pursued by the leadership. They did not adopt an approach that could unite ambulance workers and mobilise the huge reservoir of popular support through solidarity strike action.

The ambulance workers' own ranks were divided from day one. For most of the dispute there were huge gaps between different regions. In London, for instance, the vast majority of ambulance workers were locked out or suspended, and a significant minority took strike action, whereas in other areas crews were taking very limited action and more or less working normally. The TUC's 14 point guidelines were never evenly and universally applied.

Ambulance management were allowed to take the lead and dictate the scale of the action by controlling the number of suspensions.

Even when, under rank and file pressure, Poole unveiled a new policy of 'total non co-operation' in the last weeks of the dispute, the initiative was left in the hands of the management.

As a delegate to the national ambulance stewards conference on February 14th explained:

"Even if the suspension drive succeeded, there is a danger that the tactic will lead simply to lock-outs, with in-

adequate emergency cover. As one steward from Lincolnshire put it, 'The aim should be to get locked in, not locked out'. Unless the unions can secure emergency cover, if necessary by occupying the stations, then serious splits would open up in ambulance workers' ranks.

"The alternative — a strike with emergency cover — would unify the action, and stands a better chance of stiffening it in the shire counties, where it has been weakest than calling on hesitant crews to get themselves suspended and locked out."

But Poole held out, refusing to even consider the option of calling a national ballot for an indefinite strike with emergency cover.

Poole was not averse to throwing the odd red herring around. He used the mistaken calls for a strike without emergency cover by a small number of crews to confuse the issues, making it more difficult to get over the rational case for a strike with cover.

But, because of their lack of industrial muscle, the ambulance workers could not have hoped to win on their own.

As Eric Roberts of North West London NUPE explained in January:

"We won't win on our own. We've never believed that we could."

"We're going to need solidarity action from other groups of workers. 30 January is just the start."

"We know other trade unionists will back us. There is not going to be a repeat of the miners' strike. From the collections and meetings we have done we can see the support is there."

"Other workers know that if we win this one then it will be easier for them to win their own battles. The mood is changing in this country. At last people are beginning to realise that Thatcher is beatable."

Poole and Willis wasted that support. Tragically, they may well have strengthened Thatcher by allowing the Tories to win a battle in which our side was so strong.

What was needed was an escalation of the dispute along the lines argued by the Liverpool crews at their 7,000-strong

demonstration on January 30th.

"Today's demonstration is only a starting point for building up the campaign. We haven't got the muscle to win this dispute by ourselves. So the next stage is to urge the leadership of the TUC to call a one-day general strike and that's what we're going to be campaigning for."

Poole and Willis rejected calls for serious solidarity strike action.

Poole played on illusions that the ambulance workers could win on their own. His approach was summed up by a delegate to the stewards' conference:

"Only a few voices pointed to an alternative way of escalating the dispute: through appeals for solidarity strike action. Poole directly attacked this view by arguing that it was a 'cop out'. 'We are in control of this dispute if we lose then it will be our fault', said Poole, adding: 'We can't go blaming Willis if we lose this one'."

It's not surprising that in this situation the solidarity action that did take place was the result of rank and file pressure, sadly from a minority of ambulance workers. As Eric Roberts explains:

"It was our initiative to call for solidarity strikes on 6 December. The march and rally we called has forced the TUC into taking action."

"Without that pressure from the



"I have here in my hand..."

ranks they would never have called this 15-minute action.

The problem was that there was no organised force amongst ambulance workers, or in the broader trade union movement, that could have taken on the task of building effective wide-scale solidarity action in the face of opposition from Poole and Willis.

In the ambulance dispute we saw a glimpse of the potential strength of organised labour in the widespread response to the 30th January protest. What was missing was an organisation of the rank and file across industry that could have effectively harnessed that potential.

The task of every activist in the unions is to build such a movement.

## The poll tax and East Europe

### WHETTON'S WEEK

#### A miner's diary

People are really beginning to understand the poll tax and see what it is all about. And I'm not sure it's not tied in with what's happening in Eastern Europe.

People have seen on their screens what can be achieved when they are united and committed. Maggie Thatcher has been throwing her arms up in delight at what's happened in Eastern Europe, but she may well find herself not so delighted when she faces the same action at home.

We've seen that the people, if they're united and committed enough, can topple Ceausescu. They can topple the Berlin Wall. The poll tax is a small and insignificant pimple compared to those tasks.

We've seen the state machinery swing into action against the poll tax protests and we've seen the usual attempts to blame it all on *Militant* and the "Trots". Much to his discredit, Kinnock has gone along with that line of argument.

I can understand the Tories screaming about it, but I can't understand the Labour leadership. If their argument is right, that *Militant* is only a tiny rump, then how come this tiny rump is able to organise on such a massive scale?

In fact it is mainly ordinary people out on the streets who have seen the example of what has happened in Eastern Europe and have decided to go out and have a go here. If Kinnock were to identify himself with those people who are raising strong objections to the poll tax, rather than throwing his weight behind Maggie Thatcher condemning a few militants, then he'd do a better service to the working class.

An inquiry is going to take place into the accusations against Arthur Scargill and Peter Heathfield. I suppose we've got to be seen to be putting our own house in order.

I have every confidence that Scargill will have an answer for the charges.

I had hoped for something more positive from the union executive to support the president at a time when he is under attack, not for what he has done, but because of what he stands for. But now we have to await the outcome of the inquiry.

Paul Whetton is a member of *Mantons NUM*, South Yorkshire.

## Why solidarity was needed

**T**he key reason why solidarity action was needed to help ambulance workers win is spelt out this month in *Labour Research*.

"The dispute by 19,000 ambulance workers has been costing the public £2 million a week, easily outstripping the amount needed for a settlement."

January's edition of *Nursing Times* explained why:

"The cost of settling the dispute this year with a couple of extra per cent would be minimal. And because any award would be for last year's pay round, it could have no impact on this year's 'going rate', which is already well over the much-quoted 6.5%. The government's real object now is to resist any long-term pay formula and, even more important, not to appear to capitulate in the face of industrial action."

With the Tories digging in their heels, the ambulance workers were unlikely to shift them with their own efforts.

Many ambulance workers shied away from facing up to the logic of the government's tough stance. They felt that it would be too difficult to organise solidarity action which would be against the Tory laws on solidarity action. Poole, playing on their professional pride, encouraged them to believe that they could win on their own.

But the tragedy was that the dispute provided the best opportunity in ages of successfully defeating the anti-union

laws. The ambulance workers had unprecedented levels of popular support. A resolute call for solidarity action would have stood a good chance of defeating the Tories and their laws.

## What the deal adds up to

Months ago we were offered 9% over 18 months (1.4.89-30.9.90); that offer is back on the table but then with an extra 7.9% for 6 months (1.10.90-31.3.91) but because the 7.9% is only for 6 months it is only worth 4% a year. Thus the actual rise over two years is only 13%; *this is hardly staggering!* There is an extra 2% available for local productivity, but do we want 2% extra by cutting jobs or services? And there is no pay formula. After a six month dispute we have an offer which does not even match the inflation rate and no guarantee for future years.

We need a formula to ensure that we never need to take industrial action ever again.

Merseyside Ambulance Worker

## Broad Left supporters expelled from CPSA

By Mark Serwotka, Merthyr Tydfil DSS

**B**y 23 votes to one, the National Executive Committee of the CPSA has decided to expel eight Broad Left supporters from the union.

The eight, all from the union's largest branch at Newcastle Central Office (DHSS), are the victims of a vicious political witch-hunt which has become an everyday fact of life in the union.

Newcastle Central Office branch, representing 5,000 members, has always been vital in the running of the CPSA. Its votes in elections and at the union's conference have at times been the deciding factor in many important periods for the union. For the last two decades it has been regarded as a stronghold for the left in the union, and the *Militant* in particular.

Two years ago, the so-called Charter Group (right-wing/Stalinist alliance) took control of CPSA, and emboldened by their seizure of power, the demoralisation of defeats for the union, and in line with witch-hunts taking place throughout the labour movement, they decided to act.

Using allegations from a few right-wingers in the branch, the NEC suspended the entire Newcastle Branch Committee and replaced them with a number of full-time union officials to run the branch. The following two years then saw these full-timers attempt to build a case that would stick. At an enormous cost to the union (the full-timers were claiming up to £40 per night expenses), and at the expense of providing any sort of service to the Newcastle members, they duly set about discrediting dedicated, long-serving union activists.

An 'independent' tribunal was established, this though lost a number of its hand-picked members who found the whole issue too much to stomach.

However, after hearing all the

evidence (43 defence witnesses to two from the prosecution) they duly found all eight Broad Left supporters guilty. Their 'crimes'? Using official premises and branch funds to produce Broad Left election literature. For this they are all to be thrown out of the union.

Not content with this, the NEC has also decided to investigate the activities of the CPSA Deputy General Secretary, John Macreadie, for his role in the whole affair!

CPSA members will not be surprised at the outcome of the inquiry. Like the witch-hunt currently going on in the Labour Party we do not expect justice from the union or Labour bureaucrats. However all is not lost. CPSA, like the Labour Party, has seen attacks like this defeated in the past.

The key to defeating the right-wing lies in taking our arguments to the membership as a whole. Bureaucrats are never (or very rarely) beaten by playing them at their own game; they are beaten though when they are exposed to the rank and file. In the case of the Newcastle eight, this should be done by waging a massive awareness campaign throughout the union's 850 plus branches, this campaign to culminate in winning their appeal at the union's conference.

We should all be confident that this can be achieved, by comparing the right's inactivity over issues like pay, Agencies, technology, etc., to their fanaticism in rooting out any left opposition. Members will draw the correct conclusions.

Already this has been successful in other areas, notably in the Wales & South West region, where the NEC backed off from taking action against regional officials who opposed the poll tax and supported the ambulance workers. This happened because of rank and file support for the region's officials.

The rank and file hold the key. We should avoid any talk of using the courts, mobilise the members and take our case to the conference; that will see the eight unconditionally reinstated.

## Labour's drift to intolerance

From back page

Socialist Organiser.

Lol Duffy is a left-winger and may have some links with *Socialist Organiser*. Walworth Road can't have this. Therefore, once Wirral DLP is under "investigation" the parliamentary selection in Wallasey may have to wait — perhaps long enough for a suitable candidate to be imposed.

But investigations may not go on indefinitely, and therefore "double insurance" is required. This is why the NEC is looking into *Socialist Organiser*.

Now *Socialist Organiser* is a small body, loosely organised around a newspaper. Its socialist credentials are beyond reproach. Its sympathisers — like many other socialists in the party — may hold minority views. But they are loyal members of the Labour Party, an asset to it, and they will, I understand, be happy to make any adjustments to their activity which the

chooses to force a by-election and fight as an independent, the NEC can now "within the rules" dismiss the properly selected candidate, Paul Davies, in favour of its own nominee.

But it's not enough to deal with Birkenhead. The NEC looks backward when it comes to policies, but displays foresight when it comes to a witch-hunt.

The reselection process in nearby Wallasey has not yet even started. But it is possible that Lol Duffy, who in 1987 reduced a Tory Minister's majority from 6,708 to just 279 votes, would once again be chosen as the Labour candidate.

This accounts for the NEC's decision to investigate not just the alleged irregularities in Birkenhead, but also the activities of Wirral District Labour Party and those of

NEC may require.

This, however, would rather interfere with the NEC's likely plans of disqualifying Lol Duffy. Hence the NEC may deem it necessary to build up *Socialist Organiser* into a Merseyside bug-bear, and on this basis proceed against it.

Action of this kind must be seen in the context of the current NEC policy of increasing its own authoritarian stranglehold over the party. Labour's establishment has banned CLPs from selecting the candidate of their choice, has sought to disqualify sitting left-wing MPs, and has pushed through changes which make MPs and the leadership less accountable.

These methods are alien to Labour's democratic tradition and should be condemned. Members must be alerted to the drift away from party democracy and towards intolerance and must mobilise against it.

# SOCIALIST

## ORGANISER



### An attempt to kill politics in the party

Tony Benn MP comments on the Labour Party National Executive's decision to "investigate" Socialist Organiser

# GORBACHEV MAKES HIMSELF DICTATOR

By Martin Thomas

**M**ikhail Gorbachev has decided that concentrated and autocratic force is now the only way to get the renewal he wants in the Soviet Union.

As we go to press on Tuesday 13 March, the USSR's semi-quasi-elected parliament, the Supreme Soviet, is expected to vote through drastic presidential powers for Gorbachev, including powers to declare a state of emergency, rule by decree, and veto parliamentary legislation.

### More on the USSR: page 8

It will be the third phase of Gorbachev's policy since he came to office in 1985. First he tried a drive for more efficiency, more accountability, less corruption and more discipline, broadly within the framework of the Stalinist command economy.

This produced a small spurt in production in 1986, but no real success against the corrupt, cumbersome and byzantine web of bureaucratic inertia, developed over decades.

So Gorbachev moved to a second phase: a simultaneous drive for economic reform and for a limited opening-up of the political system. The opening-up would undermine and expose the most corrupt and sluggish bureaucrats, and thus enable market-oriented reforms to become reality rather than just good intentions on paper.

That second phase has shaken up the bureaucracy, and enabled Gorbachev to weed out large numbers of his opponents from the top

ranks. But it has not brought economic success. It has brought chaos and progressive disintegration.

The USSR's external empire in Eastern Europe has vanished. Russia's internal empire within the USSR is crumbling.

On Sunday 11 March, Lithuania declared itself independent. The other Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, are likely to move the same way. On Friday 9th, the local parliament in Georgia declared illegal the treaties joining it to the USSR and demanded immediate negotiations on independence. More radical Georgian nationalists said this demand was inadequate, and promised to set up an independent government immediately.

The independence movement is also gathering strength in Ukraine; there are strong demands in Moldavia for union with Romania; and in recent months the central government has at times lost control of large parts of Azerbaijan.

This forest-fire of nationalism threatens to break up the USSR, and curtail Moscow's rule to nothing more than its heartlands of Russia and Siberia. The potential breakaway areas include some of the USSR's most important industrial centres, sources of raw materials, and agricultural areas. It is hard to imagine that Gorbachev or any other Soviet leader will let them go peacefully.

On the other hand, neither Gorbachev nor any other Soviet leader has any effective means to stop them at present.

The economic reforms so far have brought chaos, destroying the coherence of the old command system without putting anything effective in its place. Industrial production went down about 1.7 per cent (on Western estimates) in 1989. Even when goods are produced, they don't reach the counters.

According to David Lascelles in the *Financial Times*, "The economy is rapidly becoming two-tier: the rouble-based state system overlaid by a grey economy where goods are exchanged for barter or hard currency...Every factory now holds back part of its production to exchange for other goods. In shops, the best items are kept under the counter for the same reasons."

Television production, for example, was cranked up by 20 per cent last year; but the television shop in a big Leningrad department store opens for only two hours a day because there is almost nothing on its shelves.

On official figures, only 106 out of 989 basic goods are regularly available. On Western figures, inflation now runs at 8 per cent.

Even those bureaucrats who must long to get back to the stability of Brezhnevism know it's not possible. To run a strong bureaucratic command economy you need a strong



Marchers demand abolition of Article 6 which guarantees the political monopoly of the CPSU

political machine. In these days when CP members campaign for election with such promises as "a return to the glorious traditions of pre-revolutionary entrepreneurship", the Stalinists no longer have such a machine.

The only way forward from the chaos then — so Gorbachev and his allies argue — is to establish a strong regime on a new basis, with dictatorial personal power for Gorbachev which will enable him to act independently of the crumbling Stalinist party machine, push through free-market reforms, and deal firmly with the nationalists.

It is Gorbachev's "18th Brumaire" — his equivalent, he hopes, of Napoleon's coup in 1799 which ended the chaos of the Directory, always under threat of overthrow from the Royalist right or Jacobin left, and consolidated the results of the French Revolution.

But Napoleon was able to begin his reign with a decree: The Revolution is established on the principles

on which it started. It is now at an end. The masses had overthrown the old feudal order and built the outline of a new order; it remained for Napoleon to organise it under a stable, strong state structure.

The masses have not made their revolution in the USSR. Gorbachev's predecessor is less Napoleon than Emperor Joseph II of Austria, who in the same period tried to abolish feudalism and push aside the feudal lords from above.

Whatever Gorbachev's new powers, he still has to rule through the bureaucratic ruling class, or at least a section of it. His third phase of reform may be no more successful than the first and second.

Successful or not, this third phase offers the Soviet workers nothing but increased exploitation and speed-up, unemployment, increased inequality, and more curbs on strikes. They need to organise independently for a real revolution from below in the USSR.

I've read *Socialist Organiser* for many years, and I believe that such papers are an important part of building a broad movement for socialism.

I think the purpose of the new moves is to separate the electoral machine from any interest in politics.

I used to think the target was the left, then the unions, then the party, but now I just don't think they want any discussion of any kind at all.

They think that people on the left have nowhere else to go so they're going to vote Labour, and there aren't many of them anyway, so they're raiding deep into the Owen/Heseltine territory — that's what they think.

It isn't tremendously impressive. As a strategy it's disreputable. But I think that's the explanation for what the Labour leaders are doing now.

Every time they clobber the left they seem to go up in the polls. That's the beginning and end of it.

They'll do fund-raising outside the party, get the support of Robert Maxwell, and hope this will carry them in. I don't think they're interested in politics, let alone socialism. Politics, for them, are a subsidiary of advertising.

### Intolerance

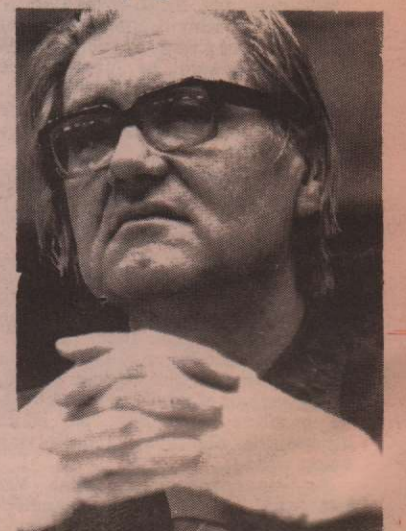
By Vladimir Derer, CLPD

If you are a left winger, you can't become a Labour MP. This is the intended outcome of the new powers which the present Labour Party National Executive Committee has awarded itself.

As of last week, the NEC can remove the endorsed parliamentary candidate whenever there is a by-election — to be replaced with someone who they favour. This decision seems to be directly related to the current situation in Birkenhead.

If the NEC's "investigation team" by any chance finds insufficient grounds for a pretext for a re-run, or if Paul Davies is chosen once again, and if Frank Field

Turn to page 11



Vladimir Derer



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