

Paper of the Communist Party of Great Britain

weekly **worker**

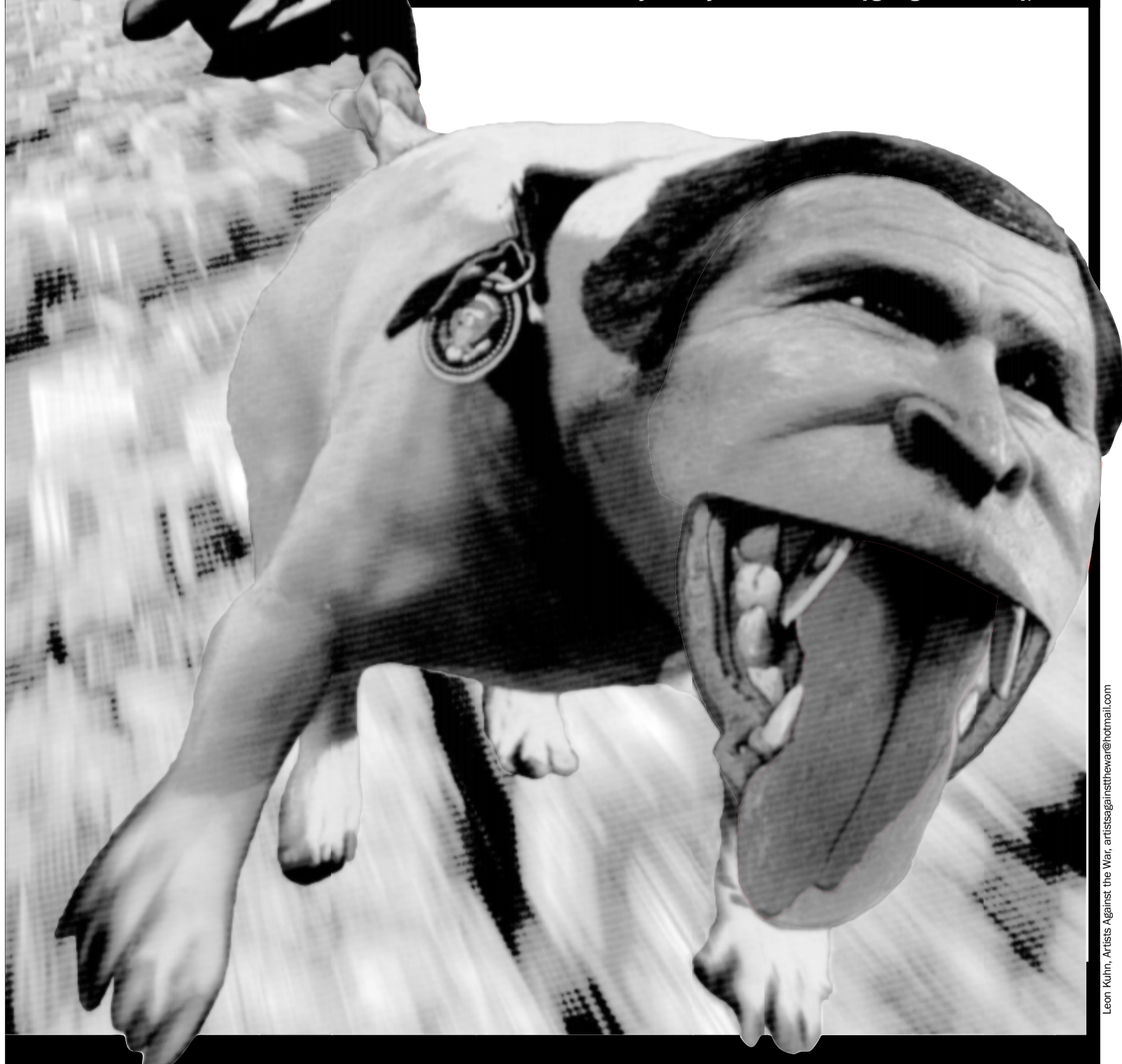
**United Kingdom needs
regime change - for a
democratic republic**

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Leon Kuhn, Artists Against the War, artistsagainsthewar@hotmail.com

Stop Bush-Blair war drive

LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Select few

Martin Thomas - junior partner in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty's duumvirate - continues to peddle threadbare lies (Letters, February 6). Obviously a ruling dogma has been cobbled together and it is the duty of every loyal disciple to join the anti-unity offensive.

Comrade Thomas is very proud of the fact that only selected AWLers were allowed to speak at our joint school on January 25. Presumably that is why Gerry Byrne - in what is unfortunately a typically malevolent letter - triumphantly claims that her AWL comrades "kicked your arse" (February 6). Well perhaps the Matgamna group did manage to cohere its upper ranks. Perhaps not. However, the only worthwhile approach starts by asking who advanced and who damaged unity, and who persuaded and who alienated the other side and the 'neutrals'? Begin here - with the common cause - and comrades Thomas and Byrne would arrive at a different assessment.

A few other points. Comrade Thomas repeats his charge that the CPGB "controlled" the September 20 2002 debate on 'Marxism and religion', organised by All Hallows church in Leeds. As the *Weekly Worker* reader knows, this is untrue. Indeed the meeting was chaired - ie, "controlled" - by Jane Astrid Devane, a member of the AWL. Readers of *Solidarity* are, of course, denied my point of view on this incident. Being inconsistent democrats - and hypocrites to boot - its editors turned down my submission.

But comrade Thomas's main contention seems to be that organisers of meetings and invited speakers possess no rights. Specifically, having agreed a two-way exchange back in January 2002, neither Mike Marqusee nor Ken Leech had any right to object when some six months later Ray Gaston - the All Hallows vicar - proposed to expand the panel by including Sean Matgamna. Presumably comrade Thomas believes that his master should be accorded special privileges - no doubt as he is in the AWL.

But the invitation was *conditional*. It was extended with the proviso that none of the others objected. And, frankly, to describe an objection - which, whatever his motives, came from Mike Marqusee - as an example of "no-platforming" belittles the term and smacks of egocentric sectarianism. Anyway, as I have said before, perhaps Ray Gaston should have simply told comrade Marqusee that his objection to Matgamna - "fed up with being branded an anti-semite" by the AWL - was overly sensitive. He could have withdrawn Marqusee's invitation. But that was for him to decide having spoken to the comrade and knowing as he does the All Hallows congregation, the Leeds left, etc.

Interestingly though Ken Leech - a well known Anglican theologian and supporter of many leftwing causes - did raise objections too. Having experienced a previous 'debate' where - as is their habit - a devotee of the Matgamna group simply read out a prepared statement, Leech asked for an assurance that this would not reoccur. Should he be denied that right? Not in my opinion. Did comrade Matgamna frothily denounce him? No. He knew his invitation was conditional and wrote a polite note promising no repetition.

I must pose another question. Does comrade Thomas seriously expect us to believe that no one in the AWL read the oft repeated advert in the *Weekly Worker* where Jack Conrad was billed as "replacing Sean Matgamna"? If they were so aggrieved, why did the AWL office not contact us? As explained elsewhere, I was under the impression that comrade Matgamna had, once again, simply dropped out and left the organisers in the

lurch. On the other hand Leeds AWL staged what they called a "boycott" of the All Hallows debate. Did they not inform anyone higher up in the AWL chain of command? We ought to be given the facts.

Another point. The January 25 joint school was - the AWL unilaterally announced - going to feature a speaker from the Revolutionary Democratic Group. We objected. Did we not have that right? Did comrade Thomas connive with a "no-platforming" by bowing to our wishes? Such hyperbole must be dismissed and treated with contempt.

Finally, comrade Thomas rattles out - for the nth time - his master's lie that in the 1980s we sided "consistently" with the "Stalinist ruling classes". Yet, as he knows perfectly well, we called for a "political revolution". By that we meant a revolution which "forcibly transforms the bureaucracy from the master of society into its servant" by introducing a far-reaching socialist democracy (J Conrad *From October to August* London 1992, p92).

During that same period, of course, the Matgamna group backed their "kind of people" in Afghanistan ... the CIA-financed mujahedin counterrevolution. This is a worrying but *consistent* method which had them talking favourably about a Nato assault on Serbia, still leads them to put an equals sign between the IRA and the UDA in Northern Ireland and being a "little bit Zionist" sees them insisting that exiled Palestinians have no right of return.

Jack Conrad
London

Gallows

I have followed the discussions between the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the Communist Party of Great Britain with a mixture of amusement and sadness. You may have heard the old saying that five socialists locked in a room together will form four parties and an entrust faction. I wish I could call it a slander, but it undoubtedly reflects an important truth about our movement.

Of course, it was always thus: why focus on this dispute in particular, when fragmentation has been such a common feature of our history? My particular feelings arise from my own background. Though politically active in my teens, I am a little ashamed to say that my commitment to a just society later found expression in merely delivering a few Labour leaflets and voting at election time. Even this small effort died when Blair dumped clause four.

It has taken the threat of a cynical war to awaken me from this complacency and disaffection. Aware that merely supporting an anti-war movement without also committing myself to political action aimed at opposing the causes of war would be an empty gesture, I decided it was time to rejoin a socialist organisation.

Unlike some, I suspect that there are still many sincere and conscious socialists within the Labour Party. To dismiss them, along with the leadership of the party, is to underestimate the enormous historical importance of the Labour Party, and the depth and solidity of its links with the working class. However, I could not subscribe to the party's programme or canvas support for it.

On the other hand, I worried about joining one of the many other parties on the left, simply because they didn't always manage to achieve quite the same passion in opposing capitalism as they did in denouncing each other. Complex and difficult areas of specific policy, about which any two sincere socialists working from the same basic principles might nevertheless honestly disagree, were presented as fundamental divisions. Comrade A would argue not merely that comrade B was wrong in his approach to, say, the problems faced by Israelis and Palestinians, but that comrade B's ap-

proach demonstrated that he was pro-imperialist, or Stalinist, or anti-semitic.

What must surely be painfully obvious to many of us is that the issues dividing our movement are so complicated that many working people with an instinctive understanding of the nature of our society and its injustices would have to undertake a considerable study of both history and political theory before they could even understand the issue dividing one party from another, let alone decide their own view. (I do not mean to patronise here: my own head is sometimes left spinning when I read the various accounts of factional dispute.) They are therefore faced with a serious obstacle to overcome before they can even begin to contribute to worthwhile political action, even if they can overcome the feeling that the multiplicity of small, socialist parties reduces them all to irrelevance.

This does not mean that I think either theory or history unimportant, nor that I think comrades should not discuss the application of socialist principles to the solving of particular problems for humanity. However, I do think that these debates should take place within a single organisation which recognises the common ground on which these discussions are based. Such an organisation would provide a clear alternative to Labour - both to disaffected comrades still within that party, and to the most politically conscious working people outside it.

I do not believe that such an organisation would be without principle. Indeed, I think it a higher application of principle and discipline to recognise the fraternity of those with whom we disagree over policy but whom we recognise as comrades in the overthrow of the foundation of our society of the private ownership of the means of production and the interests of a small, manipulative and oppressive ruling class. When socialists talk, they take much common ground for granted, and focus on what divides them. This is natural: a continual restatement of the 'socialist ABC' would be sterile. However, we should not allow this to lead us to forget that the 'socialist ABC' underlying both sides of the argument is, in itself, the basis of our whole movement. It matters more to defend our basic principles against those trying to fool working people into war or racism than it does to demonstrate the purest revolutionary credentials of any particular faction.

I believe the Socialist Alliance represents a recognition of that basic common principle. I was extremely sorry that the Socialist Party left the alliance and that many other parties, notably the Socialist Labour Party, never joined. This is particularly so, as much suspicion of the alliance seems to stem from a dislike of the role played within it by the Socialist Workers Party rather than any really fundamental difference in politics. I would appeal to comrades outside the alliance to support it once again.

I would also applaud the continued membership and support of the alliance by the AWL and CPGB. I have been impressed by the willingness of both organisations to grant space to each other and to other comrades outside their parties to express their views within their publications. I also note that both organisations have acknowledged that much of the debate between them has been constructive, and that there has been a certain convergence of their policies as a result. Here is real political principle in action.

It is for this reason that the increasingly acrimonious debate between the parties is so depressing. I confess, some of its wilder flights have raised a laugh: but it's gallows humour. We are fiddling while Rome, or rather the world, burns.

There seem to be two areas of dispute: one is policy, and the other a bizarrely drawn out row about the withdrawal of an invitation to comrade Matgamna of

the AWL to speak to a meeting on 'Marxism and religion' in Leeds in September of last year.

The policy disputes are too complex to go into at the tail end of a letter, but I would say two things about them. Firstly, I do not believe that, when examined free from some of the invective and fanciful extrapolations into suspected motives, they are so fundamental as to undermine either party's status as a socialist organisation and therefore deserving of fraternal respect and cooperation. Secondly, I strongly suspect that they would not have become as prominent or heated had the parties not slipped down the slope of allowing a foolish confusion about a speaking engagement to turn into a major dispute.

Manny Neira
email

Fellating

Dave Spencer's account of the 1984 faction fight and split in the forerunner of the AWL is misleading (*Weekly Worker* February 6).

He claims that the majority derided its opponents as "non-Marxists", thereby foreclosing on democratic debate, and complains of the question being put, "why people are still in the organisation when they know they are going to lose the battle. It was as though the process was an arm-wrestling contest, not a democratic debate or discussion from which comrades would learn, no matter what the outcome." From things like these, he says, "a sect was born".

The term 'non-Marxist' may have been used to describe people's political positions, as it is in the pages of this newspaper to describe the politics of the AWL, for instance (it or something synonymous). But the complaint was and is a bit rich. It was the Thornett minority who claimed that the politics of the proto-AWL were so revisionist, pro-imperialist, etc that nobody in the international Trotskyist movement would "touch us with a bargepole". We were accused not simply of being 'non-Marxist', but of practically fellating Satan. And Dave's image of a debate "from which comrades could learn" is surreal.

Actually, I did learn quite a bit. But the organisation was unbearable at that time - a bear pit, in which not a day went by without the Thornett group proclaiming some new 'political' or organisational scandal. It had begun to be like that since the South Atlantic war in 1982. At the start almost all of us opposed both sides - Thatcher and Galtieri. After a few weeks the 'Thornett group' demanded we change to a pro-Argentina position. I remember a summer school in 1982 when we - the later-to-be AWL - found ourselves for a while a small minority. Perhaps Dave wasn't there. We were mobbed.

By the time the miners' strike began, almost all the 'Thornett group' had decamped, in successive small splits. The embittered 'Thornett' rump was in a state of 'cold split', scarcely cooperating in the day-to-day work of the organisation. It demanded a new special conference, the fifth in little more than a year, to discuss the "internal situation". The majority decided to call it a day, accept that the ICL-WSL fusion had failed, and declare a split. Since we were the majority, the only way to do so was to expel the Thornett group. We didn't expel people for their politics.

No-one was expelled for sharing Thornett's politics, or being sympathetic to his faction. The question was justifiably put to them, though - and I think this is what Dave is referring to - what they intended to do, given what they had to say about the group's majority (ranging from its appalling pro-imperialist politics to the fact that most of its members were 'acolytes and hand raisers'). Unsurprisingly, most of them left when their faction leaders were expelled.

It was a terrible shame that the 1981 fusion broke down. But the notion that it did so because of the sect-mentality of what is now the AWL is perverse. The irrational (indeed 'non-Marxist') denunciation and so on was all from the other side. Much of it was public, incidentally, since the minorities had pretty free access to the paper.

Since then we have had plenty of debates, including sharp disagreements, without the insane factional heat of 1984. We have also, for example, openly and publicly changed our positions on some central questions. That experience may have made us cautious about rushing into fusions. But it hasn't diminished our commitment to unity on the left.

Clive Bradley
AWL

Workmates

I am writing to your newspaper to say how impressed I am by your open and honest debating style. I have been involved in the anti-war movement and agree with your views on the UN. I am wondering, however, why there is so much written in your paper about other left groups, as I don't see the point.

In the factory where I work and where I am a senior shop steward no one cares what the Socialist Party or the SWP or the AWL says about things, as they don't read their newspaper. So wouldn't it be much better if you just put things in your paper that concerned my workmates? If you did I would like to sell them in my factory, but at present would I be able to shift any?

Bobby Blazer
email

Paedophilia

Ian Donovan's letter shows so clearly why the satirical version of him doesn't do him justice by half (*Weekly Worker* February 6).

Rather than deal with the points I made in my original letter he arrogantly sees fit to smear those who are against child abuse as in the territory of the BNP. Later he even insinuates a continuity between my views and the holocaust. Perhaps if the left took working class parents' concerns seriously then the ground wouldn't be clear for opportunists like the BNP to use the issue. This from someone who has previously boasted of the need post-revolution to 'subdue' what he sees as 'reactionary' estates in Birmingham. A pattern emerges ...

Where in my letter do I advocate "pogroms" against paedophiles? As usual the last refuge of the middle classes is to bring race into it. By stating my opposition to Donovan's shocking view on the abuse of children it is insinuated that I'm a racist. I'm white! I'm working class! I'm against paedophilia! Therefore, by Donovan's logic I *must* be a racist. If all else fails play the race card.

Donovan again shows his ignorance and insensitivity by taking umbrage at my use of the word 'scum' to describe those who log on to paedophile sites, thereby fuelling the demand for the abuse of children. It's a worrying reflection on Donovan's view of paedophilia that he trivialises this as "not particularly vile". If creating the demand for the abuse of children for websites is not vile than I really don't know what is!

Steve Davies
Birmingham

Smear

This issue of paedophilia has raised a lot of controversy on the left, including a vitriolic attack on me from Ian Donovan in the *Weekly Worker*. In this I am accused of collapsing before reaction, and concurring in pogroms. This from a man who has filled pages in defence of alliances with explicitly, self-proclaimedly reactionary forces such as the Muslim Associa-

tion of Britain, whose allies are responsible for not rhetorical flight-of-fancy ‘pogroms’, but the real thing - who would not treat me ‘humanely’ (as an uppity woman, sexual deviant, militant atheist, godless communist, etc) if they achieved their aim of an islamist state.

Comrades who bemoan the fact that relations between the AWL and CPGB have soured might like to reflect on the fact that what I did to provoke this attack was “feebly” defend the right of the *Weekly Worker* and Ian to publish views which I strongly disagree with. The words ‘staggering’ and hypocrisy’ suggest themselves.

Blimey! It’s hard to know where to start. For defending the right of the *Weekly Worker* to publish reactionary (in my view) apologias for child abuse, I am smeared by association as a fascist, would-be exterminator of mentally disabled people. It’s tedious to point out that nowhere have I advocated vigilantism, that I explicitly condemn tabloid hysteria and hypocrisy and vigilantism.

I have tried to draw out the class issues involved in the sexual use of children, and pointed out that since authoritarianism is built into class society, it can never go all the way to protecting children by creating a sense of their autonomy and self-worth because that undermines the very basis of class rule. That makes me a funny kind of Nazi.

Gerry Byrne
 AWL

Hang ’em all?

I agree with Ian Donovan that paedophilia is a psychosexual problem that needs to be treated in a humane way. It is more often than not a result of the cycle of abuse, where the perpetrator was themselves abused as a child. It is the extreme end of a continuum, which includes verbal, emotional and physical abuse: the abuse of power in a relationship.

One question that might be asked of those who disagree with Ian is what they would do if a case of abuse arose in their organisation or workplace. The case of Gerry Healy is an obvious one. For decades leading comrades in the Workers Revolutionary Party must have known of his sexual abuse. They must have suffered from his bullying verbal abuse. But his supporters defended him on the grounds that personal behaviour has nothing to do with politics.

To me that position is indefensible: of course the personal is political and the political is personal. I learned that from feminists, who argued in the 1970s that in spite of all the rhetoric, sexism was endemic in the left groups they belonged to. It took the women in the WRP until 1985 to confront Gerry Healy.

Another case I know of is a comrade who was convicted in the bourgeois courts of child sexual abuse. He was put on probation on condition that he attended psychotherapy. He did this and embarked on a lot of his own personal study. His view of the world was transformed and he volunteered to speak to groups on the issue of paedophilia.

This was not good enough for his left group, however. Naturally they expelled him since the personal is political. But, not content with that, the leadership condoned the actions of some members who managed to get him sacked from his workplace, even though his work did not bring him into contact with children. When other comrades complained that this was unjust and inhumane, the leadership banned all discussion and called those comrades paedophiles, including several comrades who were senior social workers and dealt with child abuse every day of the week. No doubt their jobs would be in jeopardy too if the leadership had their way.

To me the leadership of the group felt that the bourgeois courts had been too liberal and too lenient. If a person has no right to work, he has no right to eat, he has no right to live: that is logical. Why not the slogan ‘Hang all paedophiles’?

That would be very popular at the moment. But it has nothing to do with any Marxism or socialism I recognise.

Ray Turner
 email

SA website

You make a few points about the SA website, most of which are presentational (*Weekly Worker* February 6). The site is useable, and latest material is available from the front page. Yes, plenty more could be done, lots of which wouldn’t actually take long. But if it looks like it is on the move and doing things, does it matter if it is “professional”?

It is worth saying, however, that politically it isn’t exactly a hub for its members. Really the point is made when you say that there are no links to local SAs. There used to be during the election campaign (they are actually still there: you have to search). Your own review of the sites explains why not, but doesn’t make the obvious conclusion.

A quick run through the 30 websites you talk of - how many of them are dead, or have not been updated since the election? Ouch! I don’t think this is just lack of the “webmaster” being bothered, I’m afraid.

There is no doubt lots going on in all these places, but how much of it is being even mentioned in SA meetings - if there are any? Let alone something being done by an SA branch - rather than individuals (or constituent organisations). Of my small knowledge of branches of the SA some of the few you mention as good also happen to be the active branches I know of.

We know the SA brought socialist activists of all sorts of backgrounds to organise together locally when the general election was on. Some have managed to keep on going, some not. Why?

Towns that work (and I wouldn’t really hold York as one, though it isn’t too bad) need only a few people committed to the SA because I actually believe it is more complicated than just the SWP (centre’s) electoral-only orientation to the SA, although that is certainly a factor.

A fair few of their members agree (though how many I wouldn’t hazard a guess). More generally people don’t know, or have not decided - in a meeting - what the SA is for yet!

Kester Edmonds
 email

Wonderland

As they gathered and congratulated each other on ‘all’ being winners, a most curious character waddled into view. It stood in a clearing and just waddled, neither progressing forwards nor indeed going backwards, but still seemed to give the impression that it was heading somewhere!

“What is it?” cried Alice. “I’m not sure,” replied the Dodo. As they studied the waddling entity in the clearing, a diminutive red gnome with pixie-like ears and reflective pate crawled out from under the stone eaglet it had rested himself upon. “Hello,” said Alice. “Do you know what that creature is?” “Of course I do. I am a sophisticated, wonderful pixie,” said the pixie, “and I know all.” “So what is it pray?” persisted Alice.

The ‘SWP’ took on an ‘all-knowing’ and superior air and declared: “*If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it’s a duck!*” “Don’t be ludicrous,” squawked Eaglet. “Anyone not taken in by *silly waster pixies* can see it is a creature ‘of a special kind’ - *it is an ‘SA’!*” “What is an ‘SA’?” enquired Alice. “Sad Appendage,” answered the Eaglet. “It is a poor imitation of a duck and can be found in ‘front’ of these SWPs wherever they exist!”

Lewis Carols
 email

Weak link

I’ve been following the events in Britain around the war as carefully as I can - given

the fact that we have our own problems to deal with. Reading all of the recent reports about the situation there, I’m beginning to think that Britain is becoming the weak link in the imperialist chain.

The report that the war could bring mass walkouts among the proletariat attests to that, in my opinion. The US and UK are the only two countries where the sentiments of the people on this war are not reflected in government policy. I tend to think that this is going to lead to a serious conflict - with the proletariat and sections of the petty bourgeoisie on one side, and the bourgeoisie on the other.

Unlike here in the US, where the position of the proletariat is fast eroding (the proletariat, under the existing regime, is not only losing the battle for democracy; it is also losing the battle for survival), the UK appears to be polarising and mobilising along class lines. If there was ever a time for the party to tell the SWP types to piss off, it is now. While I would not recommend abandoning work in the Socialist Alliance, I would recommend that the CPGB step up its independent face and do more activity without the SA albatross around its neck.

I know that such a thing would be hard, but it seems to me - albeit observing from a distance - that the thing to do right now is to begin exerting real pressure and influence on the rank and file of unions like Aslef, RMT, CWU and PCS. They are the ones talking about the likelihood of a mass walkout. They should be targeted by articles in the *Weekly Worker* about the need for a real proletarian movement against war, and for a real proletarian party.

Martin Schreader
 Detroit

Parsnips

Congratulations to Ian Donovan for his excellent article ‘Anti-war movement must avoid UN trap’, which as a front page article I presume is endorsed by the editorial board of *Weekly Worker* and PCC of the CPGB (February 6).

I particularly liked the paragraph: “It is the task of the conscious elements of the anti-war movement, particularly revolutionary socialists and communists, to seek actively by means of propaganda to harden up the anti-war masses, including through exposure of the record and crimes of the United Nations in the service of imperialist interests over decades ... We should not be afraid to outspokenly criticise the likes of Tony Benn, who preach above all that this war is immoral because of its tendency to violate ‘international law’, more than because of its predatory, imperialist nature *per se*.”

And I endorse Ian’s hope that it will be possible for “the working class to advance its own independent interests, and begin to take the offensive against the capitalist social system itself, a system that breeds the barbarism of imperialist war”.

However, as we say around these parts, ‘Fine words butter no parsnips’. I therefore wait to see if the sentiments advanced by comrade Donovan go beyond mere words and instead will become a guide to action for the CPGB’s intervention into the peace movement. Specifically whether the CPGB will finally begin to actively oppose the bourgeois pacifism of the Stop the War Coalition, the platform it provides for pro-UN apologists such as Benn, and its overtures to the class enemy in the form of the Liberal Democrats. All being things the CPGB, like the rest of the so-called ‘revolutionary’ left who tail the opportunism of the SWP, have so far failed to do!

Brian Walters
 email

Hackney SA

You have got the wrong address for our website - www.hackneysa.net is the real site.

Hackney Socialist Alliance
 London

ACTION

CPGB London seminars

Sunday February 16, 5pm - no seminar. Comrades are invited to attend the CPGB public meeting (see below).

Sunday February 23, 5pm, ‘The challenge of appeasement’, using Ralph Milliband’s *Parliamentary socialism* as a study guide.

CPGB Manchester seminars

Monday February 24, 7 pm - ‘Second International sketches’, using Hal Draper’s *The dictatorship of the proletariat from Marx to Lenin* as a study guide.

Communism and globalisation

Public meeting, Tuesday February 18, 7.30pm, Leeds TUC, North Street, Leeds. Speaker: Cliff Slaughter.

Organised by Leeds Left Alliance/Alliance for Green Socialism.

Labour democracy

Campaign for Labour Party Democracy annual general meeting, Saturday February 22, 11am - 4pm, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

NCADC national meeting

National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns: Saturday February 22, 12 noon to 5pm, Central Methodist Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester M1.

Lunch provided for all participants, crèche available. Transport costs for anti-deportation campaigns to be reimbursed by NCADC.

To attend, contact: London - John Stewart, 020 7701 5197; Manchester - Tony Openshaw, 0161 740 8206; Birmingham - John O, 0121 554 6947.

ncadc@ncadc.org.uk; http://www.ncadc.org.uk/

Rank and file trade unionists

Conference to defend public services and trade union rights, Saturday March 1, 11am to 4pm, Camden Centre, Bidborough Street, London (nearest tube: Kings Cross/St Pancras). Called by London region, Fire Brigades Union. Speakers include Andy Gilchrist and Mark Serwotka. Followed by political fund debate: Matt Wrack and a Labour Party representative. Registration: £5.

Where is Labour going?

Public meeting, Monday March 3, 7.30pm, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London. Speakers: George Galloway MP, Bob Crow (RMT general secretary), Christine Blower (former NUT president), Mark Serwotka (PCS general secretary), John Rees (Socialist Alliance) and Linda Smith (London region FBU treasurer).

Artists against the War

Postcards - 50p each.

- artistsagainsthewar@hotmail.com
- www.artistsagainsthewar.org.uk
- www.stopthewar.org

Party wills

The CPGB has forms available for you to include the Party and the struggle for communism in your will. Write for details.

RDG

To contact the Revolutionary Democratic Group email rdgroup@yahoo.com

Socialist Alliance

North West regional meeting

Saturday February 22, 11am to 4pm, Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

Rail caucus

National meeting for all Socialist Alliance members and supporters in the RMT, Aslef and TSSA - Sunday February 23, 12 noon, Lucas Arms, Grays Inn Road, London (nearest station: Kings Cross).

Firefighters

Meeting for all FBU members who are either Socialist Alliance members or supporters, Saturday March 1, 4.30pm, after rank and file conference - O’Neill’s pub, Euston Road, opposite St Pancras station.

Annual conference

Saturday March 15, South Camden Community School, Charrington Street, London N1. Amendments to policy resolutions and constitutional amendments must be submitted by Friday February 21. Election of NEC by slate using alternative vote system. Nomination of slates will close at conference, Saturday March 15, 2pm.

Socialist Alliance, Wickham House, 10 Cleveland Way, London E1 4TR; 020 7791 3138; office@socialistalliance.net

CPGB London Forum

The war and the revolutionary party

Sunday February 16, 5pm, Diorama Arts Centre, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1 (nearest tubes: Regents Park, Great Portland Street). Speaker: Jack Conrad



www.cpgb.org.uk/action

STOP THE WAR

Stop the War Coalition -
http://www.stopwar.org.uk

Serving the movement

It is not very often I am full of praise for the Socialist Workers Party, but on this occasion the comrades have to be thanked for not letting their webmaster anywhere near the Stop the War Coalition home page. Indeed, so impressive is the initial appearance that there cannot possibly be any relation between this and the shambles that passes for the SWP website (see *Weekly Worker* December 19 2002).

Understandably, the February 15 demo receives pride of place, leading with Tessa Jowell's U-turn over the Hyde Park rally ban. Immediately underneath are the latest assembly and route details for the London demo, followed by links to the STWC website (are we not already here?), as well as to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain. These in turn are followed by further links to coach drop-off and collection points, the resource page, and a car share scheme. Completing this first section is an advertisement for 'eve of demo' events taking place across London.

The next, much reduced section provides details for the Glasgow mobilisation. The wealth of detail provided for the England and Wales demo is absent here, and we are offered access to the Scottish Coalition for Justice not War. Interestingly the link provided does nothing of the sort, loading the website for Scottish CND instead.

This section is followed by a series of upcoming events and announcements, before giving the low-down on the many demonstrations taking place across the globe on February 15. From here the page continues down ... and down, and down. All in all 17 screens-worth of material is produced here. Thankfully the handy side bar provides connections to its various parts, saving the time and effort of having to scroll down searching for a particular piece.

Turning to the top half of the side bar, it provides links to seven other sections of the website. The action section is subdivided into four - events over February 14 and 15, one-off events, regular events, and protests in case war breaks out. The only criticism that can be ventured here is that these are for the most part London-based, but the option is

provided to add your own event. The press link too is very good, collecting together press releases, new stories, photos, and downloadable speeches from STWC actions over the last six months. The resources link complements this area very well with a wealth of petitions, posters, placards, and bulletins available for download. A 'lobby your politician' area is also included, providing the tools necessary to get hold of your MP or MEP online.

Access to other sites can be found under 'Links' and 'Groups', both of which are very comprehensive. The latter provides website and email details for literally dozens of local peace groups across Britain, as well as political groups from the CPGB to the Ruskin Anarchist Federation. The other links section carries less material, repeating some but carrying other UK and international peace websites. Finally, credit has to be given to the webmaster for providing a site map, allowing easy navigation around what could otherwise be a bewildering maze.

Unfortunately not all is rosy in the STWC garden. The main criticism one can level is that it fails to make the case against the very war it is opposing! The nearest to it on the home page is a link to the 'Cairo declaration' (available in English and Arabic). The archives section does carry a number of anti-war articles, many of which seem to be preaching to the converted. But it also contains the problematic 'Letter from Baghdad', written by the Oxford Research Group. While usefully outlining the effects of 12 years of sanctions and bombing, it puts a positive spin on a variety of political 'reforms' implemented in Iraq since last October. Among these are a rescinding of mandatory hand amputations for thieves, and the right for dissidents to criticise the government (providing they are not linked to foreign intelligence services). The 'soft on Saddam' politics of the STWC steering committee are faithfully reproduced in this collection.

In sum, the anti-war movement is well served by this website. It is just a shame that the SWP cannot bring itself to lavish such attention on the Socialist Alliance online ●

Phil Hamilton

Hammersmith and Fulham

Hidden alternative

The Socialist Workers Party left at home its Socialist Alliance clothing on February 11 and came to the packed 'No to war, yes to peace' meeting in Hammersmith dressed up as the Stop the War Coalition. Outside the town hall, posted like sentries, two *Socialist Worker* sellers. Inside, two stalls - one for the coalition, one for overtly SWP literature. The Socialist Alliance, invisible - not an application form in sight. Wilful neglect by the main SA player, in an event where the desire to remove Blair and change the way we are governed bubbled up from the floor repeatedly.

The initiative for the meeting came from local Labour MP Iain Coleman, who rang the coalition asking for an opportunity to speak publicly against the coming war on Iraq. No doubt he finds it necessary to express the massive anti-war feeling of his constituents - his promise to vote against war on Iraq should parliament be offered a say was endorsed unanimously by his local Labour Party constituency committee. But this also shows us how the Labour left can rise from the dead and put itself at the head of any mass movement which may appear, upstaging the SA and misleading us into safe, reformist channels.

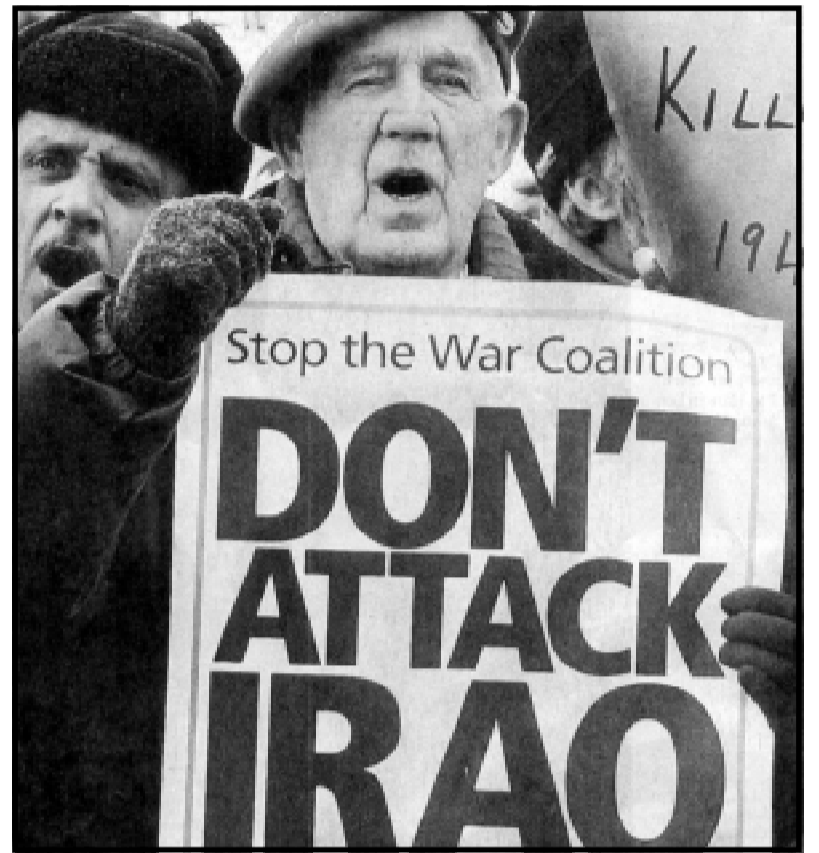
Like West London CND platform speaker and Labour Party loyalist John Grigg, Coleman argued that "no substantial case has been made to justify a military assault on Iraq", implying, of course, that he may yet be convinced by fresh evidence. John Grigg wanted to "weigh up very carefully" whether war was justified. For him, war to remove the "odious dictator" will be OK when "we are absolutely certain Saddam Hussein is about to attack his neighbour". There is such a thing as a just war, he insisted. But, not understanding that war is fought for class interests, he displayed his confusion with an untheorised trip down memory lane. Forgetting that Britain was still defending its empire, "World War II was something of a just war," he said.

To its credit, the local STWC broadened the scope of the meeting, linking the anti-war movement to the fight against service cuts and closures and to the pay struggles of local government workers and firefighters, with Fire Brigades Union official Linda Smith among the platform speakers.

Labour-controlled Hammersmith and Fulham council's closure plans for the Janet Adegoke sports centre and Brook Green day nursery came under attack in the opening remarks of chairperson and Unison steward Cathy Cross: "Billions for war, no money for services or firefighters," she said, prompting a dialogue across the floor. "Who shall we vote for then?" was quickly answered by "Socialist Alliance!", giving a cutting edge to the rest of the discussion.

SWP paper-seller comrade Kelly admitted to being "ashamed" that he voted Labour in 1997: "I thought a Labour government would have shown more independence from America." So the lesser-evil method got him nowhere. The real question is not what we are against, but what we are *for*. Playwright Will Mord called for "unity of purpose in the coalition" and the need to create an "alternate government". As Linda Smith commented, "It says a lot about our so-called democracy that we have to (quite rightly) congratulate our MP for being brave enough to speak his mind."

Unison steward Stan Keable, announcing his political affiliation to both the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Alliance, argued that Bush and Blair do not want war. They prefer peace: they will impose their will without



United against the war

war if they can. But war is merely the continuation of politics by violent means, as Clausewitz explained. "Do you want an imperialist peace?" he demanded rhetorically.

We need "regime change" in the United Kingdom as well as Iraq, he went on, and in the world order. Vote buying in the United Nations is paralleled by the disgusting patronage of "Tony's cronies" in the UK. The constitutional monarchy system gives the prime minister dictatorial powers under the royal prerogative - powers to go to war without any vote. This is not genuine democracy, rule by the people, he said, but merely a means for "gaining your consent".

Linda Smith also told us how British firefighters identified closely with the 350 New York firefighters killed in the 9/11 atrocity, and how this had produced a reluctance to oppose Bush and Blair's 'war on terror', a reluctance that was being

overcome now that the firefighters, through their dispute, recognised Blair's government as their enemy. Money is available in plenty for war, but not for fire safety. "We are not trained economists," she said, "but we are not stupid", and called for everyone to go to Downing Street on the day war begins.

Leading local SWPer John Hextall had the last word, anticipating a much bigger demonstration on February 15 than the 400,000 last September: "It's about what we do after Saturday as well," he said, but only called for more of the same. "We must build a huge campaign - a movement that not only stops this war, but goes on to build a much better society for our children."

How this task of building a new society is to be approached he left unspoken. Not surprising for a revolutionary organisation which has no programme ●

Ian Farrell

Stop the war

Eve of demo events

Trade union rally: Friday February 14, 6.30pm, Bloomsbury Baptist Church, Shaftesbury Avenue, near junction New Oxford Street (Tottenham Court tube). No tickets required. Speakers: Bob Crow (RMT), Jack Hyman (president, West Coast Longshoremen, USA), Mark Serwotka (PCS), Billy Hayes (CWU), chair Andrew Murray (Aslef).

Don't attack Iraq: Friday February 14, 7.30pm, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road (Euston tube/BR). No tickets required. Speakers: Jesse Jackson, Tony Benn, Ahmed Ben Bella, Yvonne Ridley, Bianca Jagger, John Rees.

National demonstration

Saturday February 15, London. Two assembly points: starting point A - Embankment (nearest tube: Embankment), 12 noon; starting point B (for groups from the north) - Gower Street (nearest tubes: Tottenham Court Road, Euston Square, Euston), 12 noon. March to Hyde Park for rally. Called by Stop the War Coalition, Muslim Association of Britain, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Glasgow march

Assemble Glasgow Green, Saturday February 15, 10am. March to SECC conference centre, where Blair is addressing Labour Party conference. Rally 2.30pm. Organised by Scottish Coalition for Justice Not War, c/o Scottish CND, 15 Barrland Street, Glasgow, G41 1QH; 0141-423 1222; scnd@banthebomb.org

No military bases

Fairford: National demonstrations, Sunday February 23 and Saturday March 22, 12 noon, junction High Street/Park Street, Fairford, Gloucestershire. http://www.gwi.org.uk

around
THEWEB



Stop the war, pay the firefighters Vote Socialist Alliance

Firefighter **Syd Platt** is the Socialist Alliance candidate in the February 20 council by-election in Haverstock ward in the London borough of Camden. Peter Manson spoke to him

What is your political background?

I was a Labour Party member years ago, but I became disenchanted when clause four was dropped. I have always voted Labour, right up until the last election. I used to think it was better to try and change Labour from within, but now I've seen the light. New Labour is continuing the Tory mantra - public bad, private good. They're privatising through PFI or through the back door.

I was interested in what lots of the left groups were saying, but I hadn't considered joining, and certainly not standing in an election. I suppose I had the mainstream union view - you have to fight to take the party back to old Labour. But the fire dispute made me realise that's a lost cause - we need a socialist alternative.

Would that socialist alternative be like old Labour then?

Well, in many ways old Labour did follow socialist principles - it was a lot more caring, while New Labour is more like old Tories. Old Labour believed in putting people before profit.

But it's all about socialism, to be honest with you. Some people are embarrassed by the word - for the last 20 years the press has been trying to get rid of socialism in all its forms. But when you speak to people about their beliefs, you realise that they have socialist politics without using the term. It's something we should be proud of - we should say, 'I am a socialist!'

You said the firefighters' dispute helped you make the break.

Yes, my own personal experience played a large part. There was a feeling amongst firefighters that New Labour was our friend, but now they are waking up. Eventually there must be political disaffiliation. A lot are opting not to pay the political levy. In my opinion we need to break the link, while maintaining the levy. We need to support politics - including, I believe, socialist politics.

The Socialist Alliance is for the democratisation of the political fund, of course, rather than calling for an immediate break with Labour while there is no viable alternative.

That's one thing. But if the Fire Brigades Union executive council backed me, for example, the Labour Party would have problems. The FBU London region has endorsed the application for support from Steve Cracknell, who stood for the SA in Haringey, but it will be turned back nationally. London has also backed me - with good wishes so far. I haven't asked for more - I'm waiting to see what happens on the national executive with Steve.

As I say, if the NEC went ahead and was brave enough to give their support to Steve and myself, that would cause problems for Labour. They could either pretend it hadn't happened or they could disaffiliate the FBU. But that would have repercussions in other unions - they are already talking about withholding £40 million. The time has come to make a move - many are beginning to realise that.

Why don't we do what the RMT did - give Labour a list of four or five options? Do you

oppose cuts in the fire service? Do you oppose PPP? The union should only support those who back the things we fight for.

What is your view of the conduct of the FBU dispute?

I suppose there is a gap between the rank and file and the leadership. While they haven't sold us down the river, every time they've acted 'reasonably' and called off strikes to allow more negotiations, the employers and the government have come back with a worse deal. They shouldn't cancel any more strikes - let them negotiate while we're out. The membership have found it all frustrating and would support that.

The brigade committees are meeting every week and are keeping up the pressure. If the Bain report is still on the table, the union should give seven days notice of another strike. It's been a bit like a roller coaster - a build-up of momentum, which is lost when the action is suspended. It's the same for the support groups and other trade unions too. We organise big events for the strike dates, but when they are called off, the meetings go ahead, but with low attendance - it's all a bit wearing.

What is the mood of the rank and file?

They feel it's no longer just about pay. The position of the employers and the government threatens the future of the fire service itself and the whole FBU. John Prescott tried to enforce a deal on us and there's the threat of an injunction banning strikes during a war. But how would they lock up 50,000 people?

This is a battle for all trade unions and even for democracy. It should be a signal to the rest of the union movement - are you prepared to let this happen? They should all be called out for a day on a general strike. The labour movement was set up to defend basic human rights and we should do that.

Blair has said that Gilchrist and the FBU leadership just want to politicise a trade union dispute.

It's the government that has politicised it. Andy Gilchrist is not leading the strike. There was a massive 90% 'yes' vote - the members are leading it. We have our own programme of 'modernisation', such as the community fire safety initiative, aimed at preventing fires. And there are other things - greater equality, health and safety: management need to be more serious about these things. Their programme of cuts won't help - the public will have a much smaller, much worse service and heavier insurance bills.

So it's been politicised by the government - we went out over pay. MPs demand a 40% pay rise for themselves, but they want to give us 11% over two years and increase our working hours under 'modernisation'.

What about the idea that in the build-up to war firefighters are a "disgrace to their country"?

A lot of us find that deeply offensive. Whenever there's a big national disaster every politician comes out with how we are a 'wonderful bunch of people'. But, as soon as we stand up and dare to demand more pay, we are 'rabid leftwingers' leaving the country without protection. We are 'criminally risking lives' or are even 'in the pay of Saddam Hussein'. But the



FBU has supported socialism all over the world - we won't jump on *The Sun's* bandwagon.

The government are the ones putting lives at risk. Because of the dispute soldiers have been tied up firefighting instead of killing men, women and children in Iraq. They are putting lives at risk in Iraq and here.

In my opinion the FBU leadership has been too defensive on this question. We should say, this is not our war - we are against it.

Like the public 80% of firefighters are against the war. There will be FBU banners on the February 15 demonstration and lots of firefighters in uniform will be there. A lot of FBU ex-servicemen are dead set against war on Iraq. It will cause misery and suffering and increase the threat of terrorism. The only winners will be the multinational oil companies. The money should be used on public services, not on war.

How has the war featured in your election campaign?

I was speaking to the Labour candidate on Saturday and he said that the war was "not a local issue". As far as I'm concerned it's an issue if the people want to discuss it. They do - and it's costing Labour votes. They're asking, how can you spend three and a half billion pounds on war, yet you can't afford to pay the nurses or firefighters?

How are voters reacting to you as a firefighter?

People are reacting positively. There has been

Proud to be a socialist

lots of sympathy and massive public support for the firefighters. They can see the link between cuts in the fire service and all the other public services. Whether that will translate into votes is yet to be seen.

How is the campaign going?

We've been out leafletting and canvassing and there's been a lot of support. The problem will be the turnout - it could be as low as 22-23%. That means that only the hard-core support, including for the established parties, will vote.

A number of people have told me they're never going to vote Labour again - there's an awful lot of disenchanted Labour voters about. They were expecting things to change, but the gap between rich and poor is still growing. Locally, when it comes to schools, libraries and housing, New Labour stand for the same as the Tories - cuts in jobs and working conditions and worse services for the public ●

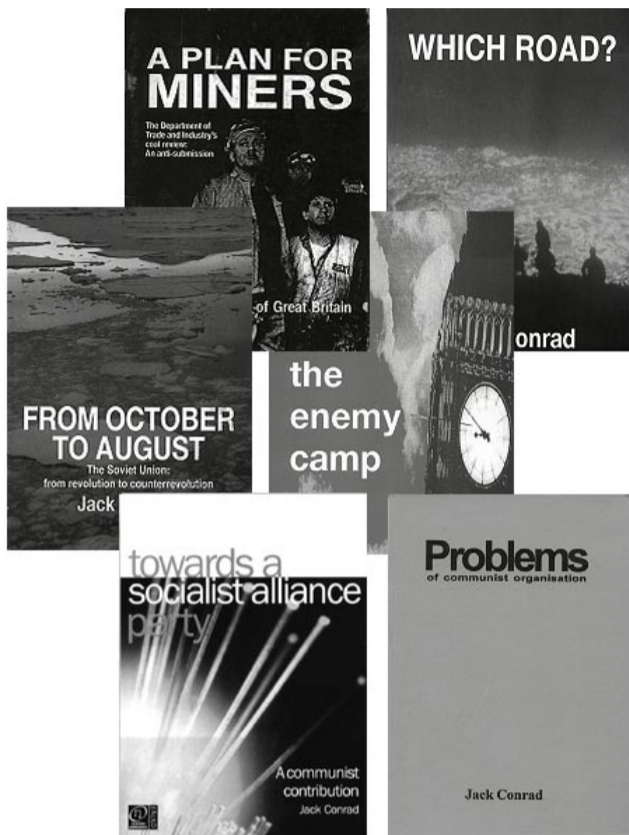
There will be FBU banners on the February 15 demonstration and lots of firefighters in uniform will be there

Join SA campaign

Help needed with canvassing. Meet outside the Fiddlers Elbow pub, junction Prince of Wales Road, Malden Road, 11am, Sunday February 16, 5.30pm, and Monday February 17, 5.30pm. Campaign meeting, Monday February 17, 7.30pm, Castlehaven Community Centre. To help on polling day, Thursday February 20, or at any time call Simon Joyce (07811 144890) or email sallythompson@blueyonder.co.uk

STOP THE WAR

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No trust in UN

War against Iraq is now almost certainly only a matter of weeks away - despite the mass opposition that pervades much of the world. But Bush's drive to invade Iraq and impose a new American order on the Middle East has now catalysed a major crisis in Nato, perhaps the biggest since de Gaulle's France left the alliance in the 1960s to pursue its own 'independent' imperialist agenda.

In seeking to formally invoke the Nato charter to make a show of defending Turkey against Iraq, despite no attack on that country having taken place (in reality Washington hopes to use Turkey as a launch point for its Iraq invasion), the US provoked a veto from France, Germany and Belgium. The apoplectic chauvinist response in the US, and the inevitable resentment at this in Europe, could well drive a deeper wedge between the two sides, and calls the whole future of Nato into question. After this defiance of the US, it is not actually beyond the bounds of possibility to envisage the vetoing of a US-backed resolution in the United Nations - which France, Russia and China have the power to do.

But before anyone hangs the flags out to congratulate Chirac, Schröder or Putin over their elegant footwork, it is worth noting that their alternative 'spoiler' proposal for the UN bears an uncanny resemblance to the Rambouillet demands put to Milosevic's Serbia in 1999 as a trigger for war. I.e, a tripling of inspectors, UN 'blue helmets' to accompany the inspectors around Iraq wherever they wish to go; extension of the no-fly zone to cover the whole country. It may well be, of course, that this turns out to be a dead duck in the face of US intransigence, but in normal circumstances this could be seen as a kind of invasion in itself, albeit leaving the existing government nominally in place while inspections continue. However, the Saddam Hussein regime seems to be playing along with the French/German-led diplomatic initiatives at the moment: it has now agreed conditionally to allow U2 spy planes to overfly Iraq to help the inspectors do their work.

In any case, all this manoeuvring is a result of the fact that Blair has once again persuaded Bush to attempt to push a resolution through the UN security council to cover their blatant international piracy with a legal fig leaf. Bush, while insisting that he does not need a second resolution to go to war, has said he is prepared to attempt for a couple of weeks to get one through - primarily, it seems, in order to help Blair to split and weaken the anti-war movement, particularly in Europe.

The diplomatic rifts between London/Washington on the one side and the French, Germans and Russians on the other have been bitter and fraught, and are getting more so. Nevertheless Blair knows, given the fact that Paris, Moscow and Berlin fear being shut out of a redrawn, US-dominated Middle East, he has an even chance of procuring a change of heart. Germany might be the most difficult, given the extremely tenuous position of Social Democratic chancellor Schröder, whose government's support has plummeted only a few months after his re-election on an anti-war programme. He is now hopping around trying to please both left and right, as if someone (notably the anti-war constituency who voted for him) is grasping him by the testicles. But Germany does not have a veto on the security council, and therefore Schröder's predicament can be more easily ignored.

France and Russia, on the other hand - along with China, which is also still making noises about opposing Bush's war - are crucial, not so much for the war plans themselves, which can and undoubtedly will go ahead irrespective, but in getting Blair the UN authorisation he desperately needs to bolster him at home for the coming attack on Iraq.

Nevertheless, whatever the differences of interest or perceived tactics between the various capitalistic world powers, more unites them than divides them when push comes to shove. The danger for them, what they fear most of all, is that an unsuccessful or misdi-



Mick Rix: threat of action against war

rected military adventure could backfire against capitalist stability and the system itself. Indeed, this is much of what the argument between the French, Germans *et al*, on the one hand, and Bush and Blair, on the other, is about: tactics. In no sense do they solidarise with the potential victims of an invasion of Iraq - all they are worried about is that the current US projection of itself as the policeman of the world is counterproductive and will endanger their own interests.

Therefore, at a certain point, when it becomes clear that Bush and co are not going to be persuaded to back down and adopt a more 'reasonable' tack, chances are that the French and German ruling classes, as well as the Russians and Chinese, who hardly relish the prospect of a prolonged falling out with the US, will eat their anti-war words and climb upon the 'regime change' bandwagon. This is what recent history reveals by way of precedence. No one can say for certain that things will shake out exactly this way, of course. But it is more likely than not, given the nature of the protagonists.

Opinion polls in Britain have most recently shown that there is a large section of anti-war opinion - around half of it by some reckoning - that would change its mind and support the war if Bush and Blair managed to get a resolution authorising an attack through the security council. Certainly, a lot of the opposition to Bush/Blair currently being voiced through the Labour Party could potentially fall victim to such illusions in the UN; and there is a real danger that this kind of development could have a demoralising effect on the anti-war movement as a whole. We therefore need clarity within the anti-war movement on the nature of the UN, which after all exists primarily as a means for reconciling imperialist interests and safeguarding the stability of the capitalist world order as a whole.

Many, of course, in dismissing this analysis and the conclusions that flow from it, will point to the numerical weight of third world and poorer countries in general in the United Nations, citing this as a reason why the potential of the UN to act as a barrier to war should not be dismissed. But again this is an illusion. Blair's 'gang of eight' declaration - the European states that signed up to his pro-US, pro-invasion document earlier this month - provides pointers as to the real role of the governments and ruling classes of less advanced countries in the UN. After all, the countries Blair managed to enrol, apart from his rightwing buddies, Berlusconi and Aznar in Italy and Spain respectively, most notably included the three poorest countries in Nato, awaiting admission to the EU: Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

It is glaringly obvious that such countries see themselves as dependent particularly on American goodwill and aid for much of their future economic prospects, to the extent that any conception that they have any real independence of judgement is something of a joke. What happens to poorer countries who get strotty, or refuse to go along with US war plans in the United Nations, is shown by the example of Yemen in the last Gulf War. After it dared to vote in the security council against the resolution authorising Desert Storm, the Yemeni UN ambassador was taunted by US officials that they had cast "the most expensive 'no' vote in history": US aid to Yemen was cut off, reinforcing the impoverishment of the masses in this dependent Middle Eastern country.

This is not to say that we should not exploit the difficulties and the divisions that have been causing the imperialists problems over this question. On the contrary, the reluctance of France and Germany in particular to go to war is rooted not just in ruling class perceptions of self-interest, but also in fear of the massive anti-war sentiments that have built up in Europe, including in Britain itself, as Bush has made his bellicose speeches and stepped up his war preparations.

It is the task of the conscious elements of the anti-war movement, particularly revolutionary socialists and communists, to seek actively by means of propaganda to harden up the anti-war masses, including through exposure of the record and crimes of the United Nations in the service of imperialist interests over decades, from Korea to the Gulf to the former Yugoslavia. We should not be afraid to outspokenly criticise the likes of Tony Benn, who preach above all that this war is immoral because of its tendency to violate 'international law', more than because of its predatory, imperialist nature *per se*. If the anti-war movement is trapped by such legalistic pacifism, it will be so much easier for the government to just brush it aside, particularly in the event that Blair gets his craved-for second UN resolution.

Blair himself has admitted that his drive to war on Iraq alongside Bush is a massive gamble, that could cost him his premiership and his political career. And indeed, this highly desirable outcome is very much on the agenda, given his precarious position *vis-à-vis* public opinion, with something like 47% of the population opposed to war *with or without* a second UN resolution, according to one recent opinion poll snapshot (on top of another 40-odd percent opposed without such a resolution). It has certainly cost him much of his popularity in party political terms - according to more recent polls, Labour is now in a similar position in terms of popular support to the low point it reached during the fuel protest crisis in 2000, mainly due to discontent with his slavish support for Bush over Iraq. This kind of mass dissent has the potential to knock Britain out of the war.

We need to deepen the existing anti-war mood to take advantage of this situation: to go beyond mere sentiment, in the direction of working class action. Once again, we can point to the example of train drivers in Motherwell, Scotland, in their refusal to transport military supplies for use against Iraq, as showing the way to what is needed above all to give the anti-war movement real teeth.

The willingness of such workers to act, together with the widespread opposition to Blair's war plans amongst the general population, seems to have given some union leaders courage. The leaders of both main rail unions were among the five general secretaries who last week threatened industrial action if Iraq is attacked.

The political space opened up by the imperialists' divisions over this war is vitally important - not for its own sake, but for the political gap it opens up for the working class to advance its own independent interests, and begin to take the offensive against the capitalist social system itself, a system that breeds the barbarism of imperialist war ●

Ian Donovan

North Korea next target?

One other component of Bush's so-called 'axis of evil', North Korea, is also firmly in the sights of the US. The Stalinist monarchy of Kim Jong Il fears that once Bush has disposed of Iraq it will be next on the hit-list.

Recently, in response to US bellicosity Pyongyang announced it was restarting its nuclear programme - ostensibly for civilian use, but with an obvious military potential - and withdrawing from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Coupled with its earlier admissions that it had restarted its civilian (in reality dual-use) nuclear programme, citing the non-delivery of pledges of power generation aid promised by the US as part of a deal to avert a similar, threatening crisis between North Korea and the US in 1994 under Clinton, this has considerably escalated the historically deep and dangerous tensions between North Korea and the US.

An escalating war of words has ensued, with US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld calling North Korea a "terrorist state", while the regime has itself threatened that it will not simply sit back and allow the United States to build up its capacity to attack it: it has threatened American forces on the Korean peninsula with a pre-emptive strike of its own to stymie that option. This is a credible threat: not only is it reckoned North Korea may well already have at least two nuclear bombs (it certainly has enough plutonium to produce such weapons, as well as the possibility of producing more from enriched uranium if its reactivated nuclear power programme works properly), but this is also how the 1950-53 Korean War began: with a pre-emptive North Korean attack on hostile, American-trained and manned military forces in South Korea.

North Korea is simply a remnant of the old Soviet bloc - a bureaucratic caricature of 'socialism in one country' in the model of something like Ceausescu's Romania. It has somewhat anomalously stayed standing (mainly due to its geographical location), while similar states have either collapsed and adopted some recognisably 'normal' form of capitalism (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic), descended into impoverished bureaucratic anarcho-gangsterism (most of the territory of Russia and the other former Soviet republics and the poorer and more marginal areas of eastern Europe), or, paradoxically, in China and to some extent Vietnam, successfully begun to undertake the transformation towards large-scale capital accumulation under the political rule of a so-called 'Communist Party'.

Along with Cuba, North Korea is the only still existing Stalinist regime that still boasts of its 'socialist' credentials. Unlike Cuba, however, it has no charismatic leaders or real reservoir of legitimacy resulting from an historic popular struggle for national liberation - rather it has the quality of the most bizarre elements of the Stalinist ice age. Kim Jong Il inherited his position as 'Dear Leader' from his father, 'Great Leader' Kim Il Sung, the hack who ruled North Korea virtually since the Japanese surrendered the northern half of the country to victorious Soviet troops at the end of World War II.

So North Korea is a freak. Its regime is obviously doomed, particularly in the context of the 1989-91 collapse of the USSR and its satellites. Its old-style Stalinist attempts to build a self-sufficient national 'socialist' economy have simply led to near or actual starvation for large sections of its population. For it to simply implode, however, is not a prospect that would be exactly welcomed by the relatively prosperous, newly 'democratised' capitalist regime in South Korea.

After all, when one remembers the economic and political problems caused for the German bourgeoisie by the absorption of East Germany in the aftermath of 1989, it is also

worth noting that, Asian tiger though it may be, the resources of South Korea for coping with similar problems are massively less than those of Germany.

A conflict between North Korea and the US could therefore be extremely dangerous and unpredictable for the entire region. The US policy of seeking confrontation with Pyongyang also has an irrational aspect to it: the arguably myopic determination of the Bush administration to confront 'rogue' regimes seems particularly strange in this case, given that the only political appeal North Korea is capable of generating is on the basis of a fairly insipid 'left' form of Korean nationalism amongst some mainly student elements in the south - fragile, because the much more economically dynamic southern state is increasingly the repository of Korean national sentiment, something that is likely to grow more as the north's death agony proceeds.

North Korean 'socialism' inspires no-one: only tiny, marginalised currents of 'orthodox' Trotskyism continue to see in it any gains for the working class whatsoever as a so-called 'deformed workers' state'.

It appears, however, that the Bush regime is determined to assert US world hegemony in any way it can, including confrontation with those states that refuse to submit to its



domination. Despite the odium of the North Korean regime, its monstrous, Stalinist nature and its remaining propaganda value to the world bourgeoisie as a horrible example of what 'socialism' will supposedly be like, the working class must oppose Bush's evi-

Kim Jong Il - dear dictator

dent plans somewhere down the line for a more decisive confrontation with Kim Jong Il's regime.

Stop US aggression - against Iraq, North Korea or any other state ●

Kit Robinson

No repeat of 1914

February 15 will see a huge demonstration of popular anger. No one doubts that. Between 500,000 and a million people are expected to take to the streets demanding that Britain does not go ahead with Gulf War II.

The organisers are already ecstatic. Here is one of the biggest political demonstrations in the history of Britain. And, say many comrades, this is even before the war has started.

We are right to celebrate the February 15 turnout. However, the happy idea that if an invasion of Iraq were to be launched - with or without a second UN resolution - the anti-war movement is somehow destined to grow and grow from a February 15 baseline is dangerous.

The stakes will become higher. The government and the ruling class will redouble and redouble again the propaganda offensive. Repressive measures and new laws might be enacted. The popular mood could suddenly swing against the anti-war movement if there are large numbers of casualties. That is why revolutionary politics are not a diversion but are vital.

Though there is no direct parallel with the permanent 'war on terrorism' and World War I, there are nonetheless many important lessons for today's anti-war movement.

Almost everyone knew a European war was in the offing. In 1871 the Marx-Engels partnership warned of a coming conflagration and 20 million deaths. And to their credit in the decade before World War I most labour leaders in Britain, Germany and France, along with the bulk of those parties affiliated to the Second International, adopted a steadfast policy of internationalism and opposition to war. There were huge peace demonstrations, countless conferences and in 1907 the International unanimously adopted the militant resolution 'Militarism and international conflicts'.

It stated that it was the duty of the working classes and their parliamentary representatives to do everything to prevent the outbreak of war. In the event of war the labour movements in the belligerent countries were to intercede to bring it to an end, using all

their power to rouse the people to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule. Put another way - fight war by fighting for revolution.

The normally squabbling British affiliates to the International - the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party, the Fabian Society and later the British Socialist Party - were all united on this one issue: the international working class must prevent the outbreak of war.

In 1911 the British affiliates found themselves on the left of the International, proposing an amendment that argued: "The congress considers as particularly effective the general strike of workers, especially in the industries which supply the instruments of war (arms, munitions, transport, etc), as well as popular agitation and action in their most effective forms." Even Ramsey MacDonald, who opposed the use of a general strike for industrial or revolutionary aims, considered it appropriate in the case of "an unpopular war". There were other more conservative voices in the labour movement, but the overall view reflected the popular mood.

However, a hint of the misleadership and the treachery to come was apparent at the 1912 Labour Party conference. A proposal from the International, supported by all British affiliates, asked for a report on how successful a partial or general strike in opposition to war might be. Textile workers leader Tom Shaw fiercely opposed it. He argued that such action would provoke a civil war, which was worse than national war. The Labour grandee, Arthur Henderson, agreed, but thought, as it was just a report and was thus non-committal, it might as well be unanimously agreed. Window-dressing.

When war did break out, the apparently substantial international working class opposition all but vanished, swept away by a torrent of rabid jingoism. The anti-war movement collapsed to a fraction of its former self. Most labour parliamentarians and trade union leaders eagerly sought to subordinate working class interests to imperialist slaughter. Only the Russians and Serbs adhered to the policy of resistance.

The British leaders had talked big for those few days before Britain declared war. On July 30 1914 the Parliamentary Labour Party voted unanimously that "on no account will this country be dragged into the European conflict". It called on "all labour organisations in the country to ... oppose, if need be, in the most effective way any action which may involve us in war". On August 1 the British affiliates of the International appealed to all other sections - in stirring class war language - to hold

demonstrations in every industrial centre. But there were no concrete proposals for any "effective" action.

Three days after war was declared a conference of all the leading labour movement organisations was convened, supposedly with the aim of setting up a National Labour Emergency Committee against war. Instead they created the War Emergency Workers National Committee, ostensibly with the aim of protecting workers' interests during the conflict. However, three weeks later the trade unions and Labour Party declared an industrial truce for the duration. The Labour Party also agreed an electoral truce and put the whole apparatus at the disposal of the war recruiting campaign.

Opposition (in widely varying degrees) was now radically narrowed to three small groupings: the generally constitutional ILP, which was given a new lease of life and benefited from an influx of radical liberals; small pacifist groups; and the Marxist BSP, which became increasingly involved in militant rank and file industrial actions. For the ruling class and the 'patriotic' press *all* opposition, no matter how qualified or tame, was treason. In these circumstances the working class to begin with showed little opposition to the war, although defending hard won agreements and trade union rights was another matter.

It became quickly apparent that a mere industrial truce was insufficient to secure the discipline required to guarantee war production. Until 1914 the ruling class had viewed the trade unions and the Labour Party as 'manageable nuisances' or 'necessary evils'. With the war the ruling class not only needed them, but also increasingly came to depend on them to shackle the workers to the interests of capital. At first from 1914 to 1916 strikes dipped sharply. However, from 1917 there was a substantial increase in rank and file militancy - especially where the BSP was active in the important (to the war effort) engineering and shipbuilding industries. These rank and file, unofficial initiatives were the only real opposition to the war - but only in an indirect sense, through struggles over pay and trade union rights. It was the inspiration of the revolutions in Russia in 1917 that put independent working class politics back on the agenda.

Of course the circumstances of World War I are far removed from today and we cannot take the analogy very far, but there are clues to definite historical tendencies, to dangers and to the sort of political approach we need ●

Alan Stevens

RELIGION AND CLASS

Origins of islam

Islam is very much in the news. It is easy to appreciate why - islam is one of the most important and certainly the most controversial religion in the world today. Besides providing millions with solace and a sense of community, there is definite political side to islam.

The corrupt and bloated royal house of Saud legitimise their rule through islam. Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam have given a new lease of life to anti-semitism. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a blood-drenched theocracy. And till their fall the Taliban imposed upon Afghanistan a counterrevolutionary regime of unparalleled reaction in the name of the compassionate and merciful Allah.

Then there is islamic terrorism. September 11 2001 and the twin towers secured for George Bush a moral majority and excused the US invasion of Afghanistan and, if he gets his way, Gulf War II; bin Laden urges new attacks and talks of "converging interests" between muslims and socialists "in the battle against the crusaders"; a beleaguered Tony Blair has desperately tried to link Iraq with al-Qa'eda; Abu Hamza - the turbulent cleric - is expelled from his Finsbury Park mosque amid a government-stoked ricin panic; Islamic Jihad and Hamas suicide bombers wreak havoc in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. And in the midst of all that there is the defender of faiths, HRH prince Charles and his multiculturalist plea for people to "tolerate" British-Asian muslims, etc.

This short article has nothing much to say that is directly contemporary. It is unashamedly historical. However, the intention is to call into question some widely held notions about islam. Certainly the aim is to undermine the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, by which islam is painted as inherently backward and violent. By equal measure I want to show that the origins and fundamental texts of islam are not divine, but are thoroughly human and can only be properly explained in historical and materialist terms.

City and sand

Compared to both judaism and christianity, the origins of islam are well documented, definite and uncontroversial. We know almost as much about the adult Muhammad and the rise of islam as we do of the life of the 16th century christian reformers, Martin Luther and John Knox. Islam sprung forth in the full light of history - almost ready-made - in 7th century Arabia.

Social consciousness is determined by social circumstances. And as a body of thought islam was undoubtedly the product of the far-reaching socio-economic changes that were occurring in and around the city of Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia.

The orientalist's romantic notion that islam originated from amongst Bedouin nomads in the parched, scorching deserts of the Nafud and in the shadows of their tents is a complete fallacy. Islam is indelibly marked by the city and what Marxists call the sphere of circulation. "Despite the extent and numerical importance of the nomads it was the settled elements and more especially those living and working on the trans-Arabian trade routes who really shaped the history of Arabia," says Bernard Lewis in his classic study (*B Lewis The Arabs in history* Oxford 1993, p29).

Regionally Mecca was a relatively important urban centre. Unlike ancient Rome, however, this city - located at a safe remove from the Red Sea coast - was not primarily a unit of consumption based on extra-economic surplus extraction (tribute). Nor was Mecca primarily a unit of production, as is typically the case with the big towns and cities of modern-day

capitalist society. Mecca functioned as a hub of long-distance caravan and, to a lesser extent, marine trade.

The city served as one of many intermediary staging posts that related the separate worlds of Mesopotamia, the Indus valley, Ganges-Brahmaputra India, Java and China and those of Ethiopia, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt and Greek and Latin Europe. The rich, highly productive and sophisticated - often riverine - civilisations in the east existed as separate zones, each possessing unique natural, agricultural or manufactured products, including luxuries. No law of value equalised necessary labour or moulded them into a single metabolism.

Consequently well situated peoples such as the Arabs could constitute themselves intermediaries - import-export merchants and money lenders - and from that chance position accumulate fabulous fortunes. Their land was barren and unproductive, the Arabs possessed no sought-after skills in manufacture or the arts, but by dint of geography - which put them on one of the motorways of the ancient world - they could enrich themselves beyond their wildest dreams.

The principal - or socially determining - occupation of the elite amongst these people therefore consisted not of state administration or overseeing production, but buying cheap and selling dear. Perfumes, gums, silks, spices and porcelain could be acquired from within China for a song. Aristocratic Europeans, on the other hand, were prepared to pay for them through the nose. Subjective value - different ways of appreciating the properties of a particular product - allowed surplus to be siphoned off from one society and into another.

Risks associated with financing such long-distance trade were high. So too were the rewards. Between source and final sale prior to consumption successive mark-ups could be up to 2,000% - what is now a humble staple, the nutmeg, being a star example.

The standing of the Arabian towns and the nomadic Bedouin tribes in the hinterland was always precarious and closely related to the shifting balances of contemporary big power politics. Arabia formed an indirect and hazardous transit route between the Mediterranean world and the south and east. The Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans had each at their zenith sought to extend their imperial hegemony into the Arabian peninsula. A mercantile city like Petra in what is now Jordan was a prized jewel by any standard. The untameable Bedouin tribes were a constant nuisance and had to be subdued. Buffer states were erected to cage them in. In 24BC the Romans even tried to conquer the Yemen and thus capture the southern trade route to India. The expedition ended in ignominious failure.

Inevitably great empires passed from expansion into decline. As they did, rivals saw their opportunity. One encroached upon another. That entailed severe disruption of established trade routes and the necessity of finding alternatives - alternatives that in the first instance skirted round enemy territory. Hence in the periphery big-power politics could produce wild swings of fortune.

In 348AD one such major swing occurred. The Roman and Persian empires concluded a peace after a whole extended period of wars, which first erupted in the 3rd century. During the long peace that lasted until 502, regional and international trade returned to the direct routes - through Egypt and the Red Sea, through the Euphrates Valley and the Persian Gulf. Western Arabia found itself bypassed. It was no longer needed. Trade crashed. Towns, cities

and petty kingdoms withered or simply ceased to exist. The famed irrigation system around Ma'rib in the far south was abandoned.

Prosperity only returned to Arabia in the 6th century. Byzantium and Persia had fought each other to the point of mutual exhaustion. The bureaucratic tributary state and standing army tended on each side towards the all-consuming. Trade routes via the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea could no longer be policed. Piracy flourished. As a consequence Yemen found itself cut off and in crisis. Suddenly Mecca and what later became known as Medina (Yathrib) were geographically well placed. Along with an explosion of trade and an influx of wealth came profound social change.

Tribal society in decay

By custom all males in the Bedouin tribes of Arabia were equal. Individuals possessed that status through their blood line. Elements of primitive communism survived amongst them. There was no private ownership of land or water. Even flocks were sometimes held collectively by the tribe. Chiefs were elected by the tribal elders, usually from amongst the leading sheikhly family known as the *ahl al-bayt*. Chiefs were rarely more than first amongst equals. They exercised authority, not coercive power, over the tribe and were advised by the council of elders, the *majlis*. Within the tribe, life was regulated by custom - the *sumna* or practice of the ancestors. Vendettas between tribes were commonplace.

The religious beliefs and practices of the nomadic Bedouin are somewhat vague, but bear a similarity to what we can glean about the ancient Hebrews. The uncontrollable forces of nature dominated people's lives and had to be assuaged. Ancestors were elevated into minor gods with this in view. They would, if treated properly and with due respect, intervene in the spirit world on behalf of the living.

However, the numerous divinities of the Bedouins possessed no clear outlines which distinguished them one from the other. Unlike in Egypt and Greece the graphic and plastic arts were not developed enough to permit gods having individualised or idealised forms. Nevertheless a pantheon is thought to have existed, the highest gods being Manat, Uzza, Allat and, above them all, Allah. The only definite distinction between these gods was locality. Particularly evocative places - groves of trees, high mountains, springs - were held in veneration: they possessed qualities that were said to make them the sanctuary of a god.

The most important gods for the Bedouin were specifically tribal though. Each tribe equipped itself with its own unique god. Unusual or oddly shaped stones were particularly useful here and functioned as fetishes or idols. These objects had a distinct advantage for nomads - they could be easily transported. Their god was carried about with them in a sacred red tent. The Hebrews famously had their tribal fetish housed in a box - the ark of the covenant. These fetish objects bring rain, fertility and good luck in war. Fetish and tribe formed a unit. Once members of the tribe settled, the fetish would be placed in the sheikhly house which would thereby gain some religious prestige.

Inevitably a tension existed between the *nouveaux riches* urban dwellers in 6th century Mecca and the nomads of Arabia. Those who inhabited and roamed the vast desert wastes thought it their natural born right to ambush caravans or impose upon them so-called 'brotherhood' taxes. At the same time the ability

of the town to reach out to far off places resulted from the complex interrelationships that joined the city and desert as a single circulatory system (in classical Greece the city dominated, but rested upon the near countryside; under feudalism in western Europe the countryside dominated, but relied upon the towns for manufactured goods and markets; likewise the city in Arabia dominated, but needed the desert - in this case for transport).

Water and pasture, vital for the nomad's herds of sheep and goats, are as easily exhausted as they are few and far between. The Bedouin tribes had to constantly track forth from one oasis to another simply to survive. Hence in marginal lifestyle they closely resembled the ancient Hebrew tribes described in the Old Testament. That did not stop the patriarch Abram being rich - not only in cattle and sheep, but "gold and silver" too (*Genesis* 8, 2).

Nomadic existence invariably goes hand in hand with both commerce and robbery - supplementary professions greatly facilitated for the Bedouins by the domestication of the Arabian, one-humped camel some four and a half thousand years ago. With these awesome beasts they could traverse huge distances with a minimum of water and food and by the standards of the day at speed. Ideal for the movement of luxury goods as well as raiding.

Bedouin chiefs - sheikhs - who had grown wealthy from trade, extortion and war sought out a sedentary existence in towns and the material and intellectual benefits that brought them and their offspring. Not that they sever their links with those in the desert. From the safety and comfort of airy and sumptuous townhouses tribal chiefs continue to preside over their kinsmen. However, this Bedouin tribal chief no longer lives through raiding, but through trade. Moreover, where the former relies on traditional bonds of mutual obligation within the tribe, the latter is seen as the result of individual effort and enterprise. Business thereby usurps tribal solidarity.

In parallel, well-to-do urban merchants seek links with the desert. They purchase huge camel herds which still enjoy access to collective water and pasture. Long-distance caravans could consist of up to 35,000 camels. These herds are tended by Bedouin nomads - many of whom have sunk deep into debt with the merchants. Having no other regular source of gaining a livelihood, they are reduced to a humiliating state of bondage. By the 7th century we therefore find customary tribal relations in an advanced stage of decay. Class relations begin to emerge.

These relations were, it should be emphasised, those of a mercantile, not a capitalist, society. Marx's well known self-expanding formula for capital - M-C-M' - applies to merchant enterprises, but cannot be generalised throughout society. Labour itself only appears as a commodity sporadically and marginally. There is no overarching labour market. Most inhabitants maintain a traditional nomadic existence as herders. Surplus is derived externally through transfer, not internally through exploitation.

Merchant ideology

Long-distance mercantile trade involves more than an urban existence and business. Nature and exclusive tribal gods assume less and less relevance. Eventually they become redundant or are subsumed.

Survival no longer depends on winter rains and tribal bonds, but on money-making. Yet in the minds of the merchants the unpredictability associated with the long-distance caravan trade - cheating

by suppliers, robbery *en route*, saturation of markets - appears just as uncontrollable as did the forces of nature. These social forces dominate their lives and must be explained, no matter how fantastically.

Tribal society is reproduced in the city and is at the same time negated. Each tribe initially had its *majlis* and its own fetish stone within the confines of the city. Quickly, however, the tribal chiefs metamorphose. They transform themselves into a republic of rich merchants for whom business comes first, tribe second.

That finds religious expression through collecting the fetish stones together and housing them in a common shrine. At some point in time the many stones in Mecca were replaced by a single - black - stone. The cube-shaped building called the *Ka'ba* was the symbol of unity in Mecca, where a single council, known as the *mala'*, also replaced the old tribal *majlis*.

Merchants by definition have little or no concern for manufacturing or agricultural techniques. Whereas the artisan and the farmer constantly strive to deepen their specific knowledge of immediate raw materials - be they iron, clay, wood, grain, animals or the soil itself - the merchant has but one business, and that is business. Commodities are judged not by any intrinsic qualities, or use-value, but solely by their ability to generate more money (capital). In fact the usefulness of commodities is reduced to their money, or exchange, value. Such an abstraction and all that it entails socially has a profound impact on the merchant's thought world.

There are definite limits placed upon the life expectations of the artisan and farmer - they rely on their own ability to labour. And there are only 24 hours in the day. In contrast the only limit that exists on merchant wealth is the ability to lay out money. Borrowing money from others in order to buy on an extended scale is a gamble, but promises massive returns. On an intellectual level the resulting necessity of calculating from the biggest figures to the tiniest fractions generates mathematics (the more trade develops, alongside the credit system, and the more the gap separating buying and selling grows in time and space, the more complex must calculations be - hence the invention of double-entry bookkeeping, percentages, the zero, etc). On a personal level, danger is ever present. The merchant hovers between the extremes of wealth and ruin. Avarice and fear engender a brutal cynicism towards lenders and buyers, sellers and competitors.

Artisans and farmers are tied to a specific place - workshop or land. Merchants as a class cannot content themselves with parochial concerns. They must venture far and wide, and that brings them into contact with more advanced peoples and their ideas. The merchant will therefore tend to cease being purely national (tribal) and instead acquire the universalistic outlook of a cosmopolitan.

'Merchant' and 'foreigner' are interchangeable terms. The Arab merchant travels through and lives in many distant lands along the trade routes. By the same measure wealthy transit points such as Mecca see an inward migration of foreign merchants and labourers, who not only trade with, or work for, the natives, but settle amongst them. The population of Mecca was in consequence varied and mixed.

The elite, ruling, class of aristocratic merchants who controlled the long-distance caravan trade were known as '*quraysh* of the inside'. Below them in power and status were the '*quraysh* of the outside', who consisted of smaller

traders and included recent incomers. The Mecca proletariat was a combination of Bedouins and foreigners. In the hinterland were the ‘Arabs of *quraysh*’, the dependent Bedouin tribes. Elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula foreign colonies - including both jewish and christian - were established which were connected with the long-distance caravan trade. Medina being the foremost example.

Arabia lay on the periphery of the civilised world and certainly rated as an extremely backward region. Yet, because of advanced neighbours and long-distance mercantile trade, elements within Arabia swiftly take on features and adopt attributes that are amongst the most sophisticated on offer. There is, so to speak, no need to reinvent the wheel. Put another way, Arabia provides a splendid example of uneven but combined development.

In the border lands Arabs were recruited and trained as fearsome mercenary soldiers by Byzantium and Persia. Modern forms of warfare were thereby acquired. Writing reached Arabia from abroad too. Purely oral means of communication could not fulfil the ever expanding requirements of running an international business. Certainly once the idea of writing had been encountered it was readily copied in its highest - ie, most expressive - form by the merchant class. Religious notions of monotheism also find an eager response, especially in cities like Mecca, where traditional bonds and tribal gods have lost their purchase.

It was into these challenging social and intellectual conditions that Mohammed was born and grew to maturity.

Social position of islam

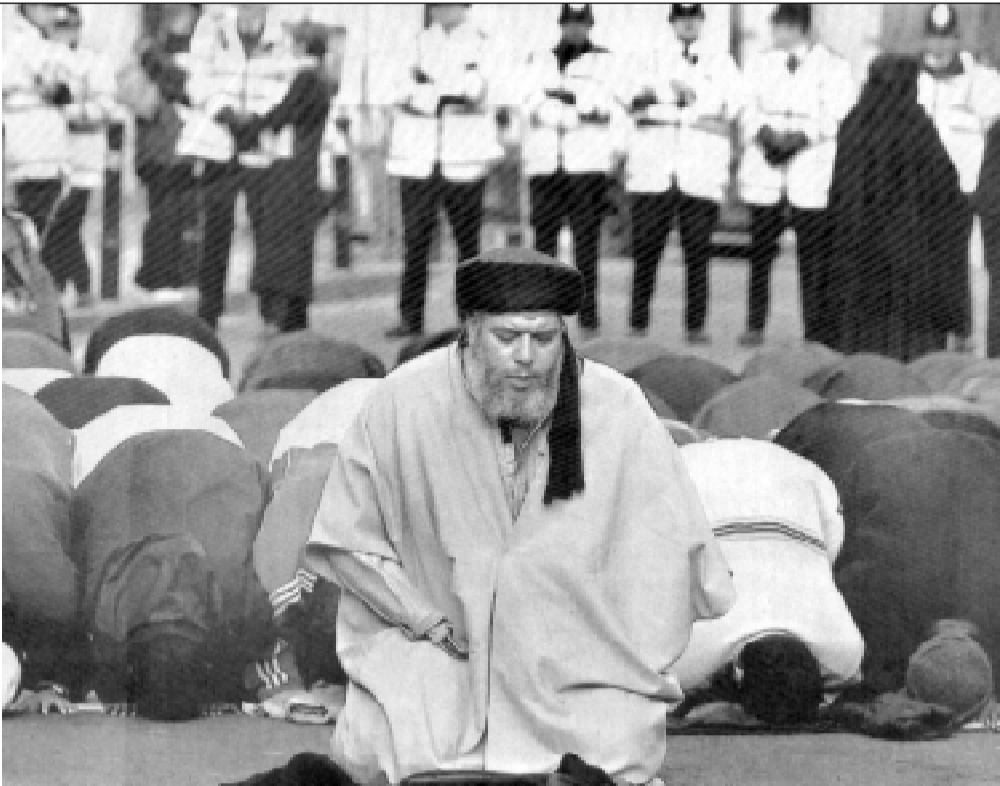
Not much is known about the ancestors of Muhammad or his early life. Most of what is claimed turns out under scholarly examination to owe more to myth-making than hard fact. He seems to have been born in Mecca between the years 570 and 580. Though an orphan and a member of a declining tribe, the Banu Hashim, one of the ‘*quraysh* of the outside’, he married wealth in the form of Khadija, the widow of a rich merchant, who was somewhat older than himself. This is echoed in the *Koran*: “Did he not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee? Did he not find thee erring, and guide thee? Did he not find thee needy and suffice [enrich - JC] thee?” (93: 6-8).

Perhaps Muhammad took up trade. Perhaps not. There is no evidence that he did, even of a literary nature. Either way, he obviously had some acquaintance with jewish and christian scriptures. The similarities between the *Koran* and the Old and New Testaments are obvious. Nevertheless the *Koran* is no carbon copy. It is an independent work, inspired in all probability by an indirect knowledge of jewish and christian myths.

There would appear to have been a school of thought in Mecca which rejected the old paganism but could accept neither the jewish nor christian doctrines. Conceivably Muhammad emerged from this milieu. Muslims themselves admit that there were many ‘false prophets’ in Arabia at the time.

Muhammad - obviously a man of great charisma - purportedly began preaching at the age of 40. He denounced all local gods and idols. There is only one god, Allah, and he is the creator of everything. Just as the jews made their main tribal god, Jehovah, a universal god, so did Muhammad. And just as Jehovah had a special connection with the jews, Allah had a special connection with the Arabs. His shrine was the *Ka’ba* in Mecca. So, while some elements of Arab tradition were discarded, others were retained. The black stone housed in the *Ka’ba* - in all likelihood a meteorite - continued to be regarded with veneration and Muhammad decreed that every muslim had to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life. Pilgrimage was the source of considerable additional income for the

**Abu Hamza:
turbulent
cleric**



city well before his time.

Muhammad modified other Arab traditions too and elevated them from the tribal to the universal. Feuding and vendetta were outlawed amongst believers. One muslim had to lend aid to another. No muslim could make a separate pace with unbelievers. Where before there had been alliances of tribes, there was now to be a sense of community based on religion. Blood is replaced by confessional faith.

In the same manner the mutual aid of the tribes and the obligatory generosity expected towards those in need was transferred to the religious community itself. From a very early stage Muhammad’s muslim party began to build political structures and social services which could substitute for those of the decaying tribes.

Muhammad’s first followers came from a similar class background to himself. They were the younger sons and cousins of rich merchants who lacked social influence and those from the *quraysh* of the outside - middle class merchants who were struggling to retain an independent existence.

The *Koran* reflects their world outlook. It is studded with commercial expressions and concepts. Relations between people and god are of a strictly commercial nature. “Allah is the ideal merchant,” comments Maxime Rodinson, the French Jewish scholar (quoted in PN Siegel *The meek and the militant* London 1986, p172).

In contrast to the rich merchants Allah is honest and never cheats. Life is a balance sheet of profit and loss. Good deeds bring credits. Evil can be forgiven, but is always accounted for. The unbeliever is a bankrupt and will be condemned to hell on the day of final reckoning. The believer receives their reward in heaven.

Heaven is depicted as a lofty oasis with cool pavilions, refreshing springs, exotic fruit and orchards of shady trees. In this heaven the blessed will enjoy the sexual favours of beautiful, gazelle-eyed virgins “untouched before them by any man or *jinn*” (spirits - JC; 55: 57). Hell - Gehenna or the blaze - is given an equally Arabian treatment. The damned are cast into an endless desert. They quench their thirst only by drinking “boiling water and pus”. The *Koran* threatens the rich with such a hell. Not because they are rich, but due to their greed. They do not urge the “feeding of the needy”. They devour the inheritance of women, children and the week. All that is exalted by them is earthly wealth: as a punishment they must pass through the gates of Gehenna “to dwell therein forever” (40:76-77).

In effect Muhammad’s infant party represented the urban middle classes against the Meccan oligarchy. The proletariat and Bedouins were to be allies in this sacred cause. Soon Muhammad’s party was subject not only to ideological counterattack - they endanger the

status of Mecca’s sanctuary; their leader is a low class upstart - but persecution.

The extent of this persecution may be exaggerated in later accounts, but it proved sufficient to persuade a group of his converts to leave for Ethiopia. As to Muhammad himself, failure to make rapid progress against the ‘party of hypocrites’ in Mecca caused him to look elsewhere. He accepted an invitation from Medina to transfer his party of muslims to that city. Not being a centre of pilgrimage, Medina had no vested interest in the old religion and appears to have wanted an authoritative figure to serve them as a mediator. The Meccan oligarchy raised no objection and allowed Muhammad to leave in peace and at his own pace. He did so in 622. Here starts the islamic era.

The oasis of Medina was inhabited by many Jews - both Arab converts and those whose ancestors might have conceivably originated in Palestine. There were three Jewish tribes - the Banu Qurayza, the Banu Nadir and the Banu Qaynuqa: by tradition the first two engaged in agriculture, while the latter were smiths and armourers. Two Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, settled in the town after them - first as clients, then as the dominant element.

By inviting in Muhammad, the *ansar*, the helpers, unleashed a social revolution, first in one city, then across the whole of Arabia. There were winners and losers.

In Medina Muhammad faced some stiff initial opposition. That included the Jewish tribes. Muhammad had presumably hoped to win support from amongst them. His new religion had at that time more than a jewish tinge to it. In order to attract them muslims were ordered to fast for Yom Kippur and pray in the direction of Jerusalem. The Jews remained unconvinced. However, being internally divided, they were unable to overpower Muhammad and his party.

Muhammad steadily increased his political power in Medina. He went from being in effect its chief magistrate, whose main task was mediation, to its theocratic ruler. Muhammad decreed that “the children of Israel” and their religious practices would be tolerated. However, the believers were organised into a wider community, the *umma*. The *umma* had simultaneously a religious and a political significance. It was a community of believers and a super-tribe. Membership of the religiously defined super-tribe carried definite rights and obligations. This proved attractive to both the middle class merchants and the urban poor. Within the *umma* the authority of Muhammad ruled supreme.

Secure in their Medina base, Muhammad and his followers turned to raiding the Meccan caravan routes. This had a dual purpose. Firstly, it helped to weaken Mecca and bring forward the day of its conversion. Secondly, the raids enriched the *umma* in Medina.

The raid of March 624 by 300 muslims under the direct leadership of Muhammad is celebrated in the *Koran*. Success in the so-called battle of Badr - “god surely helped you” - emboldened Muhammad (3: 119). Internally he turned against the jews and christians in Medina. They were now accused of falsifying their scriptures so as to conceal his prophetic mission. Externally he ensured that there would be continuing warfare by adopting Mecca as the holy muslim city. His followers were told to stop praying in the direction of Jerusalem. Now they had to turn towards Mecca.

Because he had a universalistic ideology, through which he could successfully unite the middle class merchants and lower class Arabs of all tribes, Muhammad’s prestige and following grew in leaps and bounds. That was translated into increased military effectiveness. In January 630 the chance murder of a muslim by a Meccan furnished the excuse needed for the final assault on Mecca. Following his victory increasing numbers of distant Arabic tribes recognised the hegemony of Medina and Muhammad’s mission as the last and greatest prophet of god.

After Muhammad

According to the traditional accounts Muhammad died on June 8 638 after a short illness. The subsequent Arab takeovers of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq owed less to the muslim religion and more to the extreme weakness of the Byzantine empire on the one hand and the Persian empire on the other. There was no grand plan.

The first military expeditions took the form of raids and turned into wars of expansion once commanders discovered the vulnerability of both Byzantium and Persia. Given the usurious levels of taxation imposed upon them by the Byzantine state, the christian populations of Egypt and Syria actually welcomed the muslim invaders. Border tribes played a vanguard role and turned to the muslim leaders in Medina only after meeting particularly powerful Byzantine or Persian armies. So religion provided a certain solidarity and coherence, but was by no means the driving force. That force was booty.

The Arab tribes had long had the custom of absorbing client peoples. That proved to be the case with the conquests of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, etc. These people became Arabs and muslims. In turn these newcomers to the community provided the recruits for new armies of conquest. Syrians and Egyptians drove into north Africa. The Berbers took Spain and Sicily. The Persians invaded north India. Thus islam expanded in wider and wider concentric circles.

Here is the source of the commonly held misconception that islam is a religion that is theologically committed to forceful conversion and conquest by the sword. But in their expansion the Arab

muslims were merely following in the footsteps of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Medes, Macedonians and Romans before them.

As to forcible conversion, the fact of the matter is that some christian populations did not convert despite the material incentive muslims enjoyed of living virtually tax-free. That is why Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Palestine have to this day sizeable christian minorities. Islam recognised the right of jews and christians to worship freely and to engage in economic activity. Jews flourished under islam as money lenders and bankers. In return they had to pay a special tax. It was in order to escape this burden that many, the overwhelming majority, saw the light and adopted the one true faith.

With the murder of Ali - the son of Mohammed’s uncle Abu-Talub - in 661, the hegemony of the middle class Medians was broken. The bourgeois revolution comes to an end and along with it the generous welfare state instituted by Mohammad’s immediate successors. The most important social benefit was the *diwan*, a pay and pension scheme set up for muslim soldiers. After a bitter civil war which pitted muslim against muslim the Meccan oligarchy restored their domination. However, by now they had in their hands not one city but a world empire bigger than that of the Romans’ at its zenith.

Under these new masters the islamic world reaches heights of civilisation not previously attained. From the Romans and Greeks the Arabs took science and philosophy, from Persia systems of administration and from India medicine and mathematics. Some members of the intellectual elite such as Rhazes, the philosopher and physician, embraced rationalism and even moved in the direction of outright atheism.

From the mid-8th century to the mid-11th century the islamic empire functioned as a system of opulent mercantile cities which linked the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. Muslim ships plied both the Atlantic Ocean and the China Seas. However, compared to China and India, the riches of the islamic empire were essentially superficial (with the partial exception of Egypt and the Sawad - the most irrigated part of the Mesopotamian alluvial plane). Surplus was not primarily generated internally, but came from the outside - first through war booty and then long-distance trade.

Once the monopoly over trade routes was broken, decline was inevitable. The Turkic invasion of Persia and Mesopotamia in the 10th century, the 11th century crusaders and the voyages of European discovery in the 16th century damaged and then totally outflanked the islamic world.

The essential decline of the islamic mercantile system was masked by military success and the incorporation of Mongolian and Turkic invaders. However, with the militarisation of society, intellectual and economic life underwent a steady regression. Tribute exacted from the peasants, previously negligible, became crippling. All available surplus was channelled into the absolutist state and its overblown army. Islam suffered accordingly. Toleration could no longer be afforded. Dangerous thoughts were suppressed. Reaction triumphed in every area of life. Innovation and science flickered out of existence.

Many of the paid persuaders and propagandists of 19th century western imperialism and their modern-day counterparts insist that islam is naturally intolerant and benighted. Nothing could be further from the truth. As will be readily appreciated from what has been sketched out above, we must separate cause from effect. What flowered in the 9th century was a culture based on a thriving mercantile system. The subsequent decadence of the 12th and 13th centuries cannot be blamed on islam as a religion. Rather its cause is to be found in the structural limits inherent in any mercantile system ●

Jack Conrad

SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

Call for Socialist Alliance paper

An appeal for a regular Socialist Alliance newspaper was launched last year by three leading members, **Dave Church, Marcus Ström** and **Martin Thomas**. To add your name to the appeal please email your support to: marcus.strom@ntlworld.com

We, the undersigned, believe that the Socialist Alliance must launch a regular, campaigning newspaper as an urgent priority. This publication should:

● **Fight to build the agreed actions of the Socialist Alliance, maintain our public profile between elections and give news, analysis and practical guidance to our activists on the ground.**

● **Reflect the diversity of views in our alliance. A Socialist Alliance paper must have space for the open exchange of ideas, for comradely polemic and the presentation of minority views. Wherever possible, we should afford the right of reply in our paper.**

● **Strike a balance between agitation and propaganda in its pages. Working class readers should not be patronised or talked down to. Our paper must carry longer theoretical pieces, as well as snappy, factual, socialist reportage.**

If the majority of the SA continues to block an official publication, the minority should fight for the launch of an unofficial paper.

Additional signatories

Nicola Bent (Lambeth)
Janine Booth (Hackney)
Danny Bowles (Neath & Port Talbot)
John Bridge (Camden)
Alison Brown (Sheffield)
James Bull (Teesside)
Peter Burton (SSP)
Matthew Caygill (Leeds)
Jane Clarke (Bedfordshire)
Steve Cooke (Teesside)
Lawrie Coombs (Teesside)
Tim Cooper (Nottingham)
Chris Croome (Teesside)
James Cunningham (South Birmingham)
Mathew Danaher (Southampton)
Mervyn Davies (Colchester)
Ian Donovan (Southwark)
Arthur Downs (former mayor, Tower Hamlets)
Jim Drysdale
Laura Duval (Bedfordshire)
Pete Edwards (Bedfordshire)
Mark Ferguson (Bedfordshire)
Alf Filer (Brent)
Janice Fowler (Southwark)
Steve Freeman (Bedfordshire)
Ray Gaston (Leeds steering committee)
Darrell Goodliffe (Cambridgeshire)
Andy Gunton (Lambeth)
Billy Hodson (Teesside)
David Isaacson (Colchester)
Chris Jones (chair, Merseyside)
Eryk Karas (Bedfordshire)
Sarah Lawlor (Bedford-

shire)
Terry Liddle (treasurer, Greenwich)
Ron Lynn (Lambeth)
Lesley Mahmood (executive committee, coordinator Merseyside)
Rob Marsden (Leicester)
Laurie McCauley (North Yorkshire)
Anne Mc Shane (chair, Hackney)
Sam Metcalf (Nottingham)
Duncan Morrison (Lewisham)
Paul Nicholson (Southampton)
Harry Nugent (Bedfordshire)
Dave Osler (Hackney)
Dave Parks (Exeter)
Harry Paterson (Nottinghamshire)
Mike Perkins (Southampton)
Peter Pierce (Greenwich)
Phil Pope (Southampton)
Charlie Pottins (Brent)
Peter Radcliff (Nottingham)
Daniel Randall (Nottingham)
Lee Rock (Waltham Forest)
Mike Rowley (Oxford)
Dave Spencer (Coventry)
Alan Stevens (chair, Greenwich)
Danny Thompson (Bedfordshire)
Steve Turner (Bedfordshire)
Mike Wagstaff (Colchester)
Pete Weller (Lambeth)
Geoff Wexler (Cambridgeshire)
Paul Willoughby (East Kent)
Jay Woolrich (Leicester)
Patrick Yarker (Norfolk and Norwich)

Make unity real

Steve Freeman has announced his intention to stand for chair of the Bedfordshire Socialist Alliance on behalf of the Democratic and Republican Platform. A fellow comrade from the RDG spoke to him

Why have you decided to stand?
The Socialist Alliance project, that filled so many with optimism, has ground to a halt. The exit of the Socialist Party and the resignations of Dave Church and Liz Davies show the difficulties we have in uniting the left. The Socialist Workers Party is the most important organisation to the left of the Labour Party. It seems we can't live without the SWP, but we can't live with them either.

In Bedfordshire all the problems of working with the SWP are exaggerated to the nth degree. So if you support the SA project, you cannot sit on the sidelines simply waiting for it to implode. I am standing as a supporter of the DR Platform because we must make the united front work. If I am elected, then the minority platform, which is presently excluded, will be represented with one seat on the organising committee.

What state is the BSA actually in?
The BSA had over 60 members in 2001. Forty-nine attended the last 'AGM' in January 2002. This number has withered on the vine, with average attendance down to about a dozen, mainly SWP members. We are supposed to hold monthly meetings, but since April three have been cancelled. We have had no educationals, except one debate on the euro. Since the SWP takeover there has been no public meetings nor any public activity organised by the officers, except the ill-fated local election campaign in June.

The SWP intervene in campaigns on their own account as they did during the firefighters' dispute and anti-war activity. The BSA is like a train shunted into the sidings. Of the four officers elected on the SWP slate in April, two have already resigned without seeing out their year of office. The project is going downhill rapidly. If comrades Danny and Jane are expelled, the credibility of the SA in Luton will be destroyed.

Do you blame the SWP?
That would be the simple answer. But it is too easy to blame them because they are in control. We could make them the scapegoat for our own weakness. Rather than that, we should spell out what must be done to change the situation around. We need practical policies to improve morale, end sectarianism and build the SA. Where the SWP do deserve criticism is by trying to witch-hunt and scapegoat Danny, Jane and any political opposition. It shows that they have no political answers.

Is the BSA a united front?
No, it's a divided front. There are two platforms. Socialist Worker is in effect a platform and the Democratic and Republican Platform is the other one. We do not agree on how we can work together. Both platforms must be represented in the organising group (ie, elected officers). That would indicate a commitment to work together in a united front. In fact we are not represented in the organising group. Consequently the various negotiations and compromises that oil the wheels of united action don't take place.

I am standing for chair to represent the idea of the BSA as a united front that includes minorities, rather than excludes them for sectarian reasons. I am for a fully inclusive and democratic SA, which includes all the forces of the left. I am opposed to splits and expulsions, which have done so much to damage the credibility of the left. In particular I am opposed to the expulsion of comrades Danny and Jane.

I am standing so that SA members up and down the country can be clear about the real policy of the SWP. If the BSA is to be a united front, then as the sole nominee of the DR Platform, I should be elected with the support of SWP members.

Iraq and the firefighters are currently the two most important issues facing the working class movement. The BSA must act as a united front if we are to intervene in these struggles. We must seek to raise the profile of the SA. If we are to work as a united front there must be political debate and discussion.

What future direction does the DR platform have?

We want the SA to become a united republican socialist party: that is, a workers' party that fights seriously for republicanism and socialism. *People before profit* is a republican and socialist manifesto. We need to act on it. The Scottish Socialist Party shows the direction we must take. We need a campaigning newspaper to spread our message.

The exact time for launching a new party will depend on concrete circumstances. The first thing we must do is begin campaigning in the workers' movement for a new party. We need to win the argument throughout the trade union movement. The firefighters and the war provide us with opportunities for this, but we are failing both locally and nationally to campaign for a party.

Do you have any experience as chair?
I have been chair of my Natfhe branch, with

350 members, for the last four years. Natfhe was derecognised by the college three years ago and I was involved in a successful struggle to win back trade unions rights. For the last two years we took strike action against compulsory redundancies. We are currently involved in industrial action over the London allowance.

Do you think you can work with SWP members?

The answer is 'yes'. Despite what some people might think I am not anti-SWP. The current secretary of my Natfhe branch is an SWP member and we work together very well. I moved the motion at the London SA opposing the exclusion of the SWP from the Leeds Left Alliance. I opposed those in the old 'indie' BSA who wanted to expel the SWP for disruptive behaviour in 2001. I proposed Viv Smith, the SWP organiser, as the BSA Stop the War coordinator. I was one of the proposers of the new BSA constitution, which guaranteed representation for all supporting organisations on the officers group. Whether they can work with me is another matter. Still, they will have an opportunity to express that by using their votes in the forthcoming AGM ●

The exit of the Socialist Party and the resignations of Dave Church and Liz Davies show the difficulties we have in uniting the left

Long expected move

Nick Long has resigned from the Socialist Alliance. The now former chair of Lewisham Socialist Alliance has cited articles in *Socialist Worker* and *Socialist Resistance* on congestion charges as the "final straw", announcing he has applied to join the Green Party.

Comrade Long thinks that a flat tax on cars entering city centres is the way and the light to cleaner living. The SWP, the International Socialist Group and others in the SA oppose congestion charging. Not much of a difference of principle and hardly an issue worth splitting over.

Comrade Long has always been a mercurial character. He was initially a pro-Scargill witch-hunter in the Socialist Labour Party, then was an oppositionist for a few days before flopping out. As a founder of the wonderfully misnamed Socialist Democracy Group, he led the unsuccessful attempt to expel the CPGB from the first London Socialist Alliance (set up on our initiative).

Championing 'speed bump' localism, reformism and just downright opportunism, he was never going to provide the firm foundations upon which a militant, partyist, opposition to New Labour was going to be built. This flotsam has now 'jetsammed' into a petty bourgeois dead end. Some may well say, 'Good riddance', but this would be a very childish and short-term view to take.

The Socialist Alliance - and the party that will hopefully follow it - should easily be able to incorporate such characters as Nick Long. Any mass party of the working class will have people with ill thought-out or even reactionary views joining its ranks.

In one sense, this is no big story. Yet

Nick Long's departure is not an isolated event. The anti-war movement is building by the day, yet the SA is hardly growing at the same pace. Liz Davies has left the executive. Local branches are largely inert.

There is a growing feeling among SA supporters of a lack of direction. We have said here time and again that the SA is becalmed. Without a regular political newspaper, without functioning union fractions or networks, and without local branches that act as the *real* political centres for activists, the SA cannot move forward.

The Socialist Workers Party, while one of our greatest assets, is also a liability, holding the alliance back. Campaigning for the SA to become a party does not fit into its sterile, sectarian world view of constructing numerous "united fronts" around "the party", which is already meant to exist in the shape of the SWP itself.

At the local level, the SWP's involvement in the SA is patchy, to say the least. A minority of its members are active in the alliance.

Now, for a self-styled democratic centralist organisation, this means that the leadership is either keeping the majority of its members off in richer recruiting pastures (such as Globalise Resistance or the Stop the War Coalition) or they have big difficulties organising their own membership. Either way, there is a problem.

While the departure of a fair weather socialist like Nick Long is not much to cry about in and of itself, it is another sign that the Socialist Alliance needs to take itself more seriously ●

Marcus Ström

‘Indies’ meet - two views

The Socialist Alliance’s so-called independents are by definition a motley bunch. Lacking a programme and having been burnt by one or another of the sects, they retreat into localism, invent bureaucratic solutions to political problems and forlornly play court to the SWP. But parties - real parties - are built top-down and often require fierce factional struggles. The SA indies should either struggle to form themselves into a solid grouping that can have a real, useful effect or the individuals concerned should look to developing organisational relations with one or another of the SA’s pro-party factions. Certainly, as the two - very different - reports of their February 8 conference show, they are going nowhere fast as presently constituted

RACHEL COHEN Flawed but constructive

Last weekend’s conference of Socialist Alliance independents in Birmingham was smaller than the previous one (undoubtedly the looming demonstration and build-up for this, had made a difference, as had imperfect publicity). However, it was both good-natured and productive.

The day started with discussion about what the SA’s approach to the BNP should be. David Landau kicked this off with a presentation of his SA conference resolution, laying out a detailed and well rounded approach to the problem. More than one person commented that the SA would only be able to fight fascism if it provided a real alternative on the ground, and that this would most importantly mean getting stuck into local campaigns and the issues that mattered to people on the streets.

There was also some discussion about asylum-seekers, and the need to move from ‘defending’ them individually to asserting that asylum is a right, thereby speaking to a language of rights that people have some familiarity with. There was debate (and no firm agreement) about when and whether to stand down in favour of other parties (Socialist, Green, Labour) where the BNP were standing.

This discussion naturally spilt over into the next session - where the SA was going, where we hoped it would go! Everyone was clear that there was an urgent need for a socialist party. We were less optimistic that the SA was yet on the way to being this - campaigns are still too stop-start and the organisation not yet big or broad enough. Again people brought up local campaigning and ongoing work in the community as centrally important if a party was to emerge - we had to show people that we were going to work with them over the long term. The childcare campaign was seen as a good start along this road.

After lunch the focus shifted to specific conference motions and possible amendments, beginning with the system of elections to the NEC. Everyone at the conference felt that the slate system of election was undemocratic. While no one had major complaints about the current members of the executive, the lack of accountability of slates (especially for independents, who by definition will not have anyone to ‘represent them’ in backroom deals) was seen as a problem, both for existing members of the SA (who do not feel they have a voice), for ‘indies’ on the exec (who know they could be ‘deselected’ from next year’s slate without a bloc behind them) and in trying to convince potential members that the SA is a democratic organisation. Although not everyone was in love with STV, there was broad agreement that it was the best alternative currently on offer.

I was the only woman at this meeting, which made glaringly obvious the lack of gender equality within the SA, and perhaps gave my male comrades the added incentive to spend a significant amount of time discussing the motion about quotas for women. There was some disagreement about whether this was the right way to go about things, and probably a majority were against the motion without amendment (on the executive in particular it is going to be difficult to establish gender parity while

the SA’s constituent groups only nominate men to be their representatives - perhaps they could think about this).

However, one comrade argued very strongly that, while he had in the past argued against quotas as ‘top-down’ and ‘bureaucratic’, the failure of ‘grass-roots’ initiatives suggested that perhaps it was time to try quotas. Additionally new methods of organising (women do not use e-lists as much as men; are usually responsible for childcare and find certain meeting times difficult; interact in different ways within meetings), as well as campaign foci that relate to the issues women are more generally responsible for (childcare; care for the elderly; education; health-care; part-time, service sector and casual work ...) were brought up. It was noted that it was not only women, but also ethnic minorities, youth, and the white, working class poor who are still underrepresented within the SA.

The general feeling of the conference was that it was critical that independents continue to work together (many felt that one of the most positive outcomes of the SA to date was the bringing together of socialists who had been without a ‘home’) and the issue of the SA independent group was brought up to this end. It was agreed that a leaflet for conference be prepared, with contact details, protocols for ‘membership’ (as agreed at the previous indie conference) and a voting guide, focusing on the votes where we feel that independents have a structural reason to vote for or against particular motions (because it is more or less democratic, accountable, or open to the influence of the SA’s members). Even this will of course only be indicative, given that independents by our nature need not agree on anything (especially issues of policy).

We will also organise a lunchtime meeting at the SA conference and be holding a social event (party) at a nearby location after it. The point of both these events will be to widen the network of independents and deepen ongoing contacts. It was hoped that these events be attended by independents on the SA executive and that good ongoing relations be established which will aid the accountability of the SA to its independent members.

While imperfect, this meeting was an indication that when we meet in person independents can work constructively. I did not feel everyone agreed on everything, but we disagreed civilly in the context of a shared desire to make the SA work ●

JULIAN SILVERMAN Sad little assembly

I went to this sad little assembly last Saturday. It was our one opportunity to meet prior to the coming SA national AGM. Too late for resolutions, but not too late for amendments to existing ones. (I myself have still not received my conference agenda with the resolutions printed out, so I will have to spare you some of the excruciating details).

Sad? It was not that there were so few of us (around a dozen, with one or two more drifting in and out) - after all, our second - and decisive - conference was hardly any bigger. Nor was it that people were still sitting around in the bar with beer and coffee at 11.45, dazed from their journeys, filling in the silences with anecdotes concerning the monstrosities of ancient revolutionaries we had

known long ago. First decision to be taken: do we move to the room we had booked or stay in the bar? The decision, like most of the others, carried *nem con*, was, reluctantly to move out of the bar but with the proviso that we must first pre-order our lunches for 1pm.

So, looking at our watches, we tiredly retired to the dark and leathery expanses, agreed a chair and an agenda and waited. First item was David Landau’s resolution on fighting fascists. Everybody felt the cold draught of some horrible reality at their backs. There was a fairly lengthy discussion, without a conclusion, on such issues as how little support we needed to put up candidates against Nazis fighting elections. With weak forces, the question was: which would make us look more pathetic and ridiculous: to have stood only to find ourselves hopelessly outvoted by the fascists? Or not even to have managed to stand a candidate at all? Opinions were divided, but I think the consensus was against even trying under those circumstances. There was general agreement that this was unsatisfactory and a certain fearful awareness started to creep into our consciousness that we should be rooted in the community.

And here the discussion drifted into the area designated as a general ‘Where are we going?’ thing. The only clear formulation, however, was the thought that the slogan ‘Asylum-seekers welcome here’ was wrong. *We* might like them, but not everybody did. After all, there were many people living in rotten conditions, on welfare, who resented foreigners. Since we had no practical suggestions for how to improve their lives we agreed that at least they did not have to like asylum-seekers. The idea that some asylum-seekers were doctors, etc and might ‘make a contribution’ was thought to be no argument: rather a provocation to those who could not be doctors, etc. So in order not to antagonise them, a solution was proposed whereby, where possible - ie, where it was possible to get the Socialist Workers Party’s assent - we leave out the welcomes and emphasise that asylum was a right (whether they liked it or not). There was general satisfaction.

Then those who could understand such matters discussed Phil Pope’s motion and details of the STV thing, and we all concurred, in the forlorn hope that abandoning slates would somehow influence the SWP into acknowledging they were a majority and abandoning their perverse reliance on a buffer of fellow travellers to allow them to bypass discussion and rule by default. This could mean one or two candidates on the national executive, which was felt to be a good thing, although nobody volunteered to explain what practical difference it would make one way or the other.

This discussion trailed on and then, once again, somehow meandered into the general stream of ‘Where do we go from here?’ (not that this was a question which anyone felt competent or prepared to answer). There was little dissent from the 80-20 formula so beloved of the old regime in the SA: a policy based on only mentioning the 80% supposedly agreed among the sects and the others.

The idea that the Socialist Alliance should be the first allegiance of all SA members was forcefully raised and as forcefully agreed. But nobody could see just how to formulate this demand in such a way as to have any effect on the SWP or other dominating groups. It was thought to be too late for a motion on our recent financial scandal, even though, as one comrade explained, “In my union this would have been a resig-

nation matter” or, as another put it, “... and we were talking about asking unions to give us their money!” Nor could we find a suitable resolution to amend. There was an objection to the suggestion that it be put as an amendment to a resolution on finances, because we did not want to tarnish the SA’s image in front of the press! “Not in front of the children!” quipped one comrade, bitterly.

Talk of the gross political scandal which led to Liz Davies’s resignation - the effective undermining of the alliance by the SWP (and the cover-up by other members of the executive) - drizzled out rapidly. But we did agree to ask for an apology - or perhaps to raise the question under the report-back, should there be no reference to it. There was no discussion of precisely who should be apologising for precisely what. The SWP for sabotage? The officers for allowing it? And what lessons should we draw?

It was getting towards the end of our allotted time and we had not yet discussed the matter in hand: the motions, possible amendments, etc. So we decided to run through the lot quickly and prepare a list of recommendations like a proper faction or tendency. (One comrade suggested “caucus” - since that was what we were, he said. “No!” we roared. “Group?” “No!” “Platform?” “No!” “How about Socialist Alliance?” “Ha ha!” We agreed on “IndieSA”. Pretty pathetic, we all thought, but that about summed it up.)

So we made our recommendations by mumbling through the book of motions like a Jewish father mumbling through the *Hagannah* or reciting the catechism - with the suitable ‘amens’, etc. Here the discussions took on a certain urgency as though here at last was something that might make a difference. And indeed, subjects covered *inter alia* - the wars, and mass mobilisation of the workers of the world against it (agreed), the building of a mass workers’ party (in favour), etc.

And finally (and, she claimed, only because our chairperson was a woman) the question of quotas for positions in the SA for women. The feeling was against. The chair said that, with reference to gender studies, she thought that SA meetings were not conducted in a way that was attractive to women. One comrade (me) said they were not conducted in a manner to appeal to workers, the youth, ethnic minorities or ourselves, either - and that in community struggles these issues of race and gender did not occur in the same way. That it was a question of who you identified with - and there they tended to identify with their class. But, going back to quotas, one comrade maintained that, although this was a bureaucratic way of dealing with the problem, without such bureaucratic measures he doubted that we would ever do the right thing.

That is why the meeting was sad. All the problems that anyone posed and all the solutions suggested were administrative - and irrelevant because they concerned an organisation over which we had no control and which, in any case, had no meaning in relation to the great events going on in the wonderful and terrible world around us. And, unlike others in the SA, and outside, we were all aware of this, but had next to no clue what to do about it. Or, if we did, such matters were not thought to be appropriate for discussion with the seriousness they deserved.

The meeting ended with an announcement that we would prepare a “mission statement” (?), meet during lunchtime at the AGM and hold a social afterwards, with a DJ (to drown discussion) ●

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FORUM

Tina Becker and **Anne Mc Shane** report on the February 8-9 preparatory meeting of the European Social Forum,

Resist pull to right

Well over 250 people attended the latest meeting to prepare for the 2003 European Social Forum, which was without a doubt the most disappointing gathering so far. None of the proposals, amendments or statements that were discussed were distributed beforehand. In the name of 'democracy' the two-day meeting quickly deteriorated into bureaucratic anarchism, where everybody was allowed to talk for as long as they wanted about any subject they fancied. What we saw was, in effect, a successful attempt by the French mobilising committee to put its own stamp on the ESF and pull it sharply to the right.

Under the guidance of Italy's Rifondazione Comunista, the first ESF was - although slightly chaotic in its attempt to bow before the 'anti-capitalist movement' - in reality a gathering of sections of the European organised working class. Florence saw revolutionary parties, trade unions and large numbers of militant youth make real headway in uniting our forces across Europe. A successful anti-war network was formed, which has been instrumental in organising the huge protests that will take place this weekend.

But rather than building on this success and further strengthening our forces across Europe, the French mobilisation committee is instead attempting to make the ESF 2003, which will take place in Paris in November, more diffuse and more attractive to reformist forces, NGOs and the trade union bureaucracy. Apparently, some unnamed trade unions insist that our ESF statement on the war ought not to call for militant action and that we ought not to build effective international networks that can start to *organise* our forces. While our governments across Europe discuss how best to build a new European superstate, we must remain loosely organised and ineffective.

The lack of any effective chairing meant that the meeting did not break up into smaller working groups, where some of the French proposals could have been thoroughly discussed and possibly defeated. People were allowed to read out their own poetry and talked at length about their feelings and desires. The plenary session on Saturday, which should have ended at 1pm, effectively lasted all day and continued on the Sunday.

Unfortunately, our attempt to challenge this was without success. To their discredit, the comrades from the Socialist Workers Party/Globalise Resistance were the loudest in demanding that the meeting should be allowed to carry on talking about everything and nothing. When, at about 3pm, we moved that the meeting should take a vote to immediately close the speakers list, well over 80% of the participants voted for it. This provoked a telling response from the SWP's Alex Callinicos. CPGB comrades may have persuaded the meeting to take a vote, but, he shouted, "the ESF works through consensus, not votes". The only reason for comrade Callinicos to want to drag out the painful plenary session seemed to be that most SWPers had not spoken yet.

This bureaucratic anarchy was to the advantage of the French mobilising committee. They will now be able to continue organising without any real opposition until the next international gathering at the end of April. By then it might well be too late to reverse some of their key decisions.

The pull to the right is hard to understand if one looks at the committee's composition. It is run by a small, well organised group of comrades who obviously work very closely together. The three leading comrades are Christophe Aguiton, Pierre Khalfa and Sophie Zafari. All of them are members of the Confédération Générale du Travail, the trade union federation that has traditionally been associated with the French Communist Party, although Sophie is the only official CGT representative. While comrades Christophe and Pierre officially represent Attac, Pierre and Sophie also happen to be members of the



Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire.

So again we see revolutionary organisations in name that behave anything but in practice. In Brazil, the Workers Party (PT), which is running and financing the World Social Forum, has 'instructed' all local regional forums to restrict themselves to discussion - they must not take any political action. The PT has its own reasons for doing so - not least its desire to keep calling the tune. At the last meeting of the international council, the Brazilian comrades were defeated in their attempt to prevent the next WSF taking place in India. They want all WSFs to take place in Brazil, in order to stay firmly in control of the process.

The French comrades' reasons for attempting to hold back left unity across Europe are similar, although a little more difficult to identify. It seems the comrades are united in not wanting to build an international rival organisation to Attac, which has successfully taken

off in a number of European countries. The LCR, the Communist Party and the Socialist Party are all involved in Attac, which with 40,000 mostly young members is much more successful in picking up new recruits than their own organisations.

Political parties are not allowed to take part in the French ESF mobilising committee - although the committee is clearly dominated by those three parties. It seems the comrades even want to prevent workshops - which last year were the only events which political groups like ourselves were able to organise - from being listed in the programme of this year's ESF.

The comrades want to carry on using Attac as a transmission belt from the amorphous 'anti-capitalist movement' into their own organisations. A strong, international ESF movement that engages with all sorts of political questions and is led by the left in Eu-

Florence 2002: Paris must build on success

rope could be a powerful rival to Attac in France, which limits itself to acting as an international lobby group.

But there are other pressures as well. There is a rumour that French president Jacques Chirac has promised one million euros towards the cost of the Paris ESF - if there were to be any such funding, it would not come without strings. This development is extremely worrying and needs to be tackled head on by the rest of the European left. So far, the Italian comrades have chosen to go it alone - the meeting in Brussels sometimes seemed to deteriorate into a fight between the French and the Italian comrades.

But contributions from all over Europe showed that nobody wanted to go down the 'French road'. At a time when our bosses and their governments are coming together, we cannot afford to let an opportunity for effective left unity pass us by ●

Attac on efficient organisation

A row broke out at the conference on the Saturday afternoon prompted by an announcement by the French committee that there would be no working group on 'enlarging the net'. What seemed to be a minor organisational matter in fact contained in a nutshell the very different approaches to left unity that exist in Europe.

Prior to Florence there had been three working groups brought together to organise the event: programme, organisation and 'enlarging the net'. The latter was aimed at encouraging trade unions, NGOs and other new forces to participate in the ESF. However, going beyond this limited remit, the group's work took on a logic of its own and it actively helped to set up the European-wide anti-war network, which took responsibility for coordinating the February 15 demon-

strations across the world.

You would think that everybody involved in the ESF process would welcome such a very positive development. If we do not unite our forces across Europe, how can we be serious about challenging the European Union, let alone stopping a war? Comrades from Italy, most of them representing Rifondazione Comunista and the trade union federation Sin Cobas, therefore asked for the 'enlarging the net' group to be reactivated with its role widened: not only should comrades in this group bring new forces into the ESF - they should also be delegated to actively help setting up international networks "of the social movements" on various subjects.

It became clear very quickly that the dropping of this working group was not an organisational oversight by the French comrades. It is part of an active

campaign to keep the ESF purely as an annual talking shop. All French comrades argued in unison against this active approach to building networks. Led by Pierre Khalfa, official representative of Attac France, the comrades stated that there were "some organisations involved in the ESF process that do not want to be part of the social movements". Apparently, those organisations want to come to the ESF and sponsor it, but they do not want to build effective European-wide organisations that could strengthen our forces.

Unfortunately, none of the comrades would enlighten the meeting as to who those organisations might be. In an interview with the *Weekly Worker* Christophe Aguiton revealed that it is apparently "the trade unions" who have called on the French mobilising committee to stop the ESF sponsoring networks or so-called "social move-

ments". The comrade would not tell us which trade unions he means. Interestingly though, all leading comrades in the French mobilisation committee (Christophe, Pierre and Sophie Zafari) are members of the CGT, the trade union federation associated with the French Communist Party.

It is obvious that we need an urgent discussion on the future of the ESF and the role of trade unions in it. Should we accept that the union bureaucracy of one particular country dictates the terms of the coming together of the left across Europe?

The French won the day. Against the wishes of the clear majority in the hall, they insisted on a compromise. There will be a third working group, but it will only be allowed to discuss how to draw in new forces - it will not be allowed to build effective coordination between these forces ●

which took place in Brussels

Anti-war retreat

A debate over a proposed new statement on the impending war shed some more light on the political road that the French comrades would like to take the ESF down. Presented by comrade Jean-Pierre Schermann, it seems to have been supported by the French mobilising committee as a whole, because no French comrade spoke against it. This is hard to understand, considering the truly revolting nature of the long statement.

In a badly translated English version, it argues against UN involvement in the war because "the United Nations credit would further be weakened". It would be "giving in to pressures from the United States" and "confer a semblance of formal legality to a decision to which would remain on the contrary of the aims of the United Nations charter". Although a UN-backed war would still be "illegitimate", the duty of the UN was to stay loyal to its own worthy aims. What was needed instead of war was "the revival of the world and regional disarmament processes" - presumably organised by our governments. "What we need is balanced global development ... rather than the policy of resorting to strength which United States try to impose."

This anti-American reformist piece of nonsense seems to have been drafted in order to bring on board more rightwing forces. If the comrades have not come under direct pressure from the Socialist Party or "the trade unions", they are certainly doing a good job of self-censorship.

The statement is also an attempt to distance the ESF from the more leftwing leadership the Italian comrades provided last year and to overturn a much better and shorter statement that was drafted in advance of the ESF in Florence, where a large number of organisations signed up to it. It condemned the imperialist war drive of Bush and Blair, stated that the people of Iraq were "suffering because of the embargo and the Saddam Hussein regime" and called for militant action against the war.

This earlier statement and the resulting mass anti-war demonstration in Florence helped to spur the coordinated action across Europe which will take place this weekend. It gave confidence and a sense of common purpose to the most politically conscious sections of the movement. It also showed the potential for the ESF to play a leading role in building political unity across Europe. Political unity that the French comrades now want to slow down, if not bring to a halt.

The debate on the statement showed that there must have been some prior discussion on it. The Italian comrades presented amendments to the statement, although it had not been officially circulated before the meeting. While this bad practice of backroom dealing needs to be criticised, the Italian amendments certainly helped to clarify the political nature of the French proposal.

Raffaella Bollini, leading representative of

It also showed the potential for the ESF to play a leading role in building political unity across Europe

the Italian mobilising committee, put forward three points. Firstly she argued for an insertion that the would clarify that "this war is wrong - with or without a second UN resolution". Secondly she proposed that national movements should pressurise all political parties in their respective parliaments to vote against the war. And, last but not least, she argued that our statement should call for "European-wide strikes against the war".

Although these are hardly revolutionary demands, they attracted immediate rebuttal from the French committee. Comrade Schermann refused point blank to include any demand for militancy. He said that we "could not possibly include a call for European-wide strikes". He wanted "the largest number of union leaders and NGOs" to sign the statement and they would not want to back such a call. Since we in the ESF were not in a position to be able to call strikes ourselves there was no point in having such a demand. Although he agreed to "make some word changes", essentially the statement would remain as it was.

Unfortunately the response of the SWP to this statement was muted. To begin with they treated it as irrelevant. This was illustrated in the debate on the text, when Chris Nineham insisted on speaking on "the fantastic demonstrations we will witness on February 15", and did not address the statement at all - despite calls from the meeting to do so. Eventually at the end of the debate comrade Samantha from Globalise Resistance protested lamely that "bombing will not make anything better - whether by the UN or the US". Considering the fact that the SWP has focused so much recently in the pages of *Socialist Worker* on the corrupt nature of the UN and the need for militant action against the war, it was a poor performance. The comrades in the SWP have obviously no intention of circulating the statement via the Stop the War Coalition or their own forums.

Tina Becker for the CPGB made it clear that the UN "consists of the big powers - Britain, France, Russia, China and above all the US, who proceed to bribe and bully the other members - therefore we must not sow any illusions in the UN as a progressive force". She backed calls for militant action made by members of Rifondazione and argued for the Florence statement to be retained instead of adopting this new rightwing position.

Despite a meeting with the Italian comrades to redraft the statement, which lasted well into the night, the French comrades only accepted a few superficial amendments. Like the World Social Forum, the ESF does not accept anything as oppressive as democracy and taking votes. So the French committee had little problem in pushing through what they wanted and presenting it as a common call from "members of the ESF", to which individual organisations can sign up.

This is a clear step backwards and, although the statement is more for the internal purposes of Attac and the Socialist Party, the fact that they will be distributing it in the movement in France as a quasi-official ESF position is tremendously damaging. The debate must be revisited and this rightwing statement overturned ●

Lack of ambition?

Christophe Aguiton is a leading comrade on the French mobilising committee. Like most of those from France participating in the ESF preparatory meetings, he is a member of the lobbying group Attac, as well as the Confédération Générale du Travail. He spoke to Tina Becker

Some comrades have been hinting that there seems to be a lack of ambition in the planning for the Paris ESF. For example, there has been little support from the French mobilising committee for a demonstration during the event. And so far, space for only 25,000-30,000 participants has been booked - but Attac alone has 40,000 members and well over 60,000 people took part in last year's ESF in Florence.

Paris does not have a huge conference centre like Florence and that is the real problem. But we are still looking. The event will have to be quite decentralised throughout Paris and St Denis and we might be able to find more venues.

Although we recently have been able to draw a number of trade unions, NGOs and muslim organisations into the ESF process, the general political situation in France is quite difficult. In the 1990s France had the strongest political movement in Europe: the 1995 strikes, the movement of the *sans papiers* and so forth. The creation of Attac in the late 1990s was a reflection of this high level of political activity.

At the same time we have not seen the same radicalisation of youth as, for example, in Italy or Greece. In those countries there will be many young people on the anti-war demonstrations on February 15. We hope that in France we can draw more young people into politics with the mobilisation against the WTO and the G8.

But there were more than one million people on the streets against Le Pen after the first round of the

presidential elections. Maybe the lack of a clear, democratic leadership in such a heightened political situation is to blame for today's absence of youth from politics.

I disagree. I think the main reason why we will not have so many French people protesting against the war is to do with the position of our government. Chirac's government is already doing the job - at least on paper. And as the president, he is much more powerful than us. If he says no to the war, that's it. The same is of course happening in Germany, where there has traditionally been a strong workers' movement. But why march against the war when your government is doing a better job than you can? I believe this is the reason why our demonstration will not be so big.

At the last preparatory meeting in Paris you put forward proposals for a European steering committee, which we supported. But now the French comrades seem very reluctant to take a clear lead.

There is a real disjunction in the French committee. A number of new forces have come into the ESF in the last few months. Forces that did not take part in Florence. We still have to talk a lot of things over with them and the atmosphere is one of compromise and negotiation. We do not want to exclude anybody and are moving forward carefully.

Is that why the French comrades have been so reluctant to accept proposals for the creation of ESF networks? Surely that would be one of the most positive developments, something that unites our forces across Europe - not just once a year during the ESF, but all year round.

We want to have a working group that can attempt to 'enlarge the net' of groups and organisations taking part in the ESF. But we are undergoing our own 'net enlargement' and that means we have organisations in our movement that are only part of the ESF, but do not want to be part of the social movements. There is a clear difference between the two. Attac is part of both the ESF and the social movement. We do not want to have a situation where a network can issue statements in the name of the ESF, when some organisations do not want to take part.

What organisations are you referring to?

There are some trade unions who do not want to be in such networks. I cannot say more than this, I'm afraid ●

Europe: meeting the challenge of continental unity

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REVIEW

Patrick J Geary's book is written as a polemic against the revival of blood and soil nationalism in Europe since the end of the cold war.

His purpose is to deconstruct the supposed ancient ethnic origins and 'natural' or pre-political quality of the European nations. In the process he in practice, but not explicitly, raises larger questions about the origin of the nation-state and the transition from classical antiquity to medieval society - in traditional Marxist terms from slavery to feudalism. Answers to these questions will not be found, at least directly, in this book; but the questions it raises are of profound importance.

Geary's starting point is the construction of myths of ethnic origin by 19th century nationalist historians, applying themselves to classical and early medieval texts. Modern academic history, as he points out, "was born in the 19th century, conceived and developed as an instrument of European nationalism" (p15). Chapter 1, discussing this process, focuses in particular on the development in Germany and the central roles of philology (the study of historical relationships between languages) and later of early archaeology - in particular the 'ethnoarchaeology' which sought to map language groupings by forms of material culture.

Out of these came the general narrative of the *Volkerwanderung*, a set of processes of mass migration in the 5th and 6th centuries during and after the fall of the western Roman empire. This (allegedly) brought various Germanic and later Slavic peoples, defined by their distinctive languages and cultures, from their places of origin to found the European nations within and outside the former Roman borders: Saxons to England, Franks to France, Lombards to northern Italy, and so on. But, as Geary points out, these histories were a hopeless ground for territorial claims.

On the material culture studied by archaeologists he quotes Chris Wickham: "a man or a woman with a Lombard-style brooch is no more necessarily a Lombard than a family in Bradford with a Toyota is Japanese" (p38). On language, in both the early and later middle ages and into the modern period, towns were often linguistically distinct from the surrounding countryside, and there were substantial other linguistic minorities which were partially or completely suppressed by the 19th century state-builders.

Geary's alternative is not to insist that nations and the 'ethnic' nationalist approach are mere 19th century constructions. Rather, he approaches the problem through conceptions of peoples in classical antiquity and the gradual supersession and transformation of these, as the western Roman empire fell apart. The ancient Greeks and Romans, he argues, with a few exceptions thought about what we now call nationality with a fundamental dichotomy: Hellenes/citizens (civilised men) versus barbarians. Citizens were members of constitutional entities created by political histories. Barbarians were not fully human in this sense, but had a timeless natural or animal quality to their social arrangements.

As a result of this view, later geographers and historians felt no shame in recycling old accounts of 'the Celts', 'the Germans' and other forms of barbarian - however much the peoples outside the Hellenistic world, and later the Roman empire, might actually have changed. In practice, on the one hand, the major self-identification of most members of the elite classes within the Roman empire was actually with their own locality; and, on the other, by the 3rd century AD and later, the Roman state's activities in creating client buffer states, etc, beyond its borders, had radically transformed the political practices of the 'barbarians'. It was this transformation, not migration, which created the new peoples with new names - Franks ('free men') and Alamans ('the people') on the Rhine, and Goths in the Balkans.

Nation-state and feudal revolution

Patrick J Geary **The myth of nations: the medieval origins of Europe** Princeton, 2002, pp199, £13.71

Meanwhile, after experiencing a severe crisis in the 3rd century, around 300 AD the Roman empire reorganised. Its tax demands became markedly more onerous and less legitimate. Its military became divided between *limitanei* - effectively a militia - on the frontiers, and *comitatenses* - a mobile striking force; and increasing use was made of barbarian soldiers and officers. It adopted Christianity, which provided a centralised state religion to replace emperor-worship, but conversely threw up heresy-hunting and explicit religious division. In the 4th and 5th century there was a marked growth of local identity among the provincial elites.

Into this situation came the emergence of the Huns, initially a confederacy of steppe nomads, which established an empire in eastern and central Europe with a polyethnic composition and elite: Geary points out that Attila, the most famous Hun leader, had a Gothic name or title (p96). If some Goths and others were integrated, others fled within Roman borders, and their confederacy with other groups and some Roman army units, created in response to Roman mistreatment, became the 'Visigoths', who went on to sack Rome and settle in southern France and later in Spain.

After the death of Attila, the Hun empire broke up into a series of new 'ethnicities'. In the course of the 5th century the western Roman empire broke up into a series of small warlord entities, together with a number of larger 'barbarian kingdoms'. Among these, the Visigoths and Burgundians in France, the Ostrogoths in France and (perhaps) the Vandals in north Africa attempted to construct separate 'barbarian' ethnic statuses. These were based partly on Arian religion, partly on dynastic myths, and partly on law-codes (with a considerable base of sub-Roman law), maintaining the provincials as 'Romans'; but they ultimately failed.

In contrast the Franks in northern France absorbed the locals into their new ethnicities and adopted the catholic religion, creating a common identity, with ex-Romans identifying themselves as Franks; Geary suggests that a similar process may have taken place in post-Roman Britain. The Lombards in Italy, again starting as a heterogeneous coalition, rapidly merged with the existing population, and the Visigoths in Spain, after holding themselves aloof as Arians for some time, became catholics (and began to persecute the Jews!).

By the end of this process 'Roman' had come to mean either a subject of the Byzantine empire, or someone who lived in Rome; and while there were still 'barbarians' outside the christian world. Europe had entered, if not completely, the world of nations within christendom which characterised the middle ages.

In his concluding chapter Geary discusses briefly the 8th to 9th century Frankish Carolingian empire's use of 'ethnic' laws and the idea that law was personal as an instrument of government; before concluding with an analogy between early medieval European ethnogenesis and the late 18th to early 19th century formation of the Zulus. Both, he suggests, were fundamentally *political* processes. His conclusion is that nationalisms that rest on historical claims, and

nationalist history, must be abandoned: "Europeans must recognise the difference between past and present if they are to build a future" (p174).

England

England is marginal to Geary's account of the origins of European nations, attracting at most a few side comments. Yet other work on the origin of England suggests a similar general conclusion. After the withdrawal of Roman troops in the early 5th century, the former Roman diocese of Britannia seems to have collapsed rapidly into a series of local warlord regimes. Over time the west - from south-western Scotland, through Cumbria and modern Wales to Cornwall - became Celtic in identification. A wide variety of (retrospectively self-identified) Germanic invaders and federate troops created regimes in the east - at least supposedly Jutes in Kent, Saxons in Hampshire (though the earliest supposed West Saxon king had a Celtic name), Sussex, Essex and elsewhere, Angles, and so on.

Some larger political entities were created: Kent, Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex. These entities remained for some centuries stubbornly independent. Yet, surprisingly, what the Normans conquered in 1066 was generally understood to be England and its inhabitants the English. So much so that the Norman invasion and settlement, which largely marginalised the Anglo-Saxon elite, was already beginning to be swallowed by 'English' self-identification by the time of Henry I in the early 12th century.

Patrick Wormald in two essays from 1983 and 1994 has argued that a central role in the formation of 'Englishness' was played by the church. When Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine to bring (Roman) Christianity to Kent, he sent him on a mission to the *Angli*, and created one large ecclesiastical province of the *Angli*; and Bede wrote in the early 730s an *Ecclesiastical history of the English people*, the *Gens Anglorum*. This ideology was then "ruthlessly applied" by Wessex dynasts from the time of Alfred on to legitimate their conquest of the whole ecclesiastical province (or as much as they could conquer), creating a centralised state on the Carolingian model.

Though it gives a more central role to the church (and the accidents of the church's ethnic identification of the inhabitants of Britain east of the Welsh border as 'Angles'), this narrative has two features in common with Geary's. The first is that it is clearly political. Nations are not pre-political linguistic or ethnic entities. They are semi-consciously fashioned in political processes. The second, which is if anything clearer than in Geary's account, is that the identification of nations emerges from the presence of multiple political entities within one religio-cultural entity - in this case 'christendom'.

'Bourgeois revolution'

Geary's book, the work he relies on and Wormald all locate the origins of many European national self-consciousnesses in processes of post-Roman state-building and the emergence of 'christendom'. This approach is startling to traditional Marxists, who are accustomed to think

of the emergence of the nation-state as an aspect of *bourgeois* revolution - and one which is 'incomplete' in many places, leading both to the Trotskyist concept of permanent revolution (that the proletariat must begin its struggle for power with the struggle for completion of the tasks of the incomplete bourgeois revolution) and the Stalinist-Maoist concept of the bloc of four classes in the national revolution.

The empirical reason for this identification of the nation-state with the bourgeois revolution is the role of nationalist ideology in the French revolution and subsequently in Germany, Italy, etc, in the 19th century. This, however, tells us little more than the role of protestantism in the Dutch and English revolutions or of enlightenment republicanism in the American and French revolutions.

Its theoretical ground has two aspects. The first, derived from Hegel and through him from the enlightenment theorists, is the idea that capitalism involves a re-emergence of the state and of sovereignty, which had been liquidated or 'parcelised' in feudalism. The difficulty with this view is that the evidence for absence of the state and sovereignty in medieval Europe is at best ambiguous; Susan Reynolds' *Kingdoms and communities in western Europe 900-1300* (Oxford 1997) gathers large amounts of evidence in the other direction.

The second is the claim that capitalism as an economic form requires a large untrammelled 'market space', which is created by national unification. This has also been an element of theories which attempt to explain English priority in the industrial revolution or in capitalism: England's precocious state and legal unification in the middle ages is said to have created the conditions for feudalism to collapse into capitalism. (This is an element among others in the 'Brenner thesis' of agrarian transformation as the key to the origin of capitalism, followed by Meiksins Wood in her *The origin of capitalism*.)

The difficulty with this view is that it massively overstates the degree of legal unification in England before the 19th century, and conversely understates the extent of the existence of multiple, competing and layered local jurisdictions, local customary rights, forms of regulation and local taxation up till then (eg, EP Thompson *Customs in common*). Indeed, the USA in the 20th century is a clear demonstration that a vibrant capitalism can live with multiple competing jurisdictions, regulatory regimes, and varying local tax regimes.

A more general difficulty is that dating the 'rise of the nation-state' - if it means increased control of the centre over the localities and increased national self-identification as against local self-identification - has proved severely difficult for historians. If academics working on the 18th and 19th centuries have found it in their period, so have those working on the 16th and 17th centuries and on the 12th and 13th centuries.

Feudal revolt

In this context, the great strength of the approach Geary and others outline is that in the 5th to 7th centuries we really are looking at the emergence of a new kind

of self-identification: the transition from the fundamental division, Romans/barbarians, to a new division *between christian nations*, which is superimposed on the christian/heathen distinction.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this emergence is also connected to two other changes in social ordering which emerge over the same period. The first is the separation of the landlord class and the clerical caste into two elites competing for social surplus, which begins in late antiquity and is not completed until the 11th to 12th century Gregorian reform movement.

The second is the gradual transition, over the same period between late antiquity and the central middle ages, from chattel slavery to villeinage and the manorial organisation of production. The doublet, civilised man/barbarian, markedly maps onto the doublet, free man/natural slave. Villeinage, in contrast, allows the villain to be an Englishman (or a Frenchman), as well as a subordinate; or, conversely, the national identities partially created and promoted by the church tend to incorporate the subordinate population and make it harder to think of them, as Romans episodically did, merely as *res loquentes*, 'talking things'.

The nation-state, in other words, is an aspect of the *feudal* revolution.

Modern nationalism

If we take this approach, it may induce us to look at modern national movements in a rather different light.

In the first place, the bourgeois states are characteristically in their origins either sub-national divisions of earlier national identities (north Italian city-states; United Provinces; USA at its origin; Germany and Austria) or supra-national entities built on the accumulation of separate feudal nations by late-feudal dynastic aggrandisement (UK; France; USA very rapidly). The bourgeois state is *not* inherently national; this is merely an inherited form of the European state.

Secondly, the processes of 'ethnogenesis' by cultural identification with ruling elites which Geary describes for the early medieval period go on even at the present date. But they are now clearly international: Anglophilia in the 19th century, Americanisation in the 20th and (so far) 21st.

Thirdly, since the late 18th century nationalist ideology has had two aspects. The first is a response to British, and later American, world domination: 'If we are to resist the Brits/Yankees we need a nation-state of our own like theirs.' In this aspect the aspirations for feudalism are legitimate (since the successive British and American world hegemonies were/are profoundly oppressive), but illusory (as long as *capitalism* survives, it will throw up a new world hegemon, and this problem can only be solved at an international level).

The second aspect is darker. Since the middle 1680s xenophobia, playing the national card, has been an element of the ideology of the English party of order, Toryism, in its struggle against democracy. In the European counter-enlightenment of the 19th century this became an aspect of the policy of the parties of order across Europe. In this aspect nationalism appeals to the 'ordered community' of the feudal past against capitalist liberty: its outcome is Nazism in the mid-20th century, 'ethnic cleansing' in the late 20th century Balkans.

If nations are not pre-political, but political constructs, as the early medieval history as well as that of the 19th century tells us; and if nationalism (inherently) has this double character, as resistance to the capitalist world hierarchy and as reactionary nostalgia; it follows that the principle of self-determination cannot provide Marxists with a golden thread to guide us through the labyrinth of national disputes and struggles. It is necessary in every case to assess the *concrete* character of a movement which presents itself in national terms, in order to judge its political meaning and the proper approach of Marxists to it ●

Mike Macnair

CONSTITUTION



Abolish the second chamber

The ‘democratic’ credentials of all the establishment parties were exposed once again last week. Much to Tony Blair’s delight, all seven options for the reform of the House of Lords were voted down in the Commons. And of course a proposal to abolish the Lords altogether was also defeated.

The hypocrisy of both New Labour and the Tories would be astounding - if we had not come to expect it from these ‘champions of democracy’. Blair, having previously committed himself and the Labour Party to a vaguely defined ‘more representative and democratic’ House of Lords, was now proposing a totally appointed second chamber. The Conservatives, on the other hand, who had originally opposed *any* change to the previous composition - a combination of titled aristocrats, Church of England bishops and rewarded cronies - and fought tooth and nail to defend the ‘rights’ of every last hereditary peer to hold on to their seats, were now advocating an 80% elected upper house.

Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith had gone further, and had been campaigning for it to be fully elected. However, within three days of last week’s debacle he announced that this new found ‘principle’ was now, just as quickly, to be abandoned.

The fact that Blair had willingly allowed a free vote on what you might think would be regarded as a vital question of the British constitution demonstrates beyond doubt that he is quite happy with the status quo - all but the remaining 92 ‘hereditaries’ are life peers, who owe their place to the system of patronage, where favours are repaid with a pretentious title, a handsome allowance and the right to sound off and attempt to block Commons decisions. Labour’s Lord Lipsey is now to introduce a bill seeking the eventual removal of the hereditary peers.

It is difficult to decide which of the two elements - patronage or heredity - is more despicable and anti-democratic. However, the truth is that even the call for a fully elected upper house, which was only defeated by 17 votes, would be designed, like all other variants, with the purpose of stalling, blocking or watering down progressive change. The second chamber is intended to provide checks and balances against democracy, against the possibility that a mass movement would force MPs to vote through legislation that threatens the ruling order and the system of capital itself.

At first sight, then, the number of members

who voted for total abolition was surprisingly high: although this was defeated by over 200 votes, 172 actually chose this option. However, just in case anyone had illusions in the apparent democratic commitment of these, mostly Labour, ‘abolitionists’, a good number of them promptly trooped into the division behind Blair and voted for the prime minister’s right to stuff the Lords with ‘Tony’s cronies’.

Genuine democrats demand not only the abolition of the second chamber, but a thoroughly accountable parliament, subject to annual election and with the right of electors to instantly recall and replace their representatives. The main function of parliament under the constitutional monarchy system is not to usher in democratic advance in the interest of the majority, but to defend the wealth, privilege and right to exploit and oppress currently enjoyed by the bourgeois minority. It acts at best as a rubber stamp for the decisions taken by the prime minister and his inner cabinet.

Thus it is entirely possible that ‘president’ Blair will attempt to launch a full-scale assault on Iraq without even going through the motions of a Commons vote. He will, however, require the accord of the queen, who of course has the constitutional power to dissolve par-

liament, appoint or dismiss the prime minister and confer or withhold royal assent.

In fact what has been remarkable about the Lords charade is that in an extended period when the whole question of heredity and its relationship to democracy under capitalism has been in the limelight, with very few exceptions establishment politicians have run a mile from the same considerations when it comes to the monarchy.

This is because, while the whole anti-democratic constitutional monarchy system can survive substantial tinkering - Lords reform, devolution, even proportional representation - the overall package must remain in place, with the monarch itself at its pinnacle.

As part of our immediate programme we communists are for:

- Abolition of the monarchy and the second chamber
- Annual parliaments; accountable and recallable MPs
- Separation of church and state
- The right of self-determination in a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, and a united, federal Ireland
- Election of the judiciary
- Abolition of patronage and state secrecy ●

Peter Manson

Fighting fund

Your chance

No doubt this week’s expanded, 16-page paper will generate extra income in terms of additional sales - we are aiming to sell 1,000 on the London demonstration. But we have obviously incurred much higher costs this week too and, while the *Weekly Worker*’s cover price accounts for a large part of our revenue, we cannot do without the full £500 fund each and every month.

A significant swathe of those who read us regularly yet never contribute to our fighting fund do so on the internet. Last week a very healthy 10,932 logged on to www.cpgb.org.uk. I would suspect that a good number of net readers based in Britain will actually be buying a print copy this

weekend in London, so this appeal is aimed at them in particular. Comrades, don’t just hand over your 50p - here’s your chance to make up for all that freeloading. And if you didn’t pay at least £1 for this copy, go and find a *Weekly Worker* seller and give them a donation!

This month’s total is continuing to creep up slowly - we now have £160, thanks to the generosity of HJ, DH, LP, CS and VC. But it is increasing *too* slowly. We still need £340 in exactly two weeks ●

Robbie Rix

Ask for a bankers order form, or send cheques, payable to Weekly Worker

What we fight for

■ Our central aim is the organisation of all communists, revolutionary socialists and politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without such a party the working class is nothing; with it everything.

■ The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but there exists no real Communist Party today. There are many leftwing ‘parties’, but in reality most are mere confessional sects. Those who disagree with the prescribed ‘line’ are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through the fullest, most open debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support democratically agreed actions, members have the right to form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists are committed to building the Socialist Alliance in England and Wales and the Scottish Socialist Party into a single revolutionary party. Communists advocate the principle, ‘One state, one party’. We oppose every manifestation of sectionalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. It is an internationalist duty to fight for revolution against the existing state. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state, then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions, a Socialist Alliance of the EU and a Communist Party of the EU.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with pollution, exploitation, crisis and war. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. All forms of nationalist ‘socialism’ are reactionary and anti-working class.

■ Socialism can never come through parliament. The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away through a parliamentary vote. They will resist, using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be readied to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women’s oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin’s Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither exploitation of person by person, nor wars, classes, countries or nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

■ All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.

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Main enemy is at home

For UK regime change

Tony Blair's government faces a crisis of historic proportions. Blair rightly admits that he may be "risking everything" after boxing himself into a position of automatically supporting a US overthrow of Saddam Hussein. This subordinate - Atlanticist - strategy has not only pitted Blair against fellow European Union governments in Germany, France and Belgium and brought Nato to an impasse. Blair is also opposed by the overwhelming majority of the British people.

Opinion polls put those supporting Blair's Iraq policy at less than 20% and falling. Over 40% solidly oppose a war - reflecting a growing body worldwide - and 40% would only be won over if Hans Blix discovers a "smoking gun", which is duly followed by a second United Nations security council resolution sanctioning the use of force. That adds up to an anti-war majority of over 80%.

Disquiet in Russia, France and China - permanent members of the security council who have a veto - makes a second resolution far from certain. Though, needless to say, the US is going all out to change minds amongst self-interested big powers and tin pot dictatorships alike by doling out threats and largesse in equal measure.

No one - not least George Bush's military advisers - know exactly what will happen if the US and Britain go ahead in a "coalition of the willing" and invade Iraq. Saddam Hussein's forces show no signs of repeating the disastrous blunder of 1991 and leaving their troop formations and armoured divisions exposed in the desert like sitting ducks, to be pounded by B52 carpet bombing and picked off by satellite-guided precision targeting.

The war - so promises Saddam Hussein's propaganda machine - will be fought in the streets of Baghdad. The elite Special Republican Guard awaits, primed for urban warfare; trenches are ubiquitous; sniper emplacements, ambushes and booby traps are ready; and a large civilian militia is mobilised and pledged to repel any attack.

Of course, it is quite possible that the Iraqi masses will suddenly find their opportunity to rise - the main enemy is at home. We communists fervently look towards such a scenario - first deal with the Ba'athist government, then, from a position of strength, the imperialist invaders. On their side US and British strategists forlornly hope for a general's coup and the surgical removal of Saddam Hussein and his immediate circle from above. But nationalism is an unpredictable and elemental force. Fear and hatred of the US could momentarily eclipse fear

and hatred of Saddam Hussein.

If that happens - and it might - the war against Iraq will be no pushover. Indeed taking a city the size and population of Baghdad - house by house - will cost US and British forces dear in terms of casualties. In such circumstances air control and tanks no longer prove decisive. As shown by the hell hole the Nazi armies fought themselves into at Stalingrad during World War II, such conditions can turn into a killing field for both sides.

The anti-war movement in Britain has before it great opportunities and great responsibilities. Undoubtedly our available forces are being multiplied many times over and our strategy must be to link together as many struggles as possible against the war. An obvious example is the firefighters' dispute.

However, mass demonstrations and even political strikes - as threatened by Bob Crow, Mike Rix, Billy Hayes and Paul Mackney - cannot be an end in themselves. Communists and their Socialist Alliance allies in the anti-war movement must not only concern themselves with economic demands - ie, calling for spending on pay, jobs, education and health, not the war. Stopping the war with Iraq must feed into a direct challenge to the United Kingdom's constitutional monarchy system. A system which makes such a war possible without any popular mandate - either in the form of a parliamentary vote or a referendum. Blair can, and in all probability will, simply resort to the royal prerogative.

Communists and revolutionary socialists do not only concern themselves with convincing the advanced section in and around the working class that New Labour is rotten, and that the war on Iraq is not against tyranny, but is designed to consolidate the US-dominated new world order and give it control over vital oil reserves. The task of communists and the Socialist Alliance also consists in helping to mobilise the widest numbers - not just the solidly anti-war 40%, but the vacillating 40% - into an *active* movement which can learn through its own experience that the UK urgently needs a regime change.

That means not a mere alteration of government through a general election, let alone a cabinet coup in which Blair is replaced by a Gordon Brown or a Peter Hain. The constitutional monarchy system - the monarch, the elected or unelected House of Lords, MI5, the presidential prime minister, appointed judges, the standing army, etc - must go. In its place must come a fully democratic federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales brought about using the most militant tactics objective circum-

stances allow.

The establishment faces a huge problem. Neither of their main parties represents, let alone heads, the anti-war movement. That leaves the system - political and economic - extraordinarily vulnerable to those below. Iain Duncan Smith and his Tory Party is virtually indistinguishable from Blair and New Labour. If it is possible, they are even more craven in their attitude to the US. However there are the Liberal Democrats and Charles Kennedy. The Lib Dem leader opposes the war and he is set to march on February 15. Kennedy is though *inconsistently* anti-war. He would readily back an invasion of Iraq with a second UN resolution. More to the point, he is a danger within.

The liberal wing of the ruling class is fearful that things might easily get out of hand. Kennedy is therefore looked to as a safe pair of hands. *The Guardian* believes that this "should be a Charles Kennedy moment" (editorial, February 8). Meanwhile the paper rounds on what it calls the "predictable leftist groups" who, its says, "attach themselves to every such protest": actually the left groups - the Socialist Alliance and especially the cadres of the Socialist Workers Party - can claim with justification much of the credit for building the February 15 demonstration.

Either way, Kennedy is envisaged as an anti-war leader who can mislead the mass anti-war sentiment back into the fold of 'normal' politics. We should therefore give Kennedy neither credit nor a platform.

To move things forward after February 15 the left has a particularly pressing responsibility of its own - overcoming our division into amateurish and narrow-



Blair: pro-Bush, not pre-democracy

minded confessional sects. Concretely what we communists will propose at the Socialist Alliance's March 15 AGM is timetabling a campaign for a democratic and effective Socialist Alliance *party*, which alone can develop enduring roots in the working class. Without building such a party - brought about in the first place by launching a common weekly or daily paper - popular anger against the war drive will inevitably be dissipated

and diverted into various dead ends.

Equipped with such a tried and tested weapon, we can not only force Britain out of the "coalition of the willing", but rid ourselves of the constitutional monarchy system. This would be a blow for extreme democracy and a step towards a new international order which knows neither war nor the exploitation of one by another ●

James Marshall

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